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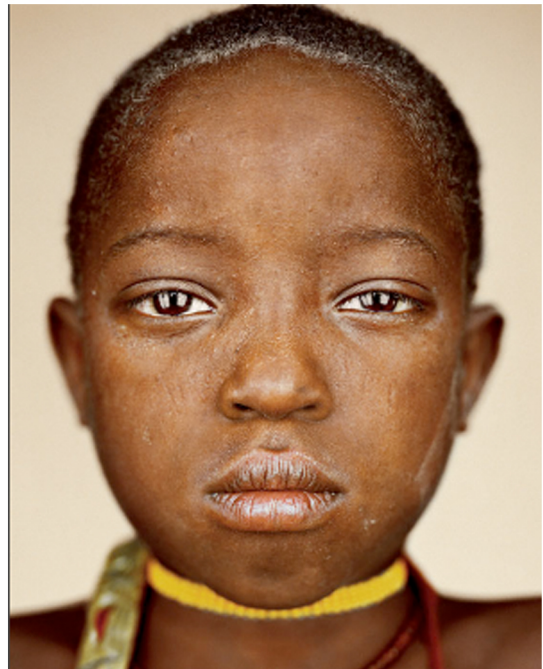
Showcase: Kinship, Close Up

By James Estrin

It would seem to be a long way from Hollywood and Washington to the home of the Hadza tribe in northern Tanzania. But for the portrait photographer Martin Schoeller, they are closer than you might think.

“We were all hunter-gatherers, basically, 15,000 years ago,” Mr. Schoeller said, “and the Hadza are among the very few, last cultures that still live a life that all of us used to share. It is worth documenting from a photographer’s view. They’ve always been written about and photographed by anthropologists. I feel that, with a different approach, I can offer something new.”

His close-up style, influenced by Bernd and Hilla Becher, puts all of his subjects — no matter their status — on equal footing, revealing similarities as well as differences. Though well known for photographing the famous, Mr. Schoeller has always been attracted to a broader range of subjects.



The current issue of National Geographic features Mr. Schoeller’s close-up portraits of the Hadza as well as his documentary photographs of them.

It was on an assignment for Travel and Leisure magazine that Mr. Schoeller first encountered the Hadza. They were not re-enacting a lifestyle for tourists, but living in a way that had basically not changed for millennia. “You can go away for 10 years, come back and people will be sleeping under the same tree,” Mr. Schoeller said.

“You think it’s such a simple life,” Mr. Schoeller said. “Men get up in the morning, grab their bows and arrows and go look for wild animals. And the women gather nuts and fruit and berries. But the closer you look, it’s a very hard life — to survive by what the land provides.”

Mr. Schoeller, 41, came to New York from Germany in 1992 to work for Annie Leibovitz as an assistant. After three years, he went out on his own and has worked for The New Yorker under contract since 1999 and also for Rolling Stone and GQ. He also makes time for personal projects.

On his third trip to photograph the Hadza, he spent 26 days photographing, mainly with medium-format cameras. In order to light the close-up portraits, he and his assistants built white tents and used two generators. He used intermediaries to gain the tribe’s trust.



The Hadza had rarely — if ever — seen a photograph. “They have no understanding of what photography means and are unaware of the rest of the world to a large extent,” Mr. Schoeller said.

He gave all of his subjects a Polaroid of themselves. “They would cherish them for maybe five minutes,” Mr. Schoeller said, “and then they would throw them out, throw them in the dirt or give them back and say: ‘Thank you. I don’t need them anymore.’”

One of Mr. Schoeller’s favorite portraits is of a young boy, Nija (Slide 1), with “a lot of attitude,” full of fortitude and pride.

“They may want things when they see what others have — that’s human nature,” Mr. Schoeller said. “But they’re not hungry and they’re not starving. They’ve been around for thousands of years without any help. It’s not that they need any help from us.”

