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Kindred Spirits



The murmuring grew louder as I turned the corner of a teahouse and wandered slowly down the cobbled street behind the main square in the old district of Lhasa. Maybe the voices I was hearing were in my head. I had only been in Tibet for two days and was still trying to shake off a throbbing headache and weak limbs brought on by the high altitude. As I continued to follow the sounds, I turned into two smaller alleyways until confronted by a huge ornately painted double door that was slightly ajar.

A young Tibetan lama beckoned me in. The small courtyard was deep in shadow, but light reflected off the high, whitewashed walls bathing a dozen or so pilgrims in a pale blue cast as they sat on the ground turning prayer wheels in a hypnotic rhythm. I listened for perhaps twenty minutes before a wizen old man in the centre of the group caught my eye and made a gesture indicating I should take a photograph. I had, of course, been itching to record this wonderful scene but became so caught up in the atmosphere of this time-honoured ritual.

What struck me above all else was the powerful feeling of belonging among the assembled pilgrims. It was the purity of this kindred spirit that gave a depth & resonance to the scene, severely limiting the information any one single image could hope to encompass. It was one of the few times that I didn't feel the need to pick up a camera at all, but thankfully those feelings don't last too long.

Football fans, train spotters, fishermen bringing in the catch, the bond of a mother & child, a pride of lions encircling springbok on the African Veldt. Recording a meeting of minds and affiliation is one of the greatest and most enjoyable challenges a photographer can face. Traditions of kinship, family, a brotherhood, a sect, sorority or clan have been around for thousands of years and it is no surprise that they have evolved to include any number of 21st century notions of togetherness.



Guarding against the fragmentation of once proud nations in the face of globalisation - especially by Indigenous cultures - has been well documented. Yet there are many examples where these people have rallied support in favour of retaining strong links with their past while embracing many aspects of the modern world.

Kyrgyzstan is a country emerging slowly and somewhat painfully from the yoke of communism. Great efforts have been made to retain the traditional culture of the high mountains & steppe for both its strength of character as well as a means of income from tourism, now in its infancy. While photographing for a new guidebook, I visited the remote mountain community of Arslanbob in the south of the country.



My interpreter had found me an extended Uzbek family of fifteen who exuded all the hallmarks of this tradition with one exception - one of the five daughters had decided to experiment with the new fashion of coiffured hair, make up and designer cloths she had seen on a recent visit to Moscow. One of her sisters was clearly unimpressed and proceeded to demonstrate the Kyrgyz art of makeup – the growing of a single continuous eyebrow.

The image was a simple but telling example of cultural contrast within one family.

Travel to any extreme environment such as the Arctic, the Amazon rainforest or the African Desert and you will almost certainly encounter people with an innate sense of community and strong ties to that environment. In 1999, I visited the oasis of Timia during the Harvest Festival at the end of two weeks crossing the Tenere Desert in Niger.

Early morning light filtered through Acacia trees as tribal Tuareg, swathed in heavy robes and tagelmousts (veils) sauntered in on their camels and surrounded by women & children extolling them with a high pitched warbling.

Even before the camel races began – a highlight of the gathering, the sense of camaraderie and community was palpable. Here was an example of the infrequent get-togethers that allowed them to catch up on events, news, marriages & rivalries. As a foreigner you are most definitely an outsider, but it is easy to feel a part of the event given the immense pride and stature that the participants exude.



Bill & Peg Stark are in their late 80's. They have been in love with each other and the outdoors for the best part of 60 years. I was fortunate to join them when they could still do the 15 mile hike up into the Alpine Lakes Wilderness of Washington State on the Pacific North West of America.

10 days of camping and walking among the autumn larches every October for 34 years earned them the privilege of naming the lakes & rocks and having an official map of the region produced by the Forest Service in honour of their love and dedication. I photographed them at a brief rest stop returning to camp on the last night before leaving the mountains, and it remains, for me, one of the most enduring images of kinship I have taken. I learnt a great deal about their time together and hoped that I could follow some of their wisdom and self-belief in my own travels and meetings with others.



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References;

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