

Figures in a Landscape: The Art of Kazuyoshi Nomachi

by Nick Taylor

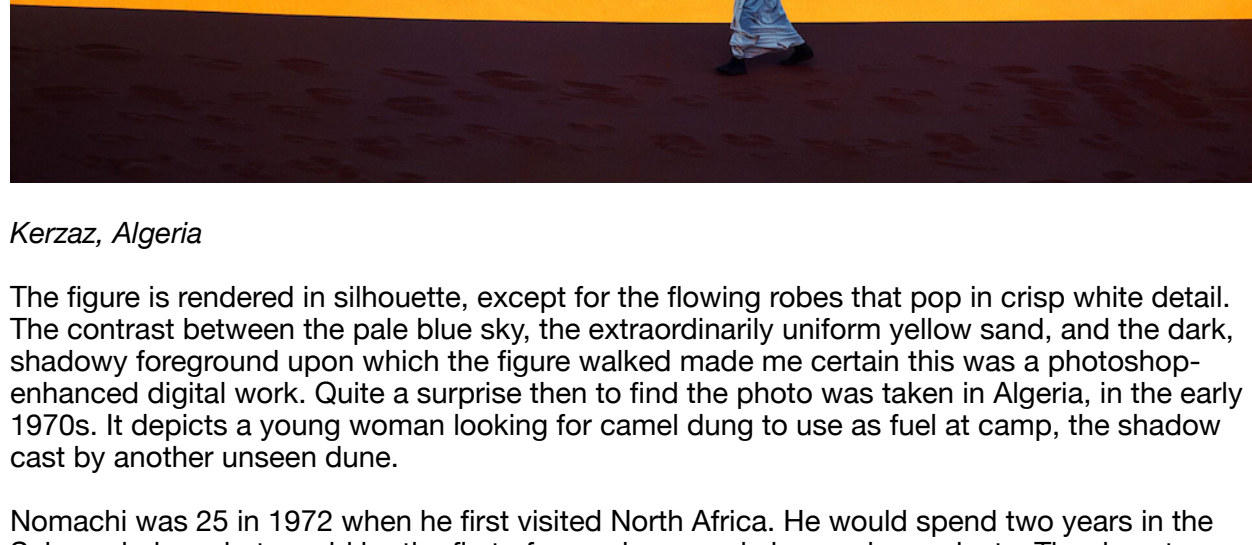


Akakus, Libya

Japanese photographer Kazuyoshi Nomachi shares with his contemporaries Sebastião Salgado and Steve McCurry an ability to turn photojournalism - the art of capturing the immediate - into something epic and monumental, as seemingly timeless as myth. Nomachi has been photographing since the early 1970s, and has worked extensively in the remotest regions of the Sahara desert, the Himalayas, the Andes and the Arabian Peninsula, and although his twelve photographic anthologies have been published around the world, outside of Japan his work has only rarely been publicly exhibited, and unlike the American McCurry or the Brazilian Salgado, no award-winning international documentary or single image that has burned itself into public consciousness has touched his career. Slowly however, the west is beginning to celebrate this singular photographic voice.

In 2013 and 2014 a comprehensive retrospective was staged in Rome. Titled "*Kazuyoshi Nomachi: Le Vie del Sacro (The Ways of the Sacred)*," the exhibit was billed as not only the first in Europe, but the first in the western world. Now, from January to April 2019, a Nomachi collection is finally being shown in the USA - at the Anastasia Photo gallery in New York's Lower East Side. This is where I first encountered his work in a fortuitous accident as I strolled by the small gallery on an early Spring afternoon.

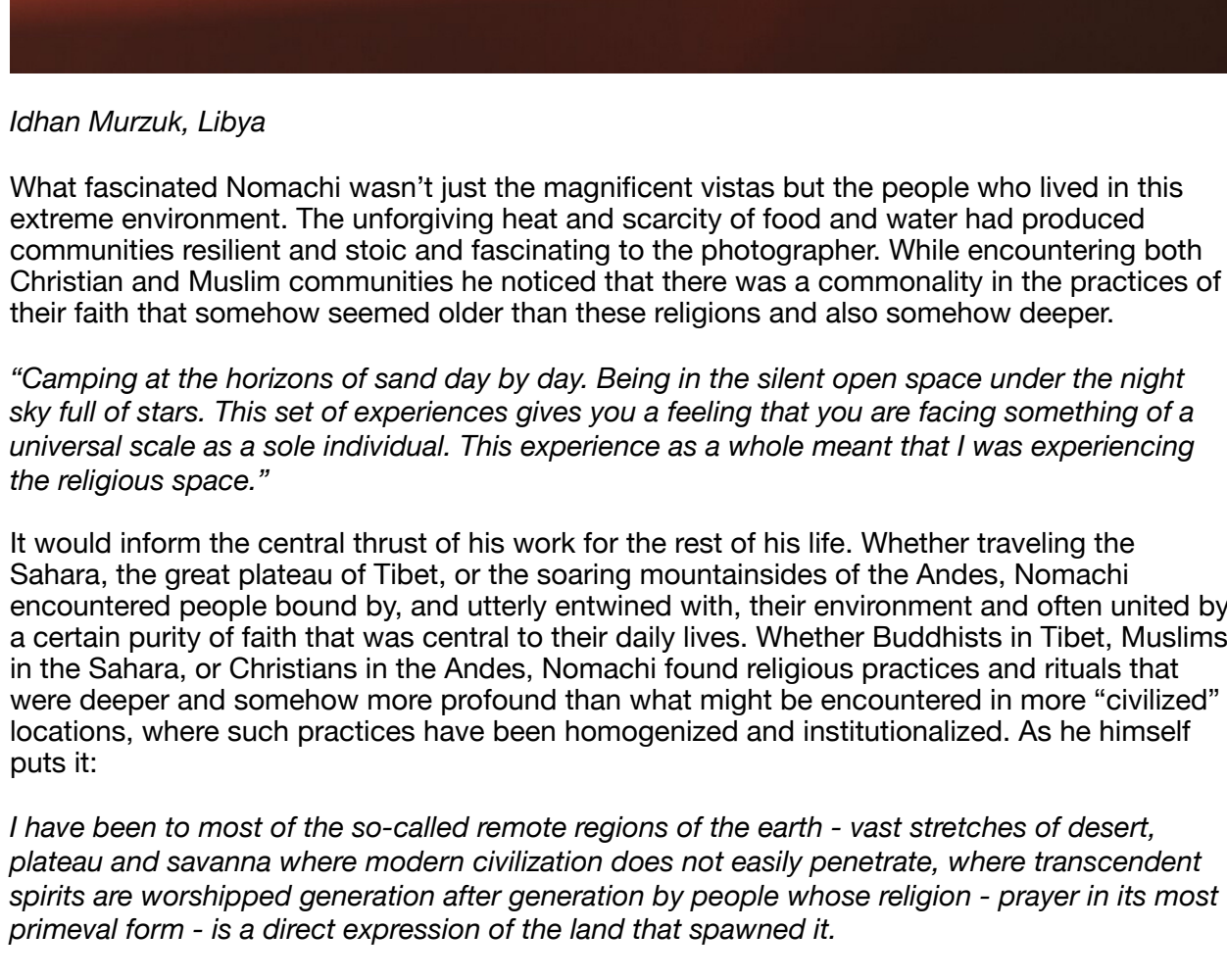
I was drawn in by a striking image of a figure walking across a desert hewn in such a vibrant yellow that it resembled to me an illustration as much as photography.



Kerzaz, Algeria

The figure is rendered in silhouette, except for the flowing robes that pop in crisp white detail. The contrast between the pale blue sky, the extraordinarily uniform yellow sand, and the dark, shadowy foreground upon which the figure walked made me certain this was a photoshop-enhanced digital work. Quite a surprise then to find the photo was taken in Algeria, in the early 1970s. It depicts a young woman looking for camel dung to use as fuel at camp, the shadow cast by another unseen dune.

Nomachi was 25 in 1972 when he first visited North Africa. He would spend two years in the Sahara during what would be the first of many large scale immersive projects. The desert captivated him. He described traveling through Algeria, Libya, Egypt and the Sudan as "*a world of sand, sculpted in breathtaking, undulating dunes. The vast emptiness continues, even after driving for three or four days and is only broken by the green patches of the oasis...*"



Idhan Murzuk, Libya

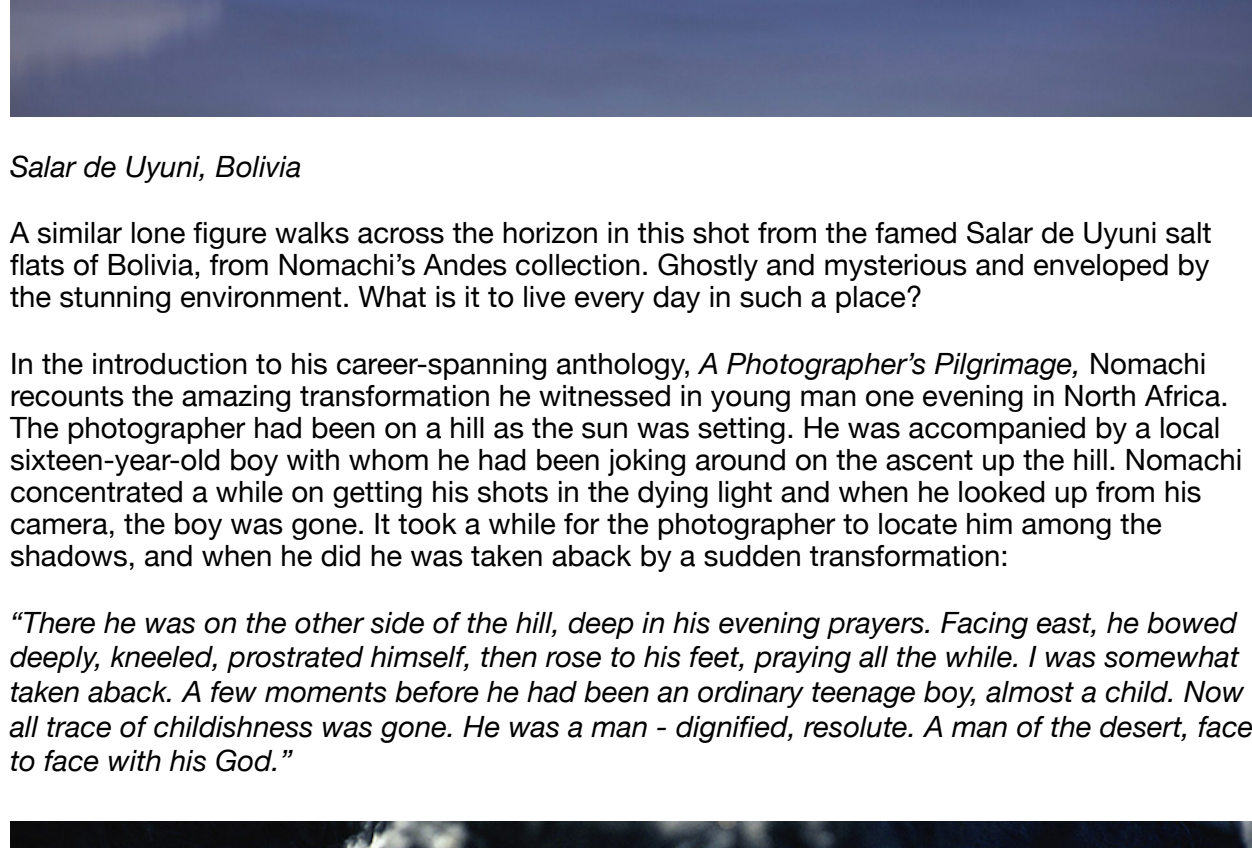
What fascinated Nomachi wasn't just the magnificent vistas but the people who lived in this extreme environment. The unforgiving heat and scarcity of food and water had produced communities resilient and stoic and fascinating to the photographer. While encountering both Christian and Muslim communities he noticed that there was a commonality in the practices of their faith that somehow seemed older than these religions and also somehow deeper.

"Camping at the horizons of sand day by day. Being in the silent open space under the night sky full of stars. This set of experiences gives you a feeling that you are facing something of a universal scale as a sole individual. This experience as a whole meant that I was experiencing the religious space."

It would inform the central thrust of his work for the rest of his life. Whether traveling the Sahara, the great plateau of Tibet, or the soaring mountainsides of the Andes, Nomachi encountered people bound by, and utterly entwined with, their environment and often united by a certain purity of faith that was central to their daily lives. Whether Buddhists in Tibet, Muslims in the Sahara, or Christians in the Andes, Nomachi found religious practices and rituals that were deeper and somehow more profound than what might be encountered in more "civilized" locations, where such practices have been homogenized and institutionalized. As he himself puts it:

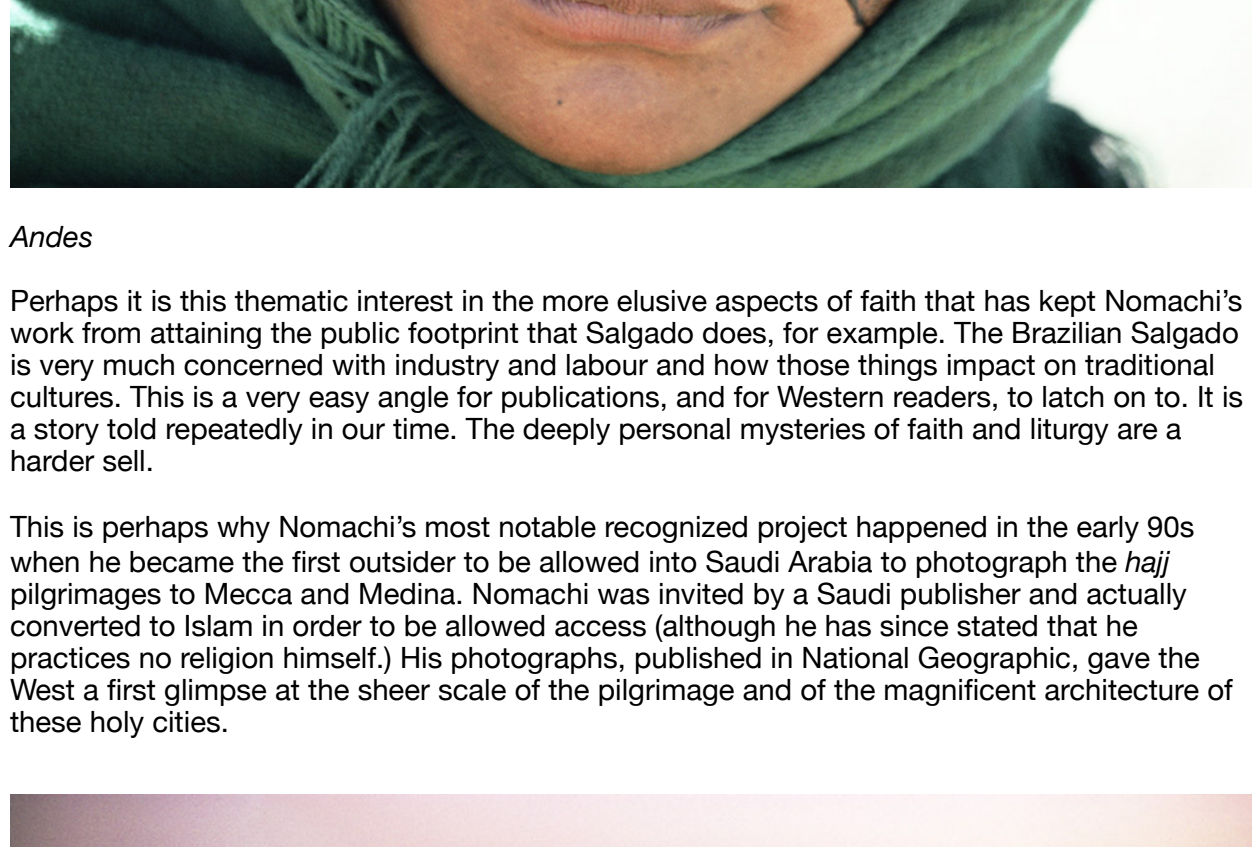
I have been to most of the so-called remote regions of the earth - vast stretches of desert, plateau and savanna where modern civilization does not easily penetrate, where transcendent spirits are worshipped generation after generation by people whose religion - prayer in its most primal form - is a direct expression of the land that spawned it.

To live in land where the extremity of scale and climate everyday reminds you how small and insignificant you are must change the way faith is practiced. Stylistically Nomachi illustrates this in a way that we can see again and again in his work. Whereas some photographers concentrate on the landscapes of these harsh climates, and others on documenting people in intimate, close-up detail, Nomachi's most striking trademark is his ability to place people inside their environment in a way that allows one to inform the other. The stark geographies of the places he has chosen to work can be seen to overwhelm the tiny figures in such a way that it often takes a moment to even pick out the subjects among the awe-inspiring landscape.



Igli, Algeria

Witness this piece from Algeria. We are drawn first to the stunningly smooth dunes and then notice something in the foreground... an object thrust in the sand, its shadow as prominent as the object itself. Then we notice the trail of footprints... and then only a few seconds later do we register the lone figure walking in the distance. What is happening here? Has the figure walked all the way to this place, this lonely rock, to pray, only to return along the same path? All under an unforgiving sun. Can we imagine the dedication involved with such a practice?

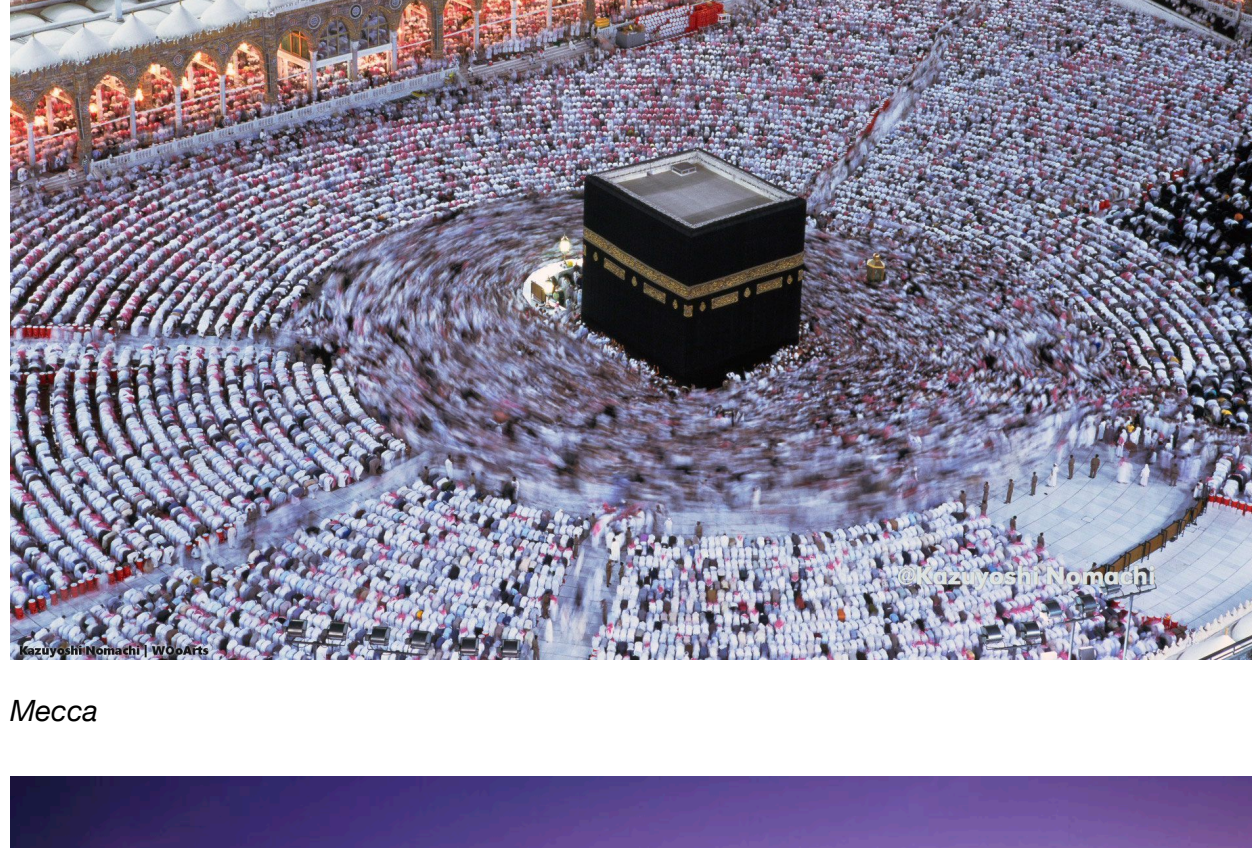


Salar de Uyuni, Bolivia

A similar lone figure walks across the horizon in this shot from the famed Salar de Uyuni salt flats of Bolivia, from Nomachi's Andes collection. Ghostly and mysterious and enveloped by the stunning environment. What is it to live every day in such a place?

In the introduction to his career-spanning anthology, *A Photographer's Pilgrimage*, Nomachi recounts the amazing transformation he witnessed in young man one evening in North Africa. The photographer had been on a hill as the sun was setting. He was accompanied by a local sixteen-year-old boy with whom he had been joking around on the ascent up the hill. Nomachi concentrated a while on getting his shots in the dying light and when he looked up from his camera, the boy was gone. It took a while for the photographer to locate him among the shadows, and when he did he was taken aback by a sudden transformation:

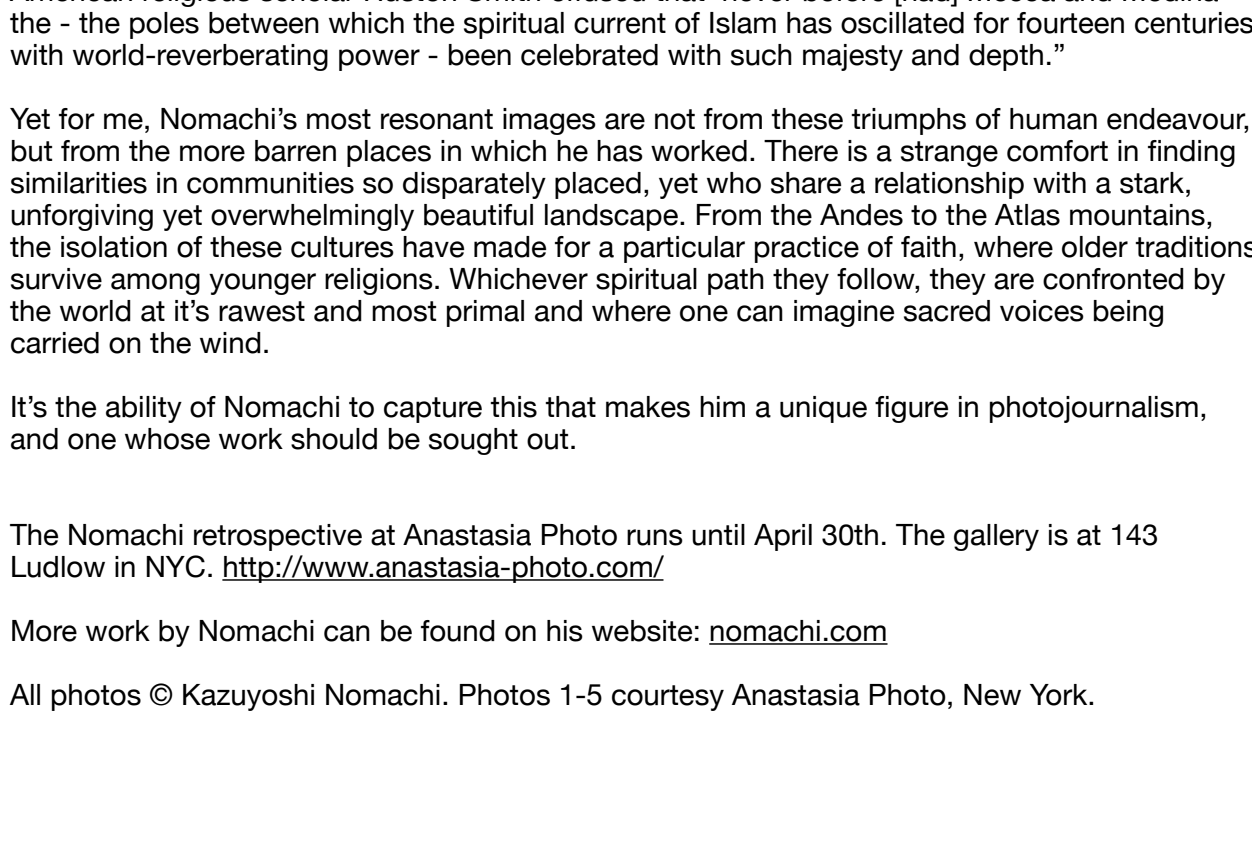
"There he was on the other side of the hill, deep in his evening prayers. Facing east, he bowed deeply, kneeled, prostrated himself, then rose to his feet, praying all the while. I was somewhat taken aback. A few moments before he had been an ordinary teenage boy, almost a child. Now all trace of childishness was gone. He was a man - dignified, resolute. A man of the desert, face to face with his God."



Andes

Perhaps it is this thematic interest in the more elusive aspects of faith that has kept Nomachi's work from attaining the public footprint that Salgado does, for example. The Brazilian Salgado is very much concerned with industry and labour and how those things impact on traditional cultures. This is a very easy angle for publications, and for Western readers, to latch on to. It is a story told repeatedly in our time. The deeply personal mysteries of faith and liturgy are a harder sell.

This is perhaps why Nomachi's most notable recognized project happened in the early 90s when he became the first outsider to be allowed into Saudi Arabia to photograph the *hajj* pilgrimages to Mecca and Medina. Nomachi was invited by a Saudi publisher and actually converted to Islam in order to be allowed access (although he has since stated that he practices no religion himself.) His photographs, published in National Geographic, gave the West a first glimpse at the sheer scale of the pilgrimage and of the magnificent architecture of these holy cities.



Camping area in Mina on the way to Mecca



Mecca



Medinha

Nomachi's work in Medina and Mecca is extraordinary, capturing both the scale and the intimacy of these pilgrimages, where literally millions of worshippers come together. The famed American religious scholar Huston Smith effused that "never before [had] Mecca and Medina - the - the poles between which the spiritual current of Islam has oscillated for fourteen centuries with world-reverberating power - been celebrated with such majesty and depth."

Yet for me, Nomachi's most resonant images are not from these triumphs of human endeavour, but from the more barren places in which he has worked. There is a strange comfort in finding similarities in communities so disparately placed, yet who share a relationship with a stark, unforgiving yet overwhelmingly beautiful landscape. From the Andes to the Atlas mountains, the isolation of these cultures have made for a particular practice of faith, where older traditions survive among younger religions. Whatever spiritual path they follow, they are confronted by the world at it's rawest and most primal and where one can imagine sacred voices being carried on the wind.

It's the ability of Nomachi to capture this that makes him a unique figure in photojournalism, and one whose work should be sought out.

The Nomachi retrospective at Anastasia Photo runs until April 30th. The gallery is at 143 Ludlow in NYC. <http://www.anastasia-photo.com/>

More work by Nomachi can be found on his website: nomachi.com

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