

Jimmy Nelson: The photographer documenting disappearing tribes

1 Jimmy Nelson makes his living seducing tribes. For the last four years, the professional photographer has travelled the world, capturing astonishing images with a vintage 4 X 5 plate camera of tribes who might otherwise lose their traditions or disappear entirely. The images are remarkable because they depict native peoples in a way no one ever has before – powerful, not vulnerable; beautiful not impoverished; proud not marginalised. He’s not the type to snap their photo and then jump on the first bus out of the village, never to be seen again. 16, the 46-year-old Briton builds trust with communities, putting the native people on a pedestal and glorifying them in the hope that in honouring their culture, we might somehow preserve it.

2 When we caught up with Nelson recently, he explained how he ended up becoming a photographer: “It was 1984 and I was in a Jesuit boarding school with 1,000 boys when my hair fell out due to a condition called alopecia totalis. It never grew back. At that time, if you had no hair, you were a skinhead. Skinheads were regarded as people who were not only lower class, but violent, aggressive – pariahs of society. I went from being a well brought up, upper-middle-class schoolboy to being a pariah. I decided to go to the one place where I thought people would look like me, so in 1986, at age 18, I went to Tibet to live among the legions of bald monks. It was a massive life changer because it gave me a story, it gave me curiosity, and the pictures I took were published in the national magazine of The Royal Geographical Society when I returned.



3 After Tibet, I kept photographing tribes as a hobby for about six years. I photographed indigenous groups in places of strife like Guatemala, El Salvador, Afghanistan and Somalia. Eighty percent of the time we had no common language. You try to find translators but when you find the tribe, many times your translator will admit that they don’t know the dialect. So you’re often forced to communicate on your own. I never gave up, I really wanted to connect. If you’re 18 enough, it is possible to communicate with people who don’t share your language.

4 Many of the photos were made with a four- or five-second exposure, and to get into that process of mutual understanding there’s been a massive build-up, sometimes weeks of building trust. And the trust is all based on telling them “You’re special, you’re beautiful, you’re powerful; for me,

you're iconic." I was a visitor who had come to praise and document. I was not coming in as a predator.

- 5 The intricacy of using a vintage 4 X 5 plate camera meant that I was always on the edge, always in uncomfortable positions. If you're trying to take photos in -40°C, and you've got a plate camera that requires your fingers, you're so desperate and so vulnerable that people want to help you and that makes them feel more involved, makes them want to participate. Besides, digital photos all end up looking the same. By using film, you're capable of giving the pictures a personal touch.
- 6 I take food and supplies back to these villages, and the pictures as well. I also donate ten percent of my earnings to the Rainforest Foundation. I hope we will all 21: they through realising that not all should be abandoned when moving to the developed world; we by learning from the tribes what we have lost. It's also about motivating other travellers to go on their own journeys. Journeys that will give them a better sense what's going on around the world, and rather than worrying about what will happen 20 years down the line, inspire them to live in the present."

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