



"Faces of Africa" Photographers on Their 30-Year Endeavor

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Carol Beckwith and Angela Fisher have been photographing the people, cultures, and traditional ceremonies of Africa for 30 years. Between them they have published ten coffee table books and numerous articles for magazines, including *National Geographic*. Their photographs have been exhibited around the world.

Now, in celebration of their long collaboration, Fisher and Beckwith ([photo](#)) have published a new National Geographic book, *Faces of Africa*. It is a collection of more than 300 portraits—accompanied by a personal text—made by the duo over three decades.

National Geographic News spoke to the photographers during a recent visit to Washington, D.C.

How did you come to work together?

Fisher: Carol was shooting for her book on the Masai and I was photographing for my book *Africa Adorned* in different parts of the continent. My brother was running hot-air-balloon flights over Masai country and invited Carol for a balloon ride on her birthday. One thousand feet into the air he looked into her eyes and said, "I'd like you to meet my sister," appreciating how much we had in common.

Beckwith: We'd heard much about one another but did not meet until the opening of Angela's traditional African jewellery exhibition in Nairobi. We immediately discovered we were kindred spirits sharing the same passion for Africa's traditional cultures. Within a week we attended together a Masai warrior ceremony on the border of Kenya and Tanzania, beginning a 25-year collaboration that has produced ten books and taken us to more than 150 different cultures in 36 countries.

The National Geographic Expeditions Council has given you a grant to continue with your work. What does the grant cover?

Beckwith: We're beginning a three-year project to complete a comprehensive study of

ceremonies of the African continent, recording in photography, film, music, and words the most important rituals in 17 countries. National Geographic is helping support this project. During our first phase we will be covering eight countries (Mauritania, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, South Africa, Mali, Madagascar), focusing on intimate ceremonies and sacred rites as they follow the human life cycle from birth to death.

Fisher: We hope to make a record which will preserve these ceremonies for future generations of African children, as well as for the education, knowledge, and understanding of the outside world.

Africa has changed much since you started photographing there 30 years ago. Is it possible to find ceremonies that have not been impacted by globalization anywhere on the continent?

Beckwith: Much has changed, of course. We believe about 15 percent of the ceremonies we have photographed no longer exist, affected by civil war, famine, AIDS, and political upheaval. In many ways we will be documenting an Africa in transition. However, there are still isolated pockets on the continent where we expect to find people maintaining their ancient ways.

Fisher: Despite the visual change, in that many people now wear Western clothing, the underlying values and beliefs often remain fairly intact. But this may not last for much longer, which is why so many African elders welcome our efforts to document the ceremonies for future generations.

How do you work as a team and how have you managed to gain access to the most intimate ceremonies in Africa, including male initiations, where typically women are not allowed?

Fisher: We always make the approach with respect and humility through the proper channels. Usually this means first meeting with the elders, who are usually men. Once they know who we are and what we are trying to do they open the way for us. The men make it possible for us to attend male ceremonies.

Beckwith: Usually we have no problem attending female ceremonies. We have found we have much in common with the women of Africa. We have a deep respect of their culture and way of life and participate as much as possible. In Niger, Wodaabe women asked if they could transform us to look more attractive and dressed us up in embroidered tunics and wrappers and painted delicate designs on our faces.

Fisher: We work well together. We decided long ago to share the credit for any photographic images we make when we're working together. That way we get our egos out of the way. In addition to being a photographic team, we sometimes specialise in different fields. I tend to focus on jewelry and body adornment and have designed jewelry for years. Carol shoots video and she has an amazing collection of footage of ceremonies as well as making drawings in the field, which we use in our books. Above all, we share a deep interest in everything we jointly do, working as a creative team with

a passion for the ancient cultures of Africa.

You've taken a lot from Africa. What did you give back?

Beckwith: We believe in the African concept of reciprocity—as a thank you for what we've been given, we've helped build schools, organize the digging of wells, and develop craft initiatives to help people during periods of drought. A portion of our book royalties goes toward helping fund these projects.

Fisher: We do realize that, while it is important to preserve tradition, people also want to improve their lives. Education is one of the best ways to do this.

Beckwith: We're touched to find that Africans hold a high respect for their cultures and really do appreciate our documentation of their traditional ways. People want their stories to be told, both for future generations of their children as well as the outside world.

Fisher: We've also helped Africa by telling a different side of their story. So much of what is published about Africa in the developed world is negative about the continent. We've always tried to show the extraordinary diversity, beauty, and dignity of the continent. Through our books and lectures we tell people about Africa's core values; respect for their elders, the benefit of growing up as part of a community, the value of rites of passage that help an individual move from one stage of life to another, the importance of living in harmony with nature and one's own spirit world.

Beckwith: When we look at the world today we feel that we could all benefit by going back to Africa to learn the fundamentals of what it means to be a human being.