

In the centre of this black-and-white photograph, we see a man, from the thighs up, standing with his arms aloft, palms forward. His mouth is open, as though he is singing or chanting. He's barechested, but wears a hat made of feathers and has dark-coloured paint across his forehead and on his cheeks. The paint goes down his torso, stopping close to the belly button. A necklace hangs down to his chest.

Behind the man, we can see shallow water flowing over rocks, and lush branches of trees arch over it. In the background, there are two other men, one of them sits on a moss-covered rock in the left of the image, holding two long spears. The other is in the top-centre of the picture, crouched on a mound. A thick fog hangs in the air.

My name is Sebastião Salgado, a photographer from Brazil. This photo was taken when I climbed the country's highest mountain, Pico da Neblina (fog peak), in the heart of the Amazon region. We're used to seeing pictures of the Amazon as a vast plain with sinuous rivers.

Yet little is known about life on these mountains because they are so difficult to access. The biggest mountains in Brazil are all in the Amazon, and the density of vegetation means there is so much we've yet to learn about them. I climbed this mountain with a group of 22 indigenous people, two of whom were great shamans, one of them is the man in this image.

The climb was difficult and slippery. This peak is called "fog" because it is draped in humidity and a lot of rain. When we reached an altitude of 2,100 metres, we set up camp and finished the climb at 3,107 metres.

The shaman in the photo, Koparihewë (a name that means "chief of song" or "voice of nature"), addresses the great Yanomami goddess who lives high up in the mountains during the climb. This goddess controls all the rains and storms in the Amazon, and he asks her to stop the rains so that we can make the ascent more easily. In the end, we managed a reasonable climb.

I don't try to send messages through my work because I let it speak for itself. But I do hope it inspires people to look at the photographs I've taken in this region with love and respect for this forest and its inhabitants.

The Amazon is one of the most protected regions on the planet, along with Antarctica, and we must protect this space in every way, because otherwise it will be catastrophic, not simply for those close to the river and its forests, but for all of us.

The Amazon holds the greatest concentration of biodiversity and water in the world. If we destroy it, there would be a return of carbon into the atmosphere so massive that it would lead to the end of the planet. It would take us from the paradise that the Amazon represents, straight to hell.

With this photograph and others I've taken there, I aimed to provoke concern and respect in order to help protect this ecosystem.

To take this photograph, I used a camera that I helped Canon develop: the 1D X. For me it's the perfect camera. It's hyper-solid, of incredible quality and robustness, which offers you a wide range of working conditions – including the inhospitable mountains of the Amazon.

I make my photographs by telling stories. This image is part of a story that took me almost nine years. I made 58 reports and journeys in the Amazon, to achieve a single story.

The resulting Amazonia collection has just over 200 photographs. If you multiply that number by the time I invested in making each of those photos – which is 1/250th of a second – the entire report represents one second of photography. One second that took nine years to realise.

People sometimes define me as an artist, but that isn't true. I'm a photographer, an entirely separate entity. Photography is a universal language. The photographs I took in the Amazon can be understood in China, France and Japan, without any translation. It's a visceral and direct form of communication. In order to photograph, you have to go deep, with enormous concentration and density, into the phenomenon that is happening in front of you. Because only one photograph will tell the whole story.

Today, images have become a means of communication, but not photography. Images taken using mobile phones are not photography, but a language we use to communicate.

True photography has the power to transmit everything that comes from the photographer's heritage - aesthetic, cultural, ideological, anthropological - and that moment when he makes the representative cut of reality. It is the mirror of society, a representative frame of the historical moment in which it was made. It has this incredible power to inspire and transform.

I'm now 80 years old, and I started photographing at the age of 26. My work as a photographer is the accumulation of the experiences I've had throughout my life.

But at a certain point in my career, I turned to ecology.

I inherited my parents' farm in the Rio Doce Valley, which my wife Lélia and I turned into a national park with a view to reforesting a region. To date, we have planted more than three million trees on this land, which has once again flourished, turning back into a great forest.

I may have been the photographer who has worked the most in the history of photography. But perhaps the most important thing I've done in my life is outside of photography. It's planting all those trees.

I've had an incredible life, and photography has given me so much. It has enabled me to visit more than 130 countries, bearing witness to the planet we all share.

I came from the earth, and today I'm returning to the earth. My life is a kind of cycle that I'm closing now.