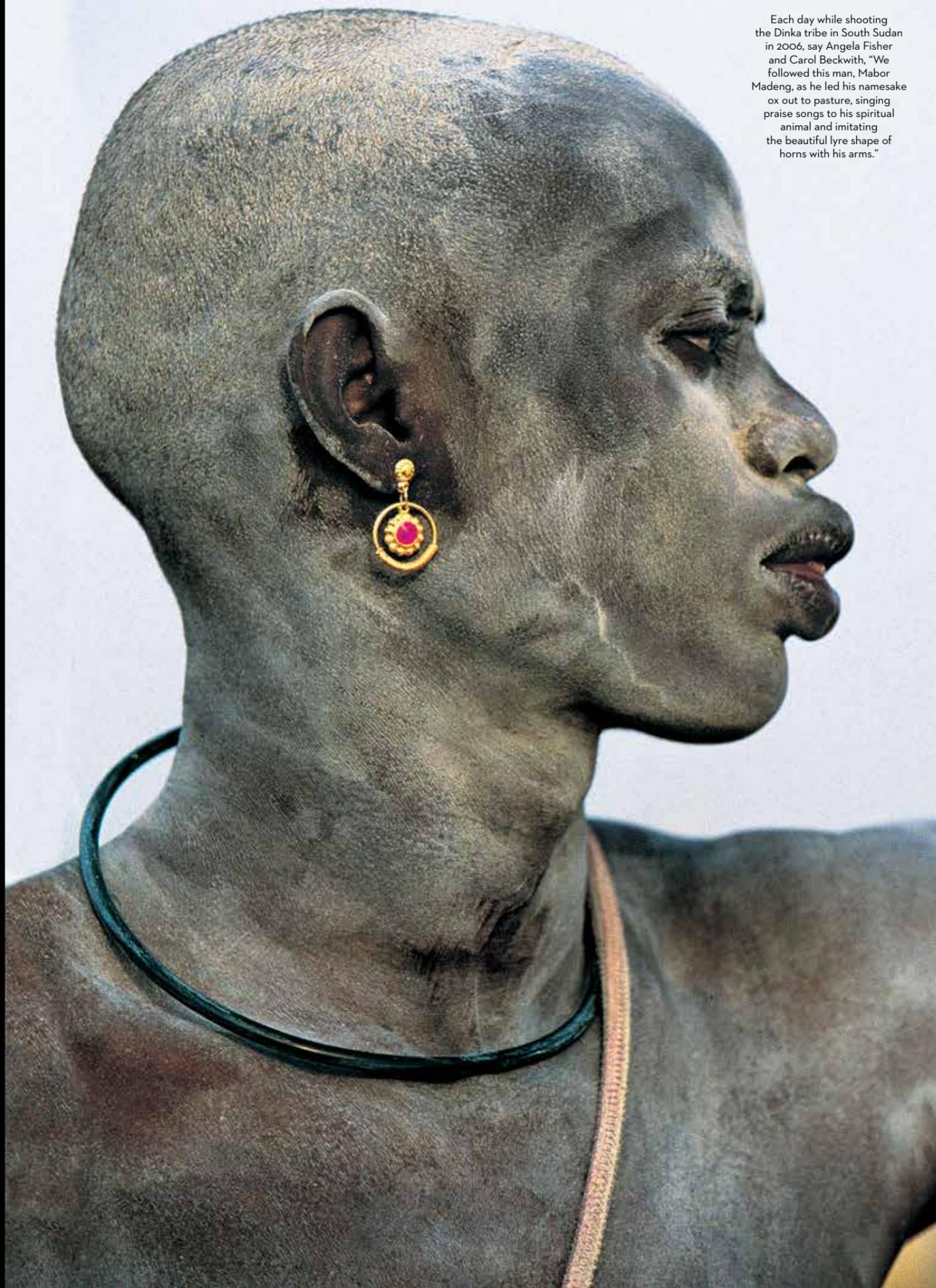


Each day while shooting the Dinka tribe in South Sudan in 2006, say Angela Fisher and Carol Beckwith, "We followed this man, Mabor Madeng, as he led his namesake ox out to pasture, singing praise songs to his spiritual animal and imitating the beautiful lyre shape of horns with his arms."



THE TRIBAL GUARDIANS

Angela Fisher and Carol Beckwith's goal to photograph every traditional culture on the continent is a race against time. BY LUCIA VAN DER POST

Over the course of 35 years, photographers Angela Fisher and Carol Beckwith have amassed an oeuvre that is equal parts art and anthropology, as remarkable for its raw aesthetic power as it is for its unparalleled access to the ceremonies and rituals of Africa's tribes. The rapid pace of change on the continent, as children head for the cities, has given their work fresh urgency. Even as the pair continue to find new cultures to document, they estimate that about 40 percent of the rites and ceremonies they have shot have already disappeared into the mists of history. In other words, it will not be possible for anybody to repeat what they have done.

Beckwith, from Boston, and Fisher, from Adelaide, Australia, have published books individually but work best side by side, occasionally forgetting who took what shot. They have traveled more than 270,000 miles together, often in great discomfort, in pursuit of their images. To get to the Dinka in South Sudan, "Five miles a day was good going—the average was two," says Fisher. Sometimes logistics made access hard; other times, the obstacles were cultural. Permission to visit the Kuba kingdom came after 12 years of trying. When they eventually arrived, the duo

met children who had never seen a white face before. "It was," says Beckwith, "like walking through a doorway into the ancient past."

African Ceremonies (Abrams) is their best-known work. Last year they published *Painted Bodies* (Rizzoli), a Pan-African study of the art of body painting. They are now working on *African Twilight*, which will cover some 140 cultures in 50 African countries, including 22 peoples they have not previously photographed. It is set to come out in 2015 (Rizzoli).

Today Beckwith and Fisher share a large, airy house in London's Belsize Park, a wonderfully idiosyncratic home filled with the treasures they've accumulated on their travels. This is also where they keep their archive: more than half a million photographs, hundreds of hours of film, as well as 200 illustrated and annotated journals from 150 African cultures. Considering the value to humanity of such a priceless resource, they are looking for a more worthy home for it. (The Smithsonian in D.C. and London's Royal Geographical Society have expressed interest.) It's not just that "these ancient cultures are a living record of our shared past, a map of where we've come from," says Beckwith, but, just as important, they are "a guide for our future." What follows is a portfolio in their own words.



From top: Photographers/guardians Beckwith (top, far right) and Fisher (next to Beckwith) in Kenya in 2004, 1978 and 1980; Ethiopia in 1990; and Niger in 1987.





ARTWORK COURTESY CAROL BECKWITH AND ANGELA FISHER;
ARCHIVAL IMAGES COURTESY AFRICAN CEREMONIES

W  e lived

with the Karo for weeks during courtship season," say Beckwith and Fisher. "Each morning the Karo men would appear in front of our tents keen to show off their freshly painted facial designs. They loved receiving Polaroids; these were some of the first images they'd ever seen of themselves." This photograph was taken near Ethiopia's Omo River in 1996.



It was always a joyous affair to watch the Surma girls beautify themselves in the morning by the cool of the water, in preparation for the courtship dances in the afternoon, say Fisher and Beckwith of the Surma girl at left, shot in Ethiopia in 1990. *Opposite:* "We were deeply touched by the closeness of man and animal among the Dinka" of South Sudan, say the photographers. In this image, shot in 2006, a boy lavishes attention on his namesake ox, which will accompany him everywhere as he matures.

