



MICHAEL RUNKEL

LAST VOICES

ENDANGERED CULTURES OF THE WORLD

CALLWEY

LAST VOICES

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LAST VOICES

FOREWORD

Michael Runkel

I have spent much of my adult life travelling. My travels have not always been easy. Many led me far off the beaten track, into remote valleys, deserts, jungles, mountains, savannas, and islands, to places that cannot be stumbled upon by chance. Often, I had no idea what to expect. Sometimes it was exhausting, sometimes uncomfortable, sometimes tough. But those were precisely the journeys that have had the greatest impact in shaping my worldview.

Over the years, I've traveled to every country on earth and almost every region and territory. I've been to vast cities and political centers, but also tiny villages and nomad camps, in the company of herders, fishermen, hunters, dancers, shamans, and families whose daily lives felt totally different from mine. I never wanted to show people off as "exotic." Quite the opposite: The longer I traveled, the more I realized that every way of life has its own logic. From a metaperspective, it is fascinating to see that however different people are, everyone ultimately has the same basic needs. When it comes down to it, most people just want a peaceful life, family, children, and a stable social environment, whether they live in the Arctic, the Pacific, or the jungles of South America.

For this reason, I have always been especially interested in traditional communities. Not because they are from some bygone era, but because they often know exactly how to live in a particular landscape. They read the weather, the animals, the soil, the water, the seasons. They know when to move on, when to wait, when to share, and when to stay silent. Much of this knowledge is not written in any book. It is told, observed, copied, and passed on.

But on my travels, I have also seen how quickly these worlds are changing. Roads are extending to remote areas. Markets, money, cell phones,

new borders, political decisions, and climate change are all impacting on ways of life that have grown over generations. Sometimes this change is loud and obvious. But often, it's quiet. A ritual is performed less often. A language is spoken less. A piece of jewelry is no longer worn. An old skill is not learned. And yet it is so important to keep these traditions and social cultures alive. People need a sense of belonging, a community they can identify with.

This book came out of so many encounters. Long drives, conversations, moments of waiting, misunderstandings, hospitality, and situations where my presence was only permitted as an observer. Many photos did not fall into my lap immediately. Often, trust had to be cultivated first. Sometimes the camera was initially more of a barrier. Only when it receded into the background was I able to get the pictures that still mean the most to me today.

The people in this book are no remnants from a world that is gone. They live in the present, with all the contradictions, hopes, and struggles which that entails. Their rituals, clothes, jewelry, dances, and ways of living together are more than beautiful to look at: They show how communities form, how knowledge is passed on, and how deeply people, landscape, and memory are intertwined.

I did not write this book with the aim of romantically capturing a disappearing world; these cultures are far too alive, too different, and too complex to be reduced to that. But I wanted to show what I have seen while it is still visible. Because with every way of life that disappears, we lose more than images. We lose experiences, languages, stories, and new ways of thinking that expand our understanding of what it means to be human.

For me, this book is a personal collection of many years spent on the road. It is not a scientific work or a complete explanation. It is a photographer's perspective, shaped by years of travel and by repeated fortunate encounters with people who welcomed him, for a short time, into their lives.

I am grateful for that.
Michael Runkel

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THE JIE

Livestock herders in the border region of Uganda and South Sudan

The Jie—often also Jiye—are part of the Nilotic cattle-herding societies of East Africa. Their homeland is in northeastern Uganda, in the Karamoja region, as well as in neighboring areas of South Sudan. The region is dominated by open savanna, thorn scrub, seasonal rivers, and wide plains. Rain is unpredictable, droughts are common, and waterholes shape patterns of movement. The way of life that developed in this environment revolves around mobility, herding, and close social cooperation.

When I arrived at the village from the campsite a little later, I suddenly saw a huge group of brightly dressed women dancing through the savanna, singing, laughing, and leaping in the air with a dense, almost overwhelming energy. At first, I had no idea what was going on.

Young Jie with facial scarification, lip piercing, and beaded headband. Body jewelry and scar patterns are expressions of identity, status, and life stage.



Women joyfully preparing for a wedding—singing, dancing and moving with vibrant energy. Celebrations like these strengthen social ties and encourage exchange between different groups.



Beaded crown, nose and lip piercings, and layers of necklaces. Colors derived from earth, ash, and plants are used in rituals and transform the body into a carrier of social information.



The roundhouses are prominent in Jie settlements, perfectly adapted to their mobile way of life.





During the rainy season, families live in permanent villages; when the dry season starts, parts of the community move with the herds to more distant pastures.

TRAVEL AND ACCESS
The Jie live far from main roads. After a flight to Kapoeta in Eastern Equatoria state, the route to their region runs north cross-country for several hours. Infrastructure is limited, and paths are not always clear. The journey there highlights the remoteness of many of their settlements to this day.

CLIMATE AND ECOLOGICAL CONDITIONS
Karamoja and the surrounding areas are affected by dramatic climatic fluctuations. Rainy and dry seasons shift unpredictably. Droughts are no rare occurrence. Waterholes and grazing land decide where people and animals move. During the rainy season, many families grow millet, sorghum, and other grains. In the dry season, parts of the community move with the herds to more distant pastures. These migrations follow traditional routes and are based on detailed knowledge of the land, plants, and water sources.

POLITICAL AND SOCIAL ORGANIZATION
The Jie society is strongly structured by age group. Males pass through clear phases, from boy to warrior, and finally to elder, each age group bringing new tasks and responsibilities. Young men watch over the herds and protect the community. Elders make decisions and help mediate conflicts.

The social organization of the Jie is based on kinship, alliances, and mutual support. Families are part of clans that share responsibility. Most decisions are made in gatherings where elders and respected men take part. Conflicts are settled through mediation, compensation, or rituals.
The settlement structure is also adapted to these conditions. During the rainy season, many families live in permanent villages with round huts made of clay and grass. These villages offer protection and enable crops to be grown. When the dry season starts, a part of life relocates as some of the community move with the herds to more distant pastures.

BELIEFS
Spiritually, the Jie are closely connected to their environment. They believe in a multitude of powers that influence nature, health, and community. Ancestors play an important role in their worldview and are part of the present-day order. Offerings, songs, and dances accompany major life events such as birth, initiation, marriage, and death.

RITUALS AND TRADITIONS
Initiation rituals are of great importance, marking not only biological maturity, but also social integration. Boys are initiated in groups, receive new names or jewelry, and are gradually accepted into the community’s sphere of responsibility. Women likewise undergo important rites of passage that con-

THE JIE
solidate and highlight their status within the community. Body painting and jewelry, such as bead necklaces and metal bracelets, are key forms of expression for social identity, status, and life stages. Colors derived from earth, ash, and plants are applied during festivals and rituals, transforming the body into a conspicuous carrier of social information. At larger gatherings, animals are slaughtered, food is distributed, and dances are performed. Events of this kind strengthen social bonds and also facilitate interaction between groups.

DIET
Cattle are the economic and social backbone of the Jie; they provide milk, meat, and leather, are used as bride price and ritual gifts, and determine the status of a family. Milk is drunk every day, although meat is saved for special occasions. Their diet is rounded out with millet and sorghum from seasonal farming, plus goats and sheep, which adapt better to dry periods.

ISOLATION AND OUTSIDE INFLUENCES
The Karamoja region has been shaped by political tensions and economic challenges for decades. Traditional mobility is affected by government interventions, restrictions on movement, and new administrative structures. At the same time, modern developments such as education and healthcare are opening up new perspectives.
Modern clothes, cell phones, and urban employment opportunities are bringing changes to daily life. Some families still adhere to the rhythm of seasonal migration, while others are increasingly becoming settled.

CHALLENGES AND THREATS
Droughts, conflicts over grazing, and government interventions are part of everyday life for the Jie. Far from bringing peace, the Ugandan disarmament campaigns in Karamoja—sometimes carried out with force—have left them defenseless against armed cattle thieves.
Climate change is exacerbating the situation as rainy seasons become and less predictable and droughts last longer. Years once regarded as “bad” are the new normal—and every drought increases the pressure on grazing land and the risk of conflict with neighboring groups.

UNIQUE PERSPECTIVE
When the women noticed me, they came dancing over, pulled me into their circle, and cheered like there was no tomorrow. Before I knew it, I was drawn into dancing along—with them, among them. Later, I found out it was the wedding party getting in the mood for the ceremony.
They unhesitatingly welcomed me in without knowing me. We danced together for a good half hour. A warm, genuine moment I will never forget.

REGION
<i>Northeast Uganda (Karamoja) and neighboring South Sudan</i>
HABITAT
<i>Open savanna, thorn scrub, seasonal rivers</i>
POPULATION GROUP
<i>Jie/Jiye (Nilotes)</i>
MAIN ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES
<i>Livestock farming (cattle, goats, sheep) plus some crop farming</i>
DIET
<i>Milk and meat from livestock; millet and sorghum during the rainy season</i>
SOCIAL STRUCTURE
<i>Based on age groups and clans; elders make decisions by consensus</i>
BELIEFS
<i>Nature- and ancestor-focused; rituals maintain harmony</i>
MOBILITY
<i>Seasonal migrations between village and pasture</i>
CLIMATE
<i>Dramatic swings between rainy and dry seasons; frequent droughts</i>
THREATS
<i>Disarmament campaigns, cattle theft, climate change, conflicts over grazing land, limited freedom of movement</i>
SPECIAL FEATURE
<i>Strongly age-group-based system, conspicuous body ornamentation</i>

THE HAMER

*Initiation in the Omo valley:
the bull-jumping ceremony*

The Hamer people live in the southwestern highlands of Ethiopia, in the lower Omo Valley. In a landscape of dry savanna, seasonal rivers, and scattered acacias, a culture has developed in which livestock, community, and initiation rituals are closely linked. One of the foremost rituals is bull-jumping, marking the transition of young men into adulthood. A man must complete it successfully before he can marry and start his own family—so it is no mere a test of courage, but a social stage that confirms his place in the community.

Preparation for the ritual: One young man paints another's face. Colors derived from earth and plants are used to mark the transition into a new stage of life.



The initiate runs across the backs of the line of cattle. A successful run demonstrates courage, self-control, and maturity—and opens the door to adulthood.





Top: Young Hamer women in festive clothes.
Bottom: The resulting scars are seen as signs of strength and belonging.
Left: The stick ritual, in which men are asked by women to beat them with thin sticks.



HUMANKIND IN ALL ITS DIVERSITY

For more than three decades, renowned photographer Michael Runkel, one of the world's most widely traveled people, has journeyed across every continent. Along the way, he has encountered communities whose ways of life and traditions are threatened by climate change, globalization, and land grabbing, and are at risk of disappearing. For the first time, this Callwey book brings together his photographs. Accompanying texts provide background on the rituals and ways of life portrayed, while offering a deeply personal account of Runkel's experiences on location. The result offers rare insights into African rituals, Siberian nomadic life, South and Southeast Asian body cultures, Oceanian festivals, and the Indigenous peoples of South America.



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