

# PIPER MACKAY

## Tribal Traits and Ceremonies

“Africa is a tapestry of ancient cultures and tribes, mesmerizing for the eyes, mind, and soul; each with a specific way of dressing and decorating themselves to visually associate themselves with their clan.

From the moment my feet hit the rich red soil of Africa, I was changed nearly 17 years ago. The sights, the smells, the sounds, the raw and wild spaces all reignited my gypsy spirit with the need to explore the untouched beauty, off the beaten path, and through harsh terrains.

My photography journey was not a trained professional that plans out a collection in advance and shoots in a location over a few quick weeks, but rather one of following a passion and dream over many years. With no expectations, due to complete naivety, my first visit to a Maasai village before the Internet, cell phones, and interference of the modern world were beyond comprehension.

Coming from Southern California, born a city girl, I was fascinated by the sense of community, lifestyle, and traditions, to say nothing of their striking appearance. My guide had to almost drag me out of the village, or I may have stayed for a few weeks.

This began a deep longing to roam Africa's wilds, searching for these extraordinary tribes while they were still living authentically as they had for hundreds of years.





Mwuila Tribe, Angola  
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Suri Cattle Camp, Omo Valley, Ethiopia  
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## THE SURI | SOUTHERN ETHIOPIA

A garment and textile designer in the fashion industry, I was awestruck by the Suri's staggering beauty as images of this tribe began circulating through print media.

I was inspired by their environment of wild trees, exotic flowers, and lush vegetation. They use the clay soil of bright yellows, startling whites, and rich earth-reds to paint each other's bodies and use the plants and flowers to create elaborate headpieces; in essence, they become a walking body of art.

The most intriguing is how quickly these talented women transform themselves into a stylish as a top fashion model doing a shoot for Vogue; a top model would need a team of stylists and hours of time.

Over the years, I have been inspired by the latest lighting trends or dropping a black or white cloth behind my subject, yet I still prefer to use nature's natural background.

It is their striking appearance living in harsh environments. Still, in harmony with the earth, that is intriguing, which is why I prefer to honor their beauty in nature and photograph them using natural light against their natural environment.

Lens Magazine



Samburu Tribe, Northern Kenya  
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Suri Tribe, Ethiopia  
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## THE EXPEDITIONS

In those early days, there was no social media or smartphones to easily research a remote area. Research, which could take up to 5 years, was done through lonely planet books, long distant phone calls to a mysterious number, personal networks, finding a good fixer, and following your gut with what little information you could dig up.

It could take 3 long days over real African tracks, bushwhacking our way through, to reach tribal regions in Southern Ethiopia or Northern Kenya. You knew you were experiencing something beyond what could be imagined, which most of us had only viewed through the pages of National Geographic; what made the adventures so exciting and addicting.

These expeditions are never without extreme conditions that are physically and mentally challenging; hot temperatures, heavy rains, getting stuck for hours, becoming geographically disappointed (lost), long hikes carrying heavy gear, sleeping in huts or the vehicle, and not having a proper shower for days. Yet, we share these stories around a campfire, with a sundowner in hand, when we meet each other out in the real African bush. As areas become more accessible, I push deeper into the bush.

Gerawol Festival, Chad Wodaabe Tribe  
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Maasai Tribe, Kenya  
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Gerewol Festival. Chad  
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## TRIBAL PAINT AND TRAITS

Tribal painting has always been important and used for many different purposes; ceremonies, to frighten the enemy, protect the skin from the elements, attract the opposite sex, and most recently, some villages near the main roads paint up for tourists. Their paint style is influenced by the colorful African birds; feathers also play a big part in their adornment.

Their ornamentation (Jewelry) is used for the same purpose and distinguishes boys from men, girls from married women, a first wife, and different clans. As in cultures across the globe, western and traditional, their daily appearance is essential. They always wear their ornamentation, and depending on the activities that day, they may become very fancy; tribal women always dress up for the weekly market.

African tribal painting and traits have long inspired art and fashion across the globe.

Gerewol Festival. Chad, Wodaabe Tribe.  
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Piper at the Turkana Festival. 2016  
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## CEREMONIES

The ancient tribal ceremonies across the African continent are as important today as they were since the beginning of time. Each tribe has its unique ceremonies for attracting the opposite sex, marriage, clan disputes, and making peace. Some traditions are annual, while others can happen often and spontaneously. To name a few:

**GEREWOL FESTIVAL OF THE WODAABE.** At the end of the rainy season each year, the local elders choose a specific place deemed the best grazing for the cattle. The semi-nomadic Wodaabe people gather for a week of incredible celebrations known as the Gerewol Festival and to exchange news. The festival is a mass courtship ritual where the young Wodaabe men decorate themselves with elaborate paint, layers upon layers of Jewelry, fancy hats, and elaborate costumes in a display to attract the young women in search of a partner.

**TURKANA FESTIVAL.** The Turkana festival was started as a way to unite the tribes as a community and promote peace between them. Once a year, never set dates, as many as 14 different tribes/ethnic groups such as the Randille, Samburu, Turkana, Dassanach Gabra, Borana, El Molo, Konso, Sakure, Garee, and Waata will gather in a sea of color, dressed in their most elaborate traditional clothing, beading, head ornaments, and paint made from the red ochre to create peace.

**DONGA.** The Donga is a stick-fighting tournament between the Suri tribesmen in southern Ethiopia. It is generally held at the end of the harvest to show off and look for a bride. However, this stick fight can also be used to settle a dispute, which can happen spontaneously.





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Donga Suri Tribe, Ethiopia  
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**MY APPROACH**

I am never in a rush because I know I want to return before I arrive. With this in mind, I allow myself to be in awe of my surroundings and spend time meeting and socializing with the tribes first; it maybe several days before I bring out my camera. I wish to be accepted by the community and invited back for years to come, so establishing trust and friendship is my priority. There are remote tribal communities that I have visited several times over several years before asking if I could photograph them. Over my journey, I have now watched boys become warriors, warriors finish their rein, get married, have children of their own, and become Jr. Elders.

You can read about a place, you can research a place, you can study photographs from a place, and you can pre-sketch your compositions, but being authentically connected to your subjects is what creates emotionally impactful work; experiences captured with raw emotion that pull the viewer in as though they were personally standing beside you. These experiences are what define my work, enabling me to capture an intimate glimpse into an unexpected world. This series represents a kaleidoscope of the color of the tribes from the Southwest to the Northeast of Africa, shot over 14 years.



Gerewol Festiva, Wodaabe, Chad  
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**TRIBAL TRAITS AND CEREMONIES**

Featured articles of Piper's work have been printed in national publications such as; National Geographic Traveler, Outdoor Photographer, Nature Photographer, Ranger Finder, Shades of Color, and numerous local publications and online magazines.

Her images have graced the pages of Nature's Best, National Geographic, National Geographic Explorer, Travel Africa, WWF calendars, birders, and numerous travel publications. Her work is represented in 4 of the 5 Remembering Wildlife books. Her images have been exhibited at the Smithsonian Natural History Museum in Washington DC, The Museum of History and industry in Seattle Washington, The Art Wolfe gallery, The G2 Gallery, and hanging in private collections worldwide.

She has been an inspirational speaker for Canon, Nikon, and large photography venues. She also leads safaris and tribal expeditions across the African Continent.



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