



The Bongo masks have a great deal of stylistic variation, typically featuring painted designs often in black, red, and yellow. According to legend, these masks are extremely powerful and have been restricted by the royal court from leaving their locality. © African Twilight: The Vanishing Cultures and Ceremonies of the African Continent by Carol Beckwith and Angela Fisher, Rizzoli, 2018.

Interview By Adam Ethan Berner

For the past four decades, photographers Angela Beckwith and Carol Fisher have spent their working lives in Africa documenting the lives and communities of several cultures throughout the continent. In their newest book, *African Twilight*, Beckwith and Fisher have compiled over 15 years of work in order to capture some of the oldest and most varied cultures in human history before they disappear forever.

Since it's been over 15 years in the making, how do you see this book and your approach to making it after all this time has passed?

Angela: Well we feel that over the years African ceremonies have continued to just decrease even more rapidly and so for us it feels like the book is a really unique record of the 35 countries we've been working in. Some ceremonies do exist still but many of them have disappeared or have greatly changed. The uniqueness of *African Twilight* is that we went further and deeper into Africa than ever before, and got very strong powerful and unrecorded ceremonies and it's all new material.



Portraits of a young Voodoo priestess wearing red parrot feathers that signify her connection with the spirit world. © African Twilight: The Vanishing Cultures and Ceremonies of the African Continent by Carol Beckwith and Angela Fisher, Rizzoli, 2018.

A lot of the ceremonies you two depict have never been documented or photographed before. How did that affect your depiction and approaches to those ones in particular?

Angela: We work very slowly in Africa, we've always had this philosophy that one must take on African time when working in the continent. So we always try to get into the community, we start living in it, we make friends, gain trust, and then start taking photographs. We believe very strongly that if you want to capture a ceremony and photograph it to its full capacity you must have the trust of the people.

What were the main methods you used to gain access to these ceremonies?

Angela: We've produced 16 books before *African Twilight*, and the message has gotten out to some of the other communities. For instance, we met a representative in the Kingdom of Benin, and we sent them the previous double volume book, *African Ceremonies*, which had a very big coverage of the Ashanti Kingdom in it. They immediately said, "Yes, we'd like to have you photograph our kingdom." We were the first women to photograph it. We heard that the last photographer, had not followed the protocol and he stood out too high in front of the King and he'd been asked to leave immediately, and there are other stories that he disappeared. So we have had the chance to gain the trust in certain circumstances by having had a good track record, and having photographed very clearly and, I suppose in a way of it, very sumptuously all these ceremonies in Africa so much so that other people wanted to be recorded in a similar style

Carol: And also when we work with people, we try to learn at least 50 words of their language so we can appear very involved and let them know that we care about communicating with them. We can greet them, we can ask simple questions, and we can comment on the photography process with them. They feel engaged and we extend effort out to enter their world. And this has a strong impact in developing trust, and of course it involves one on one communication which is a long stronger than going through a translator.



Seated on his throne, the Oba is surrounded by his wives (right), the Ewaise chief (left), and royal courtiers (far left) © African Twilight: The Vanishing Cultures and Ceremonies of the African Continent by Carol Beckwith and Angela Fisher, Rizzoli, 2018.

Do you think that there is an anthropological core to art?

Angela: Yes. There is a definite connection between art and anthropology. What's very refreshing about the art in Africa is that they don't produce art for art's sake. They produce art with some ritual or spiritual belief, and the objects and the jewelry are all like a spiritual language. They're giving off messages about either the status of a person when the person is married, single, divorced, has just become a warrior, etc. And many of the other art objects are object of protection. They're fetish objects that you can, by appeasing or paying libation to the art objects, call on the spirits of the gods or the spirits of nature or the spirits of the ancestors to gain protection, power, or advice. And many of them in their own rights are just protective objects; like images of the Kuba King are carved in a dark figure which in its own presence is a protection of the king.



The boys have graduated from their Mukanda initiation, wearing woven hats painted with ocher and charcoal, their bodies covered in chalk. © African Twilight: The Vanishing Cultures and Ceremonies of the African Continent by Carol Beckwith and Angela Fisher, Rizzoli, 2018.

There's a large amount of text for almost every photo in the book. Was that done to ensure that each image was situated in a historical and cultural context?

Carol: Yes this book really was a story of ceremonies and rituals, which we felt were vanishing. Our earlier books were sometimes more art photography where we took our best pictures that and assembled them together in this very creative and artistic way. But this book had stories to tell of ceremonies, rituals, and rights of passage, which had powerful messages of how one does move to one stage of life to another with a sense of meaning and direction and what is expected of him or her at this next stage of life, or of how one is relating to the spirit world, or of how one is connecting to their environment. We wanted to tell stories, and as much as we wanted to put our most artistic and beautiful photographs in, we wanted to build up to the story of that image and we wanted pictures to tell the story of each stage of the ceremony.

Angela: We do make a point of describing what each piece of art stands for. We are taking photographs that look extraordinary and we are describing the symbolism behind the art or the art itself, but we always intend to describe and bring in understanding of the roles African art is playing in the lives of traditional people.

I notice that in the book that the two of you frequently name the specific threats and decisions that are threatening these cultures and their communities. Was that done to call attention to the fact that it is not the passage of time that is causing these practices to dwindle, but instead the intentional actions of others?

Angela: Yes we are very keen on bringing the outside world's attention to these issues. The big hydroelectric dam being built on the Omo River, which is destroying the river flooding and the pastoral people who live on the south of the river, is actually jeopardizing lives. There are 11 groups of very traditional people living in Southern Ethiopia who are being affected by the Gibe Dam. They're also being affected by the government leasing their land to foreign investors. They're losing their land, their grazing land, and the irrigation of these big plantations is also decreasing their water. It is a huge issue and we felt very strongly that traditional societies should be able to develop at a pace that suits their own making instead of changing overnight and pushed into settled people they should be able to choose to actually evolve at their own pace. And here they're really being terminated; their whole being, their whole culture is being terminated overnight. And that leaves us very sad, particularly because they're some of the last

examples of the really ancient traditional cultures of hunter-gatherers and also the pastoral people in Africa.



Two Tribal warriors, members of a sub-clan of the Rendille who have intermarries with the Samburu, converse in the valley of Mount Poi. © African Twilight: The Vanishing Cultures and Ceremonies of the African Continent by Carol Beckwith and Angela Fisher, Rizzoli, 2018.

As a medium, what do you think are the advantages of photography in capturing these ceremonies and cultures?

Carol: We each started out in very separate fields. I started out as a painter and as an art and art history student. Angela studied in sociology and jewelry design. We feel that the best medium for telling these stories is a linear medium, where you can put picture after picture to build up the tale as opposed to painting, which is a layered technique. We both focus quite a lot on the medium of photography and film, we've taken over 1000 hours of footage of highlight moments of these ceremonies. Because these seems to be the strongest ways to tell these very important stories and to build a visual understanding.

Ideally, what would you want a reader of this book to come away with after reading it?

Angela: Well the feeling with the book is we hope that it portrays our real feelings about Africa and the reason we started photographing in Africa is that we are both very passionate about traditional cultures. In Africa, the cultures are so varied, they're so creative, and they have an incredible impact on an artistic level. And many of these cultures have actually influenced great artists in the Western world, like Picasso. We have a feeling that there is a tremendous integrity in the art coming from African cultures. Every single piece has a significant meaning to the person who either carved it or the person who is the beneficiary of it. This is interesting because it means it was carved with love, care, and great quality of technical ability. We realized from living with traditional cultures over the last forty years that they have an extraordinary lifestyle with a lot of values that we feel are very important for the world to understand. These values lead to feelings of individual happiness and contentment. And these values we feel are so important are of community, of elders, of living and giving often, and that their experience and wisdom and communities that live with ceremonies keep them in touch with the needs of the outside world. All of these things we feel are so important for the world at large to understand. So we feel that the book is important because it is a great collection of art. It is a great collection of different arts from one continent that is spellbinding and has significant meaning. And the fact that we all come from Africa it's really the story and history of our lives as human beings, and is relevant to us all. And these particular old cultural values should be incorporated more in modern Western life.

African Twilight is a work by Carol Beckwith and Angela Fisher, published by Rizzoli, is available now, and can be ordered [here](#).