



Africa's changing cultural landscape

Many travellers to Africa talk about a feeling of 'returning home', some instinctive connection to its dusty soils and its diverse people. Certainly, there is an ease and calmness about most Africans that is reassuring and captivating.

We are drawn to the exotic, noble and romantic allure of ancient tribes, intrigued by their traditional dress, colourful ceremonies and often surprising customs. We find inspiration in the enterprise and ambition of one-world millennials with dreams in their heads and hard work in their limbs.

Perhaps more than any other continent, Africa offers a powerful visual reminder of our changing world.

Over the following sixteen pages we explore Africa's changing cultural landscape. While celebrating its deep-rooted heritage, we consider the erosion of long-held traditions, look to the future and ponder our role as tourists.



African Twilight

Wildlife lover **Brian Jackman's** fixation with Africa spans over 40 years, beginning at the same time two young photographers, **Carol Beckwith** and **Angela Fisher**, started their own exploration of the continent. Their passion, however, was with Africa's rich cultural heritage and their life's work has resulted in undoubtedly the most comprehensive record of Africa's traditional ceremonies ever compiled.

Exclusively for *Travel Africa*, Brian interviewed Carol and Angela to learn more about their extraordinary story, the lessons learned along the way, and their fears for Africa's changing cultural landscape.

This is followed by a selection of images from their masterpiece *African Twilight*, which lend some insight to the traditions recorded in their book.

Pic heading: Carol Beckwith (left) and Angela Fisher being painted by the Kara during the courtship season on the banks of the Omo River. "After a few tries with traditional white chalk paint, they proposed painting us with our hot chocolate powder which they thought would show up better on our white skins."



In 1974 – the same year I first set foot in Africa – a young American photographer called Carol Beckwith decided on a whim to spend Christmas in Kenya with a friend. She went for six weeks, stayed for eight months and her life was changed forever.

During her stay she was invited to meet the Maasai and photograph their most intimate ceremonies.

"Their lives are governed by 25 rites of passage," she says. "more than any other tribe in Africa, and I was so moved to see how beautiful they looked, striding across the savannah in their blood-red shukas.

"Spending time with the Maasai just got in my blood," she tells me. "I loved everything about them, their singing, their courtship rituals, the huge respect in which they hold their elders, and somehow those eight months stretched to 40 years."

In 1978 she met Angela Beckwith on a balloon trip across Maasailand. Angela, an Australian photographer with a degree in social science, had moved to Kenya in 1970 after working with aborigines in her home country. Unlike Carol, who had obtained a degree in photography in the USA, Angela was self-taught; but they immediately recognised each other as kindred spirits. "We were a couple of nomads who happened to share the same visual eye and were crazy about traditional African cultures."

The following year they decided to photograph the Maasai together, little knowing they had embarked upon a journey that would last a lifetime, exploring the remotest corners of 40 African countries, travelling more than 500,000 miles by Land Rover, motorbike, sailing dhow and camel train to record more than 150 different cultures for their ground-breaking books, of which the latest, *African Twilight*, has just been published.

As an African shaman once told them: "When you start, you own the journey; but as you progress, the journey starts to own you."

"Sharing our love affair with Africa was the best decision we ever made," says Angela. "We were driven by the same dream of capturing the centuries-old ceremonies that govern everything from birth to death, and are so glad we did, because nearly half of all the traditions we recorded now survive only in the pages of our books."

As they say in the introduction to *African Twilight*: "The light is changing and the sun is low in the sky on Africa's traditional ceremonies."

In the field, cameras slung around their necks, they make a striking couple – Carol with a hairstyle as bubbly as her nature and Angela with her long blonde mane – and you soon realise their enduring

partnership could not have survived without the strong sense of loyalty that binds them together.

Africa can be a challenging environment in which to work and over the years they have learned to look after each other. "Sometimes we rely on Carol's charm to get ourselves out of a difficult situation," says Angela. "At other times it's Angela's persuasive powers that do the trick," adds Carol. But in the end their patience and perseverance has always paid off, giving them access to spectacular ceremonies, including some never photographed before.

Both have experienced their share of adversity, everything from political upheavals and closed frontiers to vehicle breakdowns and arduous treks by mule-train over 10,000ft mountains to live in the bush for five weeks with the Surma of southwest Ethiopia. "These were people who had only ever seen one other visitor from the outside world before," says Angela.

On a second visit they were told they would be ambushed and wouldn't get out alive, but the most dangerous ordeal for women, she says, is being in African cities at night, and recalls the time she was

carjacked after crossing from Nigeria into Benin, robbed of all her belongings and left with nothing to wear but a sheet. "It's so different from being with traditional cultures who have always respected us as women," she says. "Living with them in the bush is far safer than being in London."

Their reward is a historic archive beyond price, showcasing the rich spectrum of pan-African art with its elaborate costumes, jewellery and body painting while painstakingly recording the continent's age-old ceremonies before they are blown away by the winds of change.

Between them they have taken over half a million photographs, the best contained in more than a dozen widely acclaimed books, including *Nomads of Niger*, *African Ceremonies*, *Dinka*

and *Painted Bodies*, to which they have now added *African Twilight*.

"The sacred ceremonies recorded in our photographs are the result of belief systems that are centuries old," says Angela, "and the art forms that accompany them were never made just to hang on a wall. Unlike artists in the West, Africa's craftsmen seldom signed their work." →

We believe they hold values we just don't have anymore. Here, people are bound together by a deep respect for their elders and a strong community spirit. Poorer they may be, but a good deal happier



Although we all appear different from one another we are the same human beings with similar emotions and human needs... Celebrating our similarities while accepting our differences will help lead us to a more peaceful coexistence

Keeping track: Notes from one of the photographers' many journals, recording everything they did, saw and learned on their travels over 40 years.

Instead it was created purely for the rites of passage that have been handed down from one generation to the next."

Nor is African adornment created only for beauty's sake. It often carries a coded message, like the lollipop necklaces Turkana girls wear to indicate they are available for marriage, or the coiled brass pendants worn by Maasai women to announce their sons have been circumcised.

To complete *African Twilight* took 12 years of exhausting field-work, during which one of their most long-awaited dreams was realised when they finally gained access to the Democratic Republic of Congo to record the royal kingdom of the Kuba, the warrior rituals of the Salampasu and the rarely seen masks of the Pende.

They also received an invitation to photograph the coronation of the Voodoo king in Ouidah, Benin. This historic ceremony is an event that might happen only once in a generation and occurred just in time to be included in the book.

In many ways, the collecting of material for *African Twilight* was a race against time, a situation thrown into stark relief by the tragedy currently engulfing Ethiopia's Omo River Valley due to the creation of the world's second biggest hydroelectric dam. The dam will bring electricity to many millions of Ethiopians, but comes at the cost of relocating 250,000 people and the destruction of their traditional way of life.

"What is happening in the Omo Valley is devastating," says Carol. "It's a World Heritage Site where eleven different groups of people - among them the greatest body painters in the world - have all been living happily in their time warp. Now the dam has cut off the annual floodwaters on which they depend. Foreign investors are leasing their lands for modern agriculture and they are facing cultural extinction."

The displaced people of the Omo Valley are not the only ones to be singled out for their contribution to the diversity of African culture. Carol loves the Wodaabe, the nomadic cattle herders of the Sahel who consider themselves the most beautiful race on Earth. "The gentlest people I have ever been with," is how she describes them. But Angela's favourites are the Dinka, the legendary cattle keepers of South Sudan, the so-called "ghostly giants" of the Nile swamplands who coat their 7ft tall bodies with ash.

No doubt many people would pay handsomely to see these proud pastoralists and their white cattle with horns like arms upraised in triumph; but Angela and Carol both see tourism as a double-edged sword. In general they think it has worked well with the Maasai but

have also seen the downside in Ethiopia, where busloads of visitors descend on the Mursi, jump out and take lots of pictures before departing as swiftly as they arrived.

Are Africans themselves concerned that they are losing their traditions, I wondered? "The traditionalists all want us to record their ceremonies," says Angela, "whereas their children just want to embrace Western culture with its cool music and ghetto blasters. But it is heartening to discover that their children in turn are eager to know how their grandparents lived, as if they have somehow skipped a generation."

Does that mean we in the West can also learn from Africa's traditional cultures? "Basically, we believe they hold values we just don't have any more," says Carol. "That's why there is no loneliness in Africa. Here, people are still bound together by a deep respect for their elders and a strong community spirit. Poorer they may be, but a good deal happier."

"As for ourselves," says Angela, "our greatest joy has come from living in Africa and pursuing the life we feel so passionate about. After all, this is the land where humankind was born and where we first stood upright to begin the long journey from prehistory to the Space Age. The people we photographed on our journey all saw the world differently from us, but nonetheless shared our ancestry and taught us valuable lessons about the different ways one can lead a life."

"But the most enduring truth we have learned from Africa," adds Carol, "is that although we all appear different from one another - naked or dressed, painted or veiled - we are the same human beings with similar emotions and human needs. We believe that celebrating our similarities while accepting our differences will help lead us to a more peaceful coexistence."



African Twilight Published in two volumes, of 400 and 472 pages, and supplied in a slipcase (left), *African Twilight* is a truly remarkable testimony to 40 years of work and a cultural record of immense significance. It is available from all good bookshops and online. Buy it. Admire it. Be fascinated by it. Treasure it. It may be new but it represents generations of history.



African twilight

We're delighted that Carol Beckwith and Angela Fisher have shared with us a selection of images from *African Twilight*. Each has been chosen because it illustrates a particular facet of these deep-rooted cultures.

Endangered ceremonies: Dassenech age passages

A Dassenech elder attending the Dimi, a coming-of-age ceremony celebrating fathers and their daughters who together pass to the next stage of life. The Dassenech live on small islands in the mouth of Ethiopia's Omo River as it flows into Lake Turkana. Isolated, they have held on to traditions that have vanished elsewhere.

In the Dimi, fathers graduate into elderhood while their daughters are prepared for their future marriages. During six weeks of feasting, the fathers paint their bodies with yellow ochre, wrap themselves in leopard skins and wear headresses of ostrich feathers, armbands of giraffe tails and bells on their legs. Men who have killed enemies in battle scarify their torsos with marks in the pattern of crocodile hides. →



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◀ Royalty: the Kuba kingdom: It took many years and a meeting with the son of the Kuba king to finally get permission to make the arduous journey to remote Democratic Republic of Congo to photograph the Kuba kingdom. Royalty is revered across Africa, and the arrival of Prince Kweta in Kuba, on behalf of the king, heralded a magnificent reception. Masks, representing Kuba's deities and ancestors, came before the Prince for approval. The King's regalia includes a 13-foot long belt covered in beads and cowries; the number of cowries indicate that he is a descendant of Woot, the creator god. ▶



▲ Spirits: West African masks
 In West Africa many people believe that the spirits of our ancestors and the natural world determine what happens in one's life. At seasonal masquerades, masks channeling the spirits are danced to restore balance in the world. Entertainment masks from the village of Gossina, Burkina Faso (pictured), are permitted to leave the village to dance at events, while sacred masks are reserved for important rituals and must remain within the village. Traditionally, masks are made of stiel, but today some are dyed with aniline dyes to achieve vibrant colours, adding to the drama.



▲ Courtship: Barabai (Tanzania)
 The Barabai are traditional hunters and cattle herders who, like many tribes, have striking courtship rituals, including dances, when young people are gathered together. This girl from a cattle-rich family wears beaded hides, coiled brass jewellery and a veil of glass beads and chain. She wears a collection of double-spiral brass rings on each finger. A Barabai girl's most elaborate jewellery is displayed during courtship.



▲ Body painting: Omo river peoples (Ethiopia)
 The Kara are renowned for their colourful face and torso painting, designed to attract the eye of the opposite sex during courtship season, which begins after the rains. After rigorous courtship dancing, the designs wear off, only to be refreshed each morning with another innovative pattern. These age-old cultures are being forced to change as a result of the damming of the Omo River, which is displacing people from their pastoral homelands.



▲ Scarification: Pokot girls initiation (Kenya)
 In northern Kenya, young Pokot girls prepare to undergo their passage to womanhood. Young Pokot girls undergo ritual scarification. It is believed that fine scarification designs will enhance their attractiveness to the male eye. The short goatskin aprons worn by uninitiated girls are decorated with glass beads and are sometimes worn with belts of iron bells. In the Omo valley, Kara men and women do not kiss, but rather focus on touch for sensual pleasure.



▲ Beads of seduction: Turkana (Kenya)
 Song and dance are an important part of courtship rituals across Africa. With the Turkana, during the dances young men are drawn to women's layers of necklaces. The colour and design carries different meanings, symbolising fertility, female protection and even declaring her lineage and marriage status. A man considers a woman most beautifully adorned when her necklaces reach her chin.



Maasai warrior Euno

The Eunoto ceremony of the Salei Maasai in Tanzania, held every 14 years, marks the passage of a generation of warriors into elderhood. Lines of warriors – as many as 900 – snake towards the ceremonial manyatta where, over five days, spectacular rituals are performed to mark the warriors' passage to elderhood. At its conclusion, each mother shaves off the long, treasured hair of her warrior son and slathers his head with a mixture of red ochre and animal fat. Only mothers may perform this sacred act, which cuts the ties between parent and child as her son says goodbye to his youth. Pictured, the new generation of elders gather for a final blessing. The three leaders of the warrior generation are singled out and honoured.

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