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Fading Cultures

Magazine

50 Years of Exile
The Enduring Struggle of the
Saharawi People"

When Conservation Hurts
The hidden struggles

Cyprus
Food Markets Keeping
Community Together

Beyond Vows
Wedding Rituals and Cultural
Bonds Across the Globe

Ayurveda
The Science of Health
from Ancient Indian



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Inspiring*

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Exploring*



"In the timeless fabrics of India, Emit, a young vendor at the vibrant Silk Market in Jaipur, Rajasthan, showcases a treasure trove of heritage and artistry. Each thread in his collection tells a story, woven through generations of tradition. From the rich hues to the intricate patterns, his fabrics are not just textiles but a celebration of India's enduring cultural legacy and craftsmanship."



"On the vibrant streets of Cyprus, a market stall is more than commerce—it's heritage, community, culture, and a cornerstone of local health. Do we truly appreciate the enduring power of the street vendor?"

The Saharawi 06
50 Years beyond the wall
by Tom Corcoran

Meaning Behind the Vegetable Market 24
Cyprus Streets, Food & Community
by Emily Anna Mavadou

Beyond Vows 38
Weddings around the World
by James Pierce

Sacred Latvian Pirts 58
by Agnese Abolina and Masha Segal,

Ayurveda 70
The Science of Health
by Amara Doshi

Find Our Way 86
"The Ancient Art of Navigation"
by James Pierce

When Conservation Hurts: 114
The Hidden Struggle of Indigenous,
Tribal and Traditional Stewards
by Tom Corcoran

Welcome to the Digital Edition



Fading
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2025

Our First Print Edition 2025 Is Here!

We are proud to announce the release of our first Print Edition of Fading Cultures Magazine 2025. This collector's edition features 10 of our favourite stories from across the globe 116 pages, including an in-depth look at tribal life with the Gurjar girls in Sariska Tiger Reserve, a journey through heritage in displacement, and our groundbreaking story on the origins of oil painting that takes us back to the 7th century CE. It is printed on high-quality, Eco-certified paper using our partner's latest sustainable printing technology.



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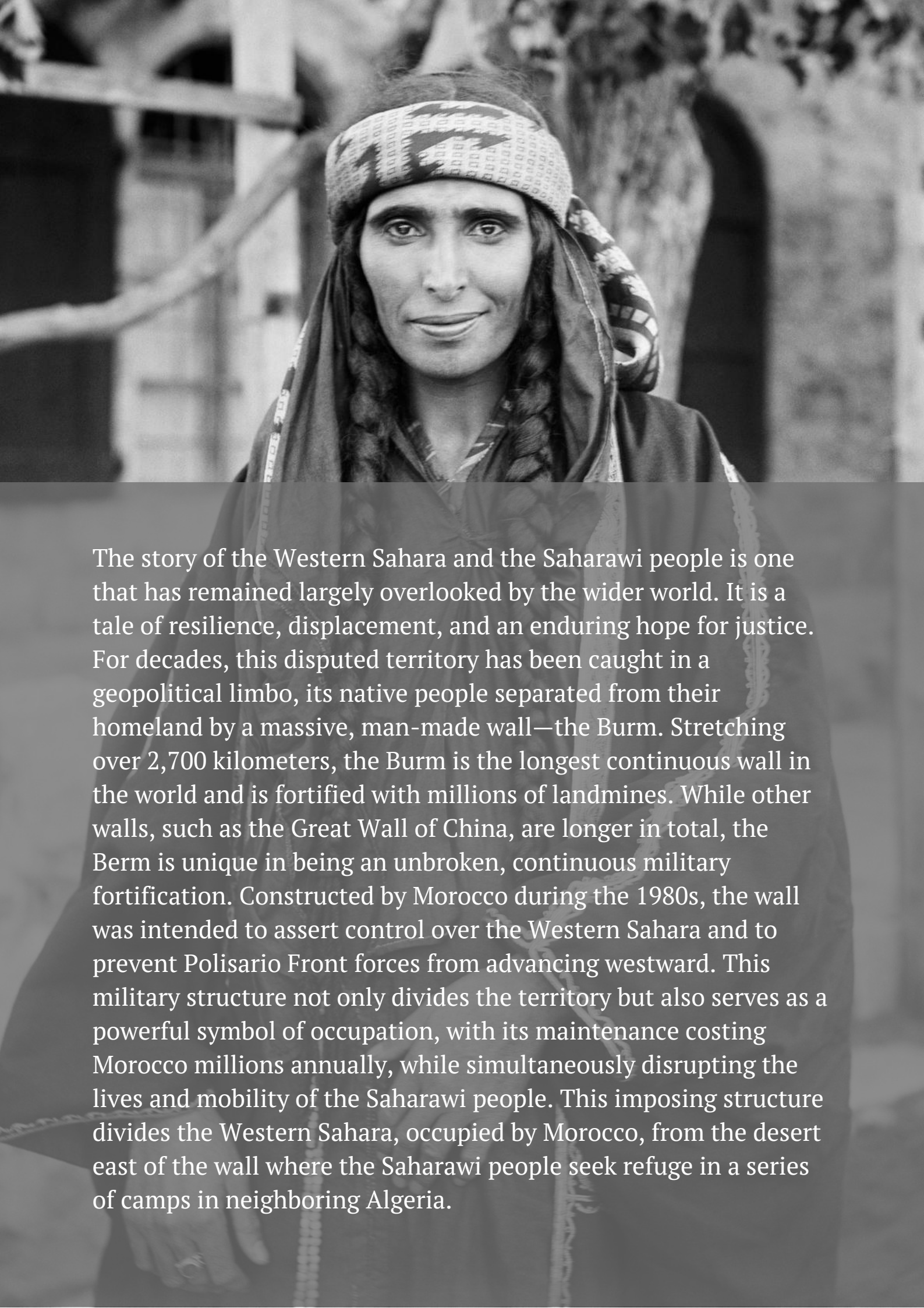
THE SAHARAWI

by Tom Corcoran
& Ethnomad Photography

"Behind the Sahara's Great Divide: The Saharawi's Fight for Freedom"

**2025 Marks 50 years of life deep in the Sahara
On the wrong side of the worlds longest wall**

In the vast, golden expanse of the Algerian Sahara, the Saharawi refugees have endured for five decades, carving out a life amidst one of the harshest landscapes on Earth. Here, in the shadow of endless dunes and under an unyielding sun, resilience becomes a way of life. Their tents, fluttering in the desert winds, are more than shelter—they are symbols of an unbroken spirit, a people striving to keep their hope and culture alive in exile.



The story of the Western Sahara and the Saharawi people is one that has remained largely overlooked by the wider world. It is a tale of resilience, displacement, and an enduring hope for justice. For decades, this disputed territory has been caught in a geopolitical limbo, its native people separated from their homeland by a massive, man-made wall—the Berm. Stretching over 2,700 kilometers, the Berm is the longest continuous wall in the world and is fortified with millions of landmines. While other walls, such as the Great Wall of China, are longer in total, the Berm is unique in being an unbroken, continuous military fortification. Constructed by Morocco during the 1980s, the wall was intended to assert control over the Western Sahara and to prevent Polisario Front forces from advancing westward. This military structure not only divides the territory but also serves as a powerful symbol of occupation, with its maintenance costing Morocco millions annually, while simultaneously disrupting the lives and mobility of the Saharawi people. This imposing structure divides the Western Sahara, occupied by Morocco, from the desert east of the wall where the Saharawi people seek refuge in a series of camps in neighboring Algeria.

My first encounter with the Saharawi story was in 2004, during a film course run by the BBC in London. A young woman in the course shared with me the plight of the Saharawi people and her dream of making a film to bring their struggles to light. Her words stayed with me, planting a seed of curiosity and perhaps responsibility. It wasn't until 2007 that I had the opportunity to see for myself the reality of life for these forgotten people. Alongside a group of fellow students from University College Cork in Ireland, I boarded a flight to Tindouf, a remote outpost in the Algerian Sahara. We flew in darkness, and as the sun rose across the desert, its vast, golden expanse seemed to stretch endlessly, a stark and humbling sight that hinted at the resilience required to survive out here. What I witnessed there left an indelible mark on my understanding of human resilience and the fight for land, home, heritage and cultural identity.




Upon arrival, we were met by Mohammad Saleh, a young translator whose dream was to become a journalist. His energy and ambition mirrored the determination of his people. Saleh reflected the dynamic, calm and poetic nature of his people, speaking English, Arabic, French and Spanish fluently. Our first stop was the Polisario Front headquarters. The Polisario, the Saharawi people's government-in-exile, has led the struggle for Western Saharan independence since the Spanish colonial era ended in 1975. Sitting in a modest room, we received a briefing on the rules and limitations of our visit, as well as a glimpse into the lives of the people who had welcomed us to their desert home.



The Saharawi camps are an extraordinary testament to human ingenuity and collective will. Remarkably, they have developed a self-managed society that operates on principles of equality, education, and mutual aid—a rare and inspiring model in refugee settings. This collective identity and organised autonomy set the Saharawi apart and exemplify their resilience in preserving a unified culture under the most challenging circumstances. Spread across the harsh desert landscape near Tindouf, there are four main camps: *El Aaiun*, *Awserd*, *Smara*, *Dakhla*, named after towns in their homeland. Despite the desolation of their environment, these camps are organised, self-managed communities.

Each camp operates under its own elected council, with women playing a pivotal role in governance and daily operations. From the moment we arrived, it became clear that the women are the backbone of their society. Unlike many other nomadic or tribal societies where leadership roles are often male-dominated, Saharawi women take on pivotal roles in governance, cultural preservation, and education. They organise the barrio's (neighborhood), births's, deaths, and festivals, preserving oral traditions, and acting as custodians of their people's identity, ensuring that their culture endures despite displacement.



A close-up photograph of a traditional Saharawi tea ceremony. A wooden teapot is pouring a dark, rich tea into a clear glass cup. The cup is placed on a silver tray with intricate patterns. A silver spoon is visible in the cup. The background is a colorful, patterned fabric. A semi-transparent text box is overlaid on the right side of the image.

For the Saharawi people, tea is more than a drink—it is a symbol of hospitality, resilience, and tradition. In their desert camps, the ritual of preparing and sharing tea is a cornerstone of social life, offering moments of connection and reflection amidst their long exile. The tea ceremony typically involves three rounds, each with its own symbolic meaning: the first is bitter, representing life's challenges; the second is sweet, symbolizing love; and the third is gentle, a reminder of the enduring hope for the future. With tea leaves carefully brewed and sugar generously added, this act becomes a way of reaffirming community bonds, even in the face of displacement and hardship.

They not only manage food distribution and oversee education but also play crucial roles in political advocacy. For example, I met Aisha, a community leader who organises literacy programs for women and groups that ensured that traditional weaving techniques are passed down to younger generations. Her work highlights the Saharawi women's broad focus on sustaining their heritage while working with younger generations of their community to adapt to the challenges of displacement. They manage food distribution, all functions at the local level and uphold the cultural and social fabric of the camps.

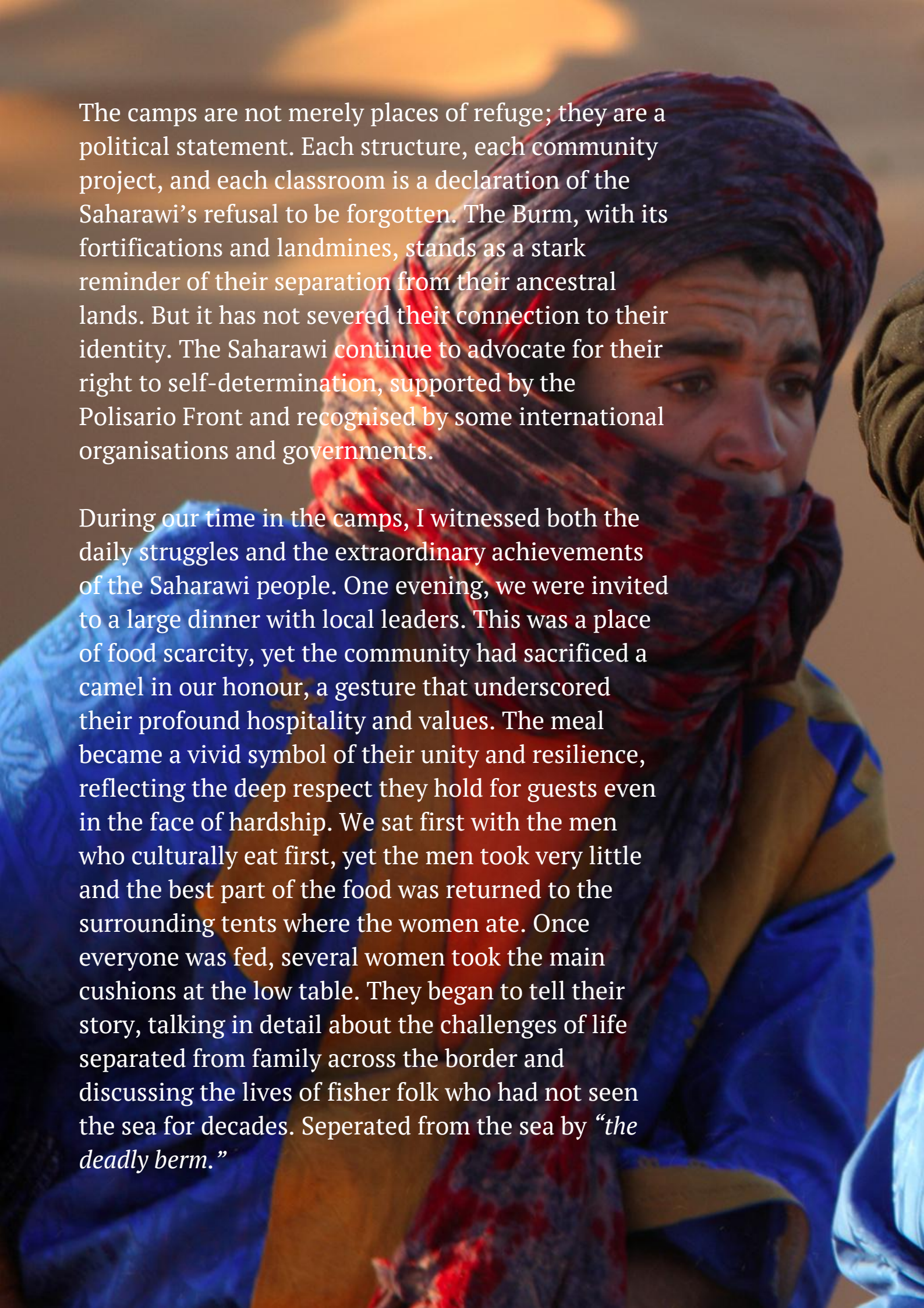
Food and essential supplies are provided through humanitarian aid, a lifeline for the Saharawi people who have been displaced for generations. Yet, they also cultivate food, albeit minimally, experimenting with vegetable gardens, creating microclimates in the desert, and using polymers to retain water in sandy soils—a testament to their resourcefulness. The food aid distribution system is highly efficient, primarily because the Saharawi have taken over the distribution from the World Food Program (WFP) ensuring that every family receives their share based on the need not just numbers. But the challenges of camp life are profound. Water is scarce, temperatures often soar above 50 degrees Celsius, in mid summer and opportunities for economic self-reliance are extremely limited.

Despite the extreme conditions, food remains central to life in the Saharawi camps. Daily meals revolve around staples like lentils, rice, couscous, and pasta—supplied by the World Food Programme (WFP)—along with oil, sugar, and fortified flour. Canned fish and legumes are included when available. During festivals, a camel may be slaughtered and shared. “Summer,” our host Mohammad Saleh told us, *“it is so hot it is hard to move—the road gets so hot it can melt the tyres on the cars. But in the late evenings, we all move out in search of a high spot to catch any hint of a breeze.”* In such heat and scarcity, preparing food is not just survival—it is an act of resilience and cultural preservation.

Education is a cornerstone of life in the camps. Schools and vocational centres dot the landscape, offering children and young adults the chance to pursue knowledge and skills. The Saharawi place a strong emphasis on education, viewing it as both a means of individual empowerment and a tool for the liberation of their homeland.

Many young Saharawi leave the camps to study abroad, supported by scholarships and partnerships with universities in countries like Cuba, Spain, and Algeria. One such example is Fatima El-Mahdi, who studied medicine in Cuba and returned to the camps as a paediatrician, dedicating her life to improving healthcare for children in these harsh conditions. What sets them apart, however, is their unwavering commitment to return to the desert. Doctors, lawyers, engineers, and teachers come back to the camps, determined to contribute to their community and preserve their way of life.

The resilience of the Saharawi is perhaps most vividly embodied in their cultural traditions. Their music carries the sound of the desert and Africa, punctuated by ululations—an ancient, celebratory sound that reverberates through the camps during gatherings and festivals, a wedding, a divorce. This rich auditory connection to their heritage and resilience to their past and underscores their pride in cultural preservation. Music, poetry, and storytelling are integral to their identity, serving as a bridge to their past and a beacon of hope for the future. Even in exile, they celebrate their heritage with pride, organising festivals and gatherings that reinforce their connection to their homeland. I was struck by the warmth and hospitality of the people, who opened their homes and shared their stories with us. In their eyes, there was a mixture of sorrow for the losses they had endured and an unyielding determination to reclaim their rightful place in the world.



The camps are not merely places of refuge; they are a political statement. Each structure, each community project, and each classroom is a declaration of the Saharawi's refusal to be forgotten. The Berm, with its fortifications and landmines, stands as a stark reminder of their separation from their ancestral lands. But it has not severed their connection to their identity. The Saharawi continue to advocate for their right to self-determination, supported by the Polisario Front and recognised by some international organisations and governments.

During our time in the camps, I witnessed both the daily struggles and the extraordinary achievements of the Saharawi people. One evening, we were invited to a large dinner with local leaders. This was a place of food scarcity, yet the community had sacrificed a camel in our honour, a gesture that underscored their profound hospitality and values. The meal became a vivid symbol of their unity and resilience, reflecting the deep respect they hold for guests even in the face of hardship. We sat first with the men who culturally eat first, yet the men took very little and the best part of the food was returned to the surrounding tents where the women ate. Once everyone was fed, several women took the main cushions at the low table. They began to tell their story, talking in detail about the challenges of life separated from family across the border and discussing the lives of fisher folk who had not seen the sea for decades. Separated from the sea by "*the deadly berm.*"

THE WORLD'S LONGEST CONTINUOUS WALL

"THE WORLD'S
LONGEST
CONTINUOUS WALL:
A 2,700-KILOMETER
SAND WALL
SURROUNDED BY
THE PLANET'S
LARGEST
CONCENTRATION OF
LANDMINES"



Stretching over 2,700 kilometers, the Berm snakes its way through the vast expanse of the Sahara, an unbroken ribbon of sand, rock, and fortifications. Constructed in the 1980s by Morocco, this immense wall, the longest continuous military barrier in the world, divides Western Sahara into two starkly different realities. To the west lies the territory controlled by Morocco, and to the east, the Liberated Territories, administered by the Polisario Front, the Saharawi government-in-exile.

At first glance, the Berm appears almost surreal, a line drawn through an endless ocean of dunes. But its presence is anything but passive. It is fortified with millions of landmines, watchtowers, radar systems, and manned by thousands of soldiers. Designed to thwart the Polisario Front's advances, the wall has become a potent symbol of occupation and a daily reminder of the Saharawi people's exile. Its construction came at a cost—not just in resources but in the division of families, the separation of communities, and the severing of the Saharawi people from their ancestral lands.

For those living in the refugee camps of neighboring Algeria, the Berm is more than a physical barrier. It is a stark reminder of what has been lost. Behind its fortifications lies access to grazing lands, water sources, and the familiar contours of a homeland they have not seen in nearly five decades. The wall imprisons not only land but also memory, separating the Saharawi from their cultural heritage and historical identity.

Yet, the Berm is not just a wall of separation; it is also one of deadly consequence. Surrounding it lies one of the densest concentrations of landmines on Earth, posing a constant threat to human lives and livestock. These silent remnants of war claim lives each year, a cruel irony for a people already living in displacement.

The Berm is more than a geopolitical artifact; it is an economic machine. Maintaining the wall costs Morocco millions annually, an investment that underscores its strategic importance. This expense is matched by the wall's symbolic weight: a steadfast declaration of Moroccan sovereignty over a territory still recognised by the United Nations as non-self-governing.

Despite its staggering scale, the wall remains relatively unknown to much of the world, hidden in the folds of a protracted and often overlooked conflict. It is a story of quiet suffering and steadfast resilience, a struggle not just against occupation but against the erasure of a people's history.

For the Saharawi, the wall is not permanent. To them, it is a barrier waiting to be dismantled, a wound that, though deep, can heal. Its dismantling would not merely reunify people with their land but restore a culture that has been frayed for too long. In their eyes, the wall is not a testament to division but a challenge—one they are determined to overcome in their unyielding quest for *“self-determination and justice.”*



The plight of the Saharawi is far from over. The occupation of Western Sahara continues, and the international community remains divided or they simply ignore this conflict. One might ask, why would anyone fight for control over a hot, dry desert that's sand runs all the way to the sea? The answer lies beneath its surface—and beyond its shores. Western Sahara is home to some of the world's largest phosphate reserves, a mineral critical to industrial agriculture. The *Bou Craa mine* alone is estimated to contain over 1.7 billion tonnes of phosphate rock, and Morocco—through its state-owned company OCP—has profited immensely from its extraction and export, despite international condemnation. In addition, the nutrient-rich winds that blow westward from the Sahara feed the Canary Current, creating one of the richest marine ecosystems on earth.

Western Sahara's waters are home to over 500 species of fish, and foreign fleets—***particularly from the EU***—have long sought access to this lucrative fishing zone, despite its disputed status. Every year, an estimated 180 million tonnes of Saharan dust are swept into the skies by strong trade winds, with over 100 million tonnes coming from this very region. Rich in iron, phosphorus, and other nutrients, these fine particles drift across the Atlantic, fertilising the ocean's surface and triggering vast blooms of phytoplankton—the foundation of one of the world's richest fisheries. The same airborne minerals eventually reach as far as the Amazon Basin, replenishing nutrient-depleted rainforest soils with an estimated 22,000 tonnes of phosphorus annually.

In essence, the Sahara—this seemingly barren wasteland—is a lifeline for ecosystems across the globe.

The Musical Heritage of the Sahrawi People

Sahrawi music embodies nomadic heritage, resistance, and identity. It is more than art—it is a form of storytelling, preserving history, poetry, and the struggle for self-determination.

Traditional Instruments are rooted in Moorish and West African traditions, Sahrawi music features enduring instruments such as the Tidinit – A four-stringed lute akin to the ngoni or guembri, traditionally played by men to accompany poetry and song. The Tbal (Tabal) – A large, single-headed drum, primarily played by women during celebrations, weddings, and communal gatherings. The Ardin – A harp-like instrument producing melodic tones, used in oral poetry and storytelling.

- Karkaba (Qarqaba) – Metal castanets similar to the Gnawa, providing percussive beats in traditional and spiritual music.

The Role of Haul Music

Sahrawi music is based on Haul (*or Houl*) music, a desert blues genre blending Arab-Berber scales with West African rhythms. Poetic and rich in call-and-response singing, it explores themes of love, exile, and resistance.



“The Tidinit”

Modern Evolution and Global Recognition

Sahrawi music evolves, merging tradition with blues, rock, and reggae. Bands like “*Grupo Nacional de Música Saharaui*” and new Sahrawi artists continue to amplify their cultural legacy on international stages.

For Sahrawis, music is a living testament to history, identity, and resistance—a voice that refuses to fade in the sands of time.



Singer Mariem Hassan has played a leading role in the struggle for a free and independent Western Sahara. © Anna Klara Åhrén / Brahim B. Ali / Alex Veitch / Mohamedsalem Werad

Mariem Hassan (1958–2015) was the most iconic voice of Sahrawi music, celebrated for her powerful vocals and deep commitment to preserving the musical traditions of her people. Born in Spanish-occupied Western Sahara, she became a cultural ambassador for the Sahrawi struggle, using her music to convey the pain of exile, the resilience of her people, and their longing for freedom. Her songs, rooted in Haul (*Houl*) music, a traditional Sahrawi genre with influences from Moorish and Berber traditions, blended seamlessly with blues and modern sounds, making her work accessible to international audiences.

Although from a legal standpoint the outcome for the Saharawi people should be clear and Morocco has no rights under international law, nonetheless the occupation continues. International rulings, such as the advisory opinion issued by the International Court of Justice in 1975, affirmed that there were no ties of territorial sovereignty between Western Sahara and Morocco, upholding the Saharawi people's right to self-determination. Subsequent UN resolutions and the 1991 ceasefire agreement promised a referendum that has yet to be delivered. Meanwhile, Morocco continues to expand settlements and infrastructure in the occupied zone, while Saharawi communities remain in limbo—either in exile or under heavy surveillance in the occupied territories.

It has been 18 years since I first traveled to the camps of the Saharawi, and very few days pass where I don't reflect on that experience—on the people who have had to adapt to life, and often death, in one of the harshest environments on Earth. Their endurance is not simply survival; it is resistance.

For those who have never heard of the Saharawi people or the Western Sahara, their story may seem distant. But it is likely their phosphate that is exploited to benefit your industrial agricultural system and their fish that are being harvested to supply your supermarkets from one of the most fertile stretches of coast on the planet. This is a story that speaks to universal themes of identity, resilience, and the struggle for self-determination. It is a reminder that even in the most remote corners of the world, the fight for justice and dignity is a cause that unites us all. The Saharawi people are not merely surviving in the desert; they are thriving, building a future that honours their past and inspires hope for future generations.

NOMADS Human Rights and Culture (NOMADS HRC) – This Madrid-based NGO supports Sahrawi-led media, cultural preservation, and human rights projects. They work to amplify Sahrawi voices globally and document the ongoing struggle for independence.

www.nomadshrc.org



Story by Emily Anna Mavridou
Photographs by Sebastian Rich





MEANINGS BEHIND THE VEGETABLE MARKET

Exploring the identities within the OXI vegetable market.

Growing up I was always hearing that you could find great quality produce at great prices at the vegetable market and for some reason the direct contact with the producers and its relaxed environment always excited and intrigued me. So, I thought why not go and visit the nearest vegetable market and also be immense in the experience? So one Saturday morning I visited the 'OXI' vegetable market in the center of Nicosia close to the Eleftheria Square. OXI means no in the Greek language (one of the official languages in Cyprus), and its pronounced 'ohi'.

"Discover the bustling charm of OXI Markets in Cyprus, where the vibrant energy and colorful displays can feel overwhelming at first—but immerse yourself, and the magic of this cultural treasure unfolds before your eyes!"



The farmers market got its name from the roundabout that is located next to it, as its name is the 'OXI' roundabout. From what I've heard a few years ago, the roundabout took its name from a kiosk which was there so everyone must have referred to it as the roundabout where 'OXI' is, meaning the kiosk. Generally, in Cyprus we usually give names to elements that are near so that others can be directed easily. But you would rightfully wonder, why the name is 'OXI' which means no. In summary, the name derives from the 'no' given by the John Metaxas (who was ruling Greece at the time) to Italy when asked to join forces in 1940. Thus, marking the entrance of Greece in WWII and the start of the Greco-Italian war in 1940.



"Fresh from the source: Farmers at the OXI Vegetable Markets in Cyprus handpick citrus fruits like mandarins and oranges, along with staples like onions and potatoes, ensuring top-quality produce for every visitor."



But let's get to the good stuff! Anyone interested can visit the 'OXI' vegetable market, which is in the heart of Nicosia, on Wednesdays and Saturdays between 05:00 and 15:00. Here, you can find local produce full of flavour and at great prices!

Strolling around the market while checking out the vegetables I thought how can vegetable markets can be considered as multidimensional spaces? It was really exciting trying to understand the symbolic meaning of the vegetable market for the producers where I quickly realized it's a place of transforming into one and linked through the purchase of local produce coming from all over the island.


The sellers are always willing to help out with whatever products or information you might need.



The market can definitely be described as a second home to all the sellers, some of whom date their presence since 1979, witnessing the transformation of the market throughout the years in both physical and social structure. Some of the sellers that I engaged in conversations with expressed that even though this was not their initial profession, it provides a stable financial income for them as they are able to claim and control their produce while also doing something that they love and some describing it as the ‘job of their dreams’.



Emily, engages in a heartfelt conversation with a local vendor, uncovering the rich heritage and history of the markets and the powerful role they play in bringing the community together."



*‘When I am about to
come to the vegetable
market, I can’t sleep!’*

One thing is definite: the vegetable market has a firm hold in the producers’ hearts, as they share that they can’t sleep as they wait to wake up to prepare for the vegetable market!

Being constantly involved and interacting with nature makes them feel a unique sense of love and enjoyment. In some cases, it's inherited across the family while some of them either continued the lineage from their parents as they were also producers or just inherited land. Others expressed that if their children do not follow the role of the producer as well their history as producers will vanish.

They described that even though working in the land indicates a quite high level of tiredness and commitment, it's a habit that they wouldn't change. Chatting with them also provided them a chance to share their concerns as their needs are unfortunately being either neglected or delayed. Various producers expressed the lack of efficiency on the design of the updated structure, which ignores the comfort and protection of the sellers from the sun or the rain while also needing a wider place.

Only two identities are dominant in the market, that of the producer and the customer. Without any social identity or labels, everyone becomes the same in the market with the shared interest in local and good produce in the best possible prices.




More specifically, it seems that there is also the tactic of the veggie market where customers considered as the most usual ones can go in the early hours of their morning between 4:30 – 5:00 AM to select the produce that they want while after lunchtime the prices are reduced.

So, the veggie market has undoubtedly something for everyone! Whenever something is too expensive in the shops, the veggie market has the better solution with fresh and local produce. usually, people in their 50+ visit the market now younger people within their 30s also appear from the age of 30 years old also attend the veggie market to purchase their goods.

Strolling around the market, one could appreciate its multicultural beauty by interacting or simply watching people of different backgrounds and ages, hearing different languages in a context where time stops, and everyone becomes the same while also some create memories and relations that will last a lifetime.

"Tomatoes to taro roots—baked, fried, or stewed—alongside green beans, apples, lemons, and hawthorns, are just a few of the seasonal treasures waiting to be discovered at the vegetable market."





"In addition to cured meats, the vegetable market showcases traditional Cypriot delicacies such as 'shoushoukos,' a unique grape juice treat filled with nuts, usually almonds or walnuts. You'll also find the iconic halloumi cheese, an essential part of Cypriot cuisine. These beloved foods, along with many others native to the island, reflect the rich culinary heritage and traditions of Cyprus."

"The vegetable market is more than just a space for economic transactions—it's a vibrant hub of social connection and cultural exchange. It reflects the broader dynamics of society, from the challenges faced by producers in seeking support from governing institutions, to the economic realities mirrored in the pricing of local goods. Beyond the produce, the market celebrates its rich multicultural fabric, fostering relationships and shared experiences that transcend backgrounds and generations. If you find yourself in Nicosia, a visit to the OXI vegetable market is an absolute must. Immerse yourself in its energy, connect with the people, and experience firsthand the warmth and authenticity that make it truly unforgettable."



Beyond Vows:

Exploring Wedding Rituals and Cultural Bonds Across the Globe

by James Pierce
& Ethnomad Photography

"Radhika tries on her first wedding dress, gazing at her reflection in the mirror. For a moment, I catch a glimpse of her drifting into memories of childhood, days spent dressing up and dreaming of this moment. Rooted in Hindu tradition, her journey takes a modern turn—she is a school teacher in Jaipur and she has chosen her husband herself, a tall, well-educated Sikh scholar."



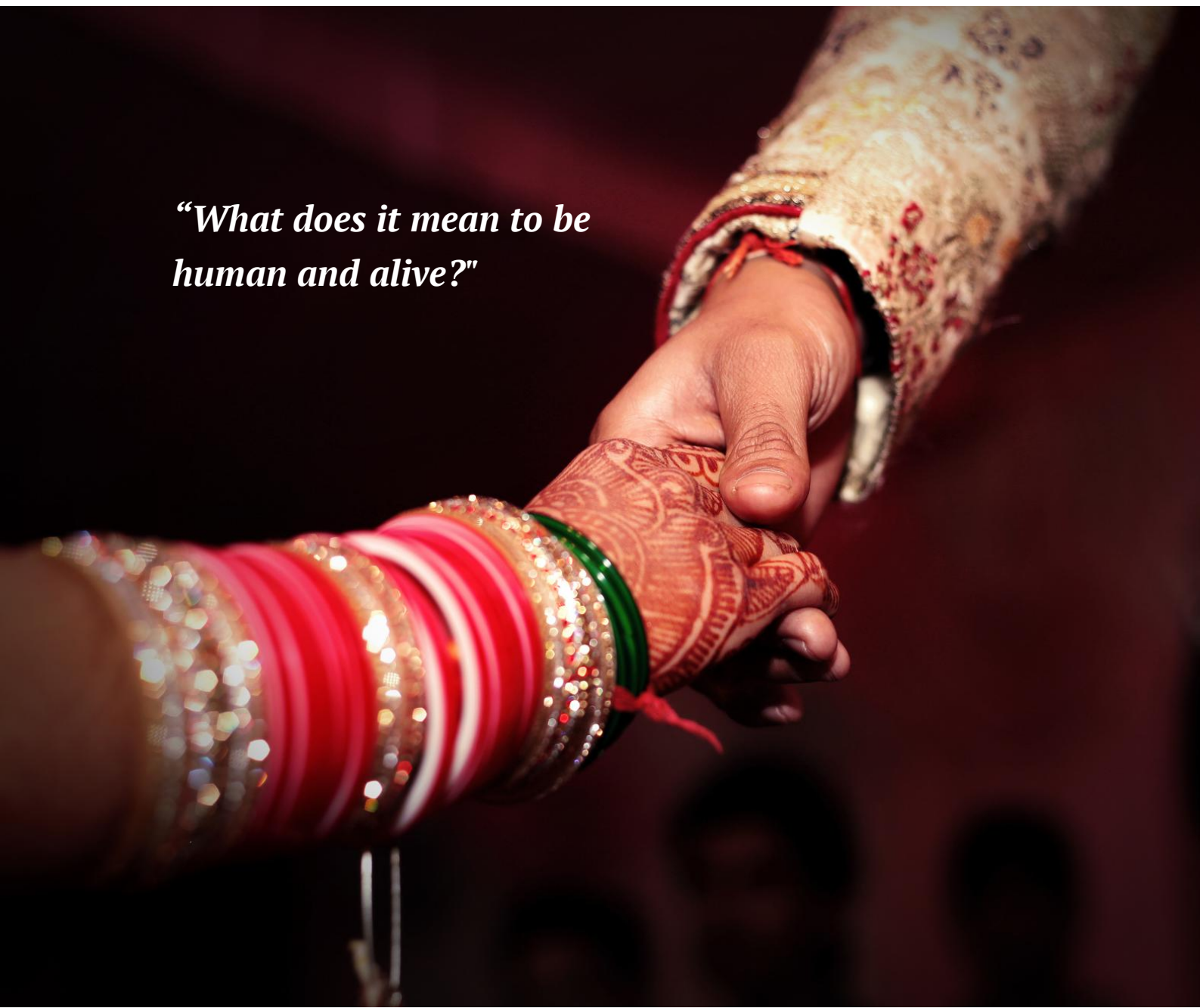
Wedding Traditions Around the World

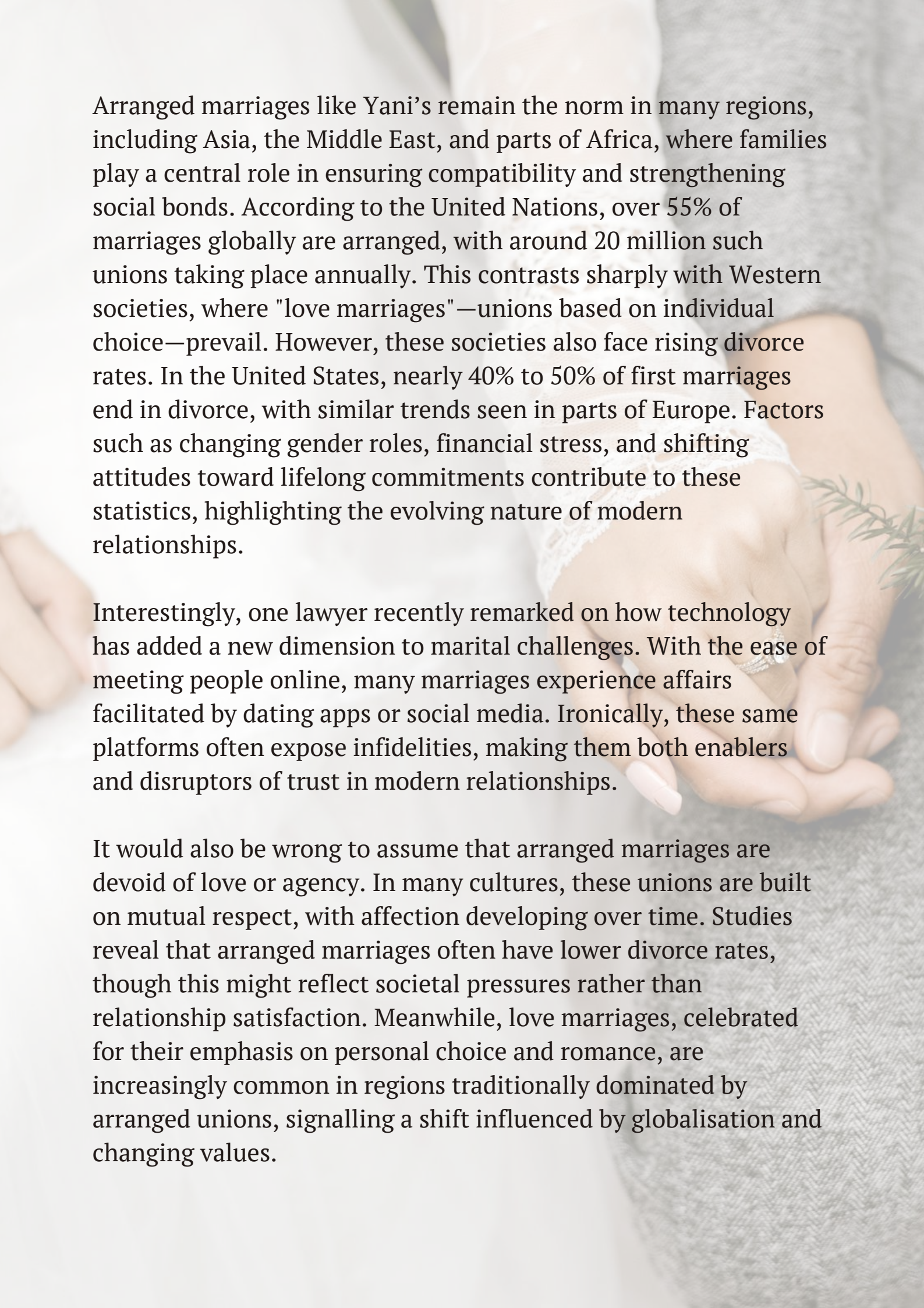
The rhythmic pounding of dhol drums reverberates through the air, mingling with the scent of marigold garlands in an Indian courtyard. Halfway across the globe, the soft chants of a Shinto priest echo through a tranquil shrine in Japan, while in a Saharawi desert camp, ululations pierce the night sky in celebration of a union. Marriage, one of humanity's oldest institutions, is a canvas of rituals reflecting the colours, values, and traditions of diverse cultures worldwide.

Most years I find myself at a wedding or two in various parts of the world. Having just returned from one, a quick wedding between two friends in India—a Sikh and a Hindu—but really a love marriage organized largely to assure the bride's father that his daughter would be well taken care of as he passed from ill health. It was also wedding season in Rajasthan, where marriage rituals are performed while the weather is at its best, so I found myself as a guest on several occasions, dancing and indulging in traditional foods. But back in Europe, I find myself missing a wedding of a young girl, Yani, whose family I lived with for a year during my work with National Geographic in Indonesia. Yani was a young teen, and I encouraged her to make sure she gets her education before she marries. I had always promised I would attend her wedding, but unfortunately, I am failing on that promise. Yani's wedding is an arranged marriage, and despite popular Western perceptions, she is excited and extremely happy to wed her new man. Yani's society is matrilineal, so she has no threat of losing her home or land through marriage, and her new husband has a thriving restaurant in Jakarta for her to discover. In fact, her arranged marriage is statistically more likely to last than the average love marriage in the current climate.

To understand marriage is to delve into the very essence of culture. Anthropologist Wade Davis once said, "Every culture is a unique answer to a fundamental question: What does it mean to be human and alive?" Yani's story captures this beautifully, highlighting a matrilineal tradition that ensures security for women even in union, offering a sharp contrast to the fragile bonds of love marriages in many Western societies.

"What does it mean to be human and alive?"






Arranged marriages like Yani's remain the norm in many regions, including Asia, the Middle East, and parts of Africa, where families play a central role in ensuring compatibility and strengthening social bonds. According to the United Nations, over 55% of marriages globally are arranged, with around 20 million such unions taking place annually. This contrasts sharply with Western societies, where "love marriages"—unions based on individual choice—prevail. However, these societies also face rising divorce rates. In the United States, nearly 40% to 50% of first marriages end in divorce, with similar trends seen in parts of Europe. Factors such as changing gender roles, financial stress, and shifting attitudes toward lifelong commitments contribute to these statistics, highlighting the evolving nature of modern relationships.

Interestingly, one lawyer recently remarked on how technology has added a new dimension to marital challenges. With the ease of meeting people online, many marriages experience affairs facilitated by dating apps or social media. Ironically, these same platforms often expose infidelities, making them both enablers and disruptors of trust in modern relationships.

It would also be wrong to assume that arranged marriages are devoid of love or agency. In many cultures, these unions are built on mutual respect, with affection developing over time. Studies reveal that arranged marriages often have lower divorce rates, though this might reflect societal pressures rather than relationship satisfaction. Meanwhile, love marriages, celebrated for their emphasis on personal choice and romance, are increasingly common in regions traditionally dominated by arranged unions, signalling a shift influenced by globalisation and changing values.

"A vibrant procession winds its way to the wedding venue, a kaleidoscope of color, music, and dance. Family and friends sway to the rhythmic beat, their joy palpable as they celebrate love and unity. In true Hindu tradition, this wedding is not merely a ceremony—it is a festival of life, where every step, song, and smile weaves a story of culture and connection."





I recall another colleague's story in Afghanistan, a man whose quiet diligence stood out amidst the bustling chaos of our shared office. He described how he didn't know who his bride would be until the wedding day and the mix of emotions that followed. "We never spoke about it," he confessed, "but I saw that same disappointment in my bride's eyes." His story is a stark contrast to Yani's joy, reflecting the diversity in how arranged marriages are perceived and experienced worldwide. Across the world, wedding rituals often encapsulate the essence of a culture's identity.

The Indian Hindu weddings I recently witnessed are among the most extravagant displays of tradition. These multiday celebrations are a riot of colour, music, and joy. Families prepare for months, orchestrating festivities that unite not only two individuals but also their extended families. The bride, adorned in intricate gold jewellery and a vibrant red sari, becomes the centre of attention, her hands and feet decorated with elaborate henna designs believed to bring prosperity. Rituals like the "Ganesh Pooja" seek divine blessings. At the same time, the "saat phere" (seven sacred rounds around a fire) form the heart of the ceremony, each round symbolising a vow of respect, love, and fidelity.

In Kyrgyzstan, weddings are steeped in ancient traditions, many of which reflect the nomadic heritage of the Kyrgyz people. A central element of the ceremony is the “*kudalyk*”, or matchmaking process, where families negotiate the union well before the wedding day. The bride, often wearing a white dress adorned with intricate embroidery, arrives at the groom’s family home in a colorful procession led by musicians playing traditional instruments like the “*komuz*.” One of the most striking rituals is the exchange of “*tushuk*”, elaborately decorated mattresses and quilts symbolising the comfort and unity the couple will bring to each other’s lives. The day ends with a celebratory feast of “*beshbarmak*” (a dish of boiled meat and noodles) shared among hundreds of guests, underscoring the community’s role in blessing and supporting the new couple. These ceremonies celebrate not only the couple’s union but also the enduring bonds of kinship and tradition.




Two Kyrgyz men strum the “*komuz*,” their voices weaving through the air in harmony with the ancient, resonant tones of this three-stringed instrument. Crafted from apricot wood, the “*komuz*” carries the soul of Kyrgyzstan's nomadic heritage, its sound echoing the vast landscapes of the steppes and mountains. Their songs, passed down through generations, tell stories of love, hardship, and the enduring spirit of their people.”

The Saharawi weddings are vibrant expressions of community and resilience in the Saharawi refugee camps. Music, dance, and poetry dominate these communal celebrations. The bride often wears a brightly coloured “*melfa*”, and her makeup symbolises beauty and hope.

Uniquely, divorce is not only accepted but celebrated in Saharawi society. When a marriage ends, the woman is welcomed back into her family with a celebratory party that marks a new beginning. Men in the community openly embrace the prospect of marrying experienced women in their second unions, valuing their wisdom and resilience. This tradition of celebrating divorce speaks to the deep bonds of sisterhood among Saharawi women, forged through life in the desert and years of displacement.

Unlike the norms in most Islamic cultures, this practice underscores the unique solidarity and adaptability of the Saharawi, shaped by necessity and shared struggles. It is a testament to the power of community in redefining tradition and ensuring women's autonomy even in adversity.



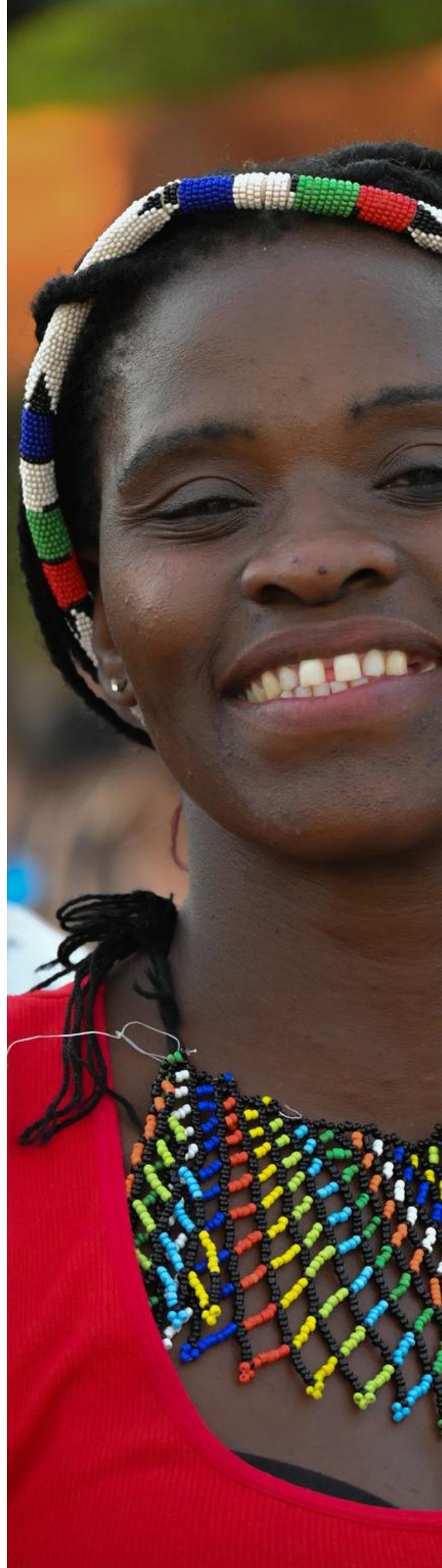
A close-up photograph of a woman in traditional white Shinto wedding attire, including a white headpiece (tsunodaiki). She is holding a small, dark red sake cup (sakazuki) with both hands, her eyes closed in a serene expression. A diamond ring is visible on her left hand. The background is softly blurred, showing another person in a dark garment with a white collar.

In Japan, Shinto wedding ceremonies offer a serene contrast to the vibrant festivities found elsewhere. Held at shrines, these weddings are intimate affairs focused on purification and harmony. The couple, dressed in traditional attire, partakes in the *san-san-kudo* ritual, where they exchange three cups of sake, symbolising their commitment to each other and the bond between their families. This ritual, rich in tradition, reflects Japan's reverence for tradition and spirituality.

"Young girls watch the ceremony unfold, their expressions a canvas of contemplation. What lies ahead for them in the coming years? Who will they marry—their dream partner or a step away from a different path? Perhaps they question the cultural expectations their mothers embraced, envisioning futures shaped by their own choices."



In South Africa, *Zulu* weddings combine ancient customs with modern influences, creating a vibrant celebration of heritage and unity. The bride often dons a traditional “*isidwaba*” (leather skirt), intricately beaded accessories, and a dramatic headdress known as “*isicholo*”, symbolising her new status as a married woman. The ceremony begins with the “*lobola*” negotiations, a cultural practice where the groom’s family offers cattle to the bride’s family as a gesture of respect and gratitude. The wedding itself features exuberant singing and dancing, with families and community members performing “*ukusina*”, a traditional Zulu dance, to honour the union. A key highlight is the “*ukutwala*” ritual, symbolising the transition of the bride into her new family while reinforcing the communal support for the couple’s journey. After the formalities, the bride often changes into a Western-style gown for a contemporary reception, underscoring the seamless blend of tradition and modernity. Zulu weddings are not just a union of two individuals but a celebration of familial and cultural bonds that resonate across generations.



A close-up photograph of a traditional Buddhist wedding offering. A woven, golden-brown basket is filled with rice. A delicate white lotus flower with a yellow center is placed on top of the basket. A person's hand, adorned with a gold bracelet, is visible, holding the basket. The background shows a red tablecloth with various dishes, suggesting a wedding feast.

"A woven basket holds a delicate flower and rice, a symbolic offering at a Buddhist wedding. The flower represents purity and impermanence, while the rice signifies sustenance and prosperity—a blessing for the couple's shared journey. These offerings honor tradition, expressing gratitude and invoking harmony for the union."

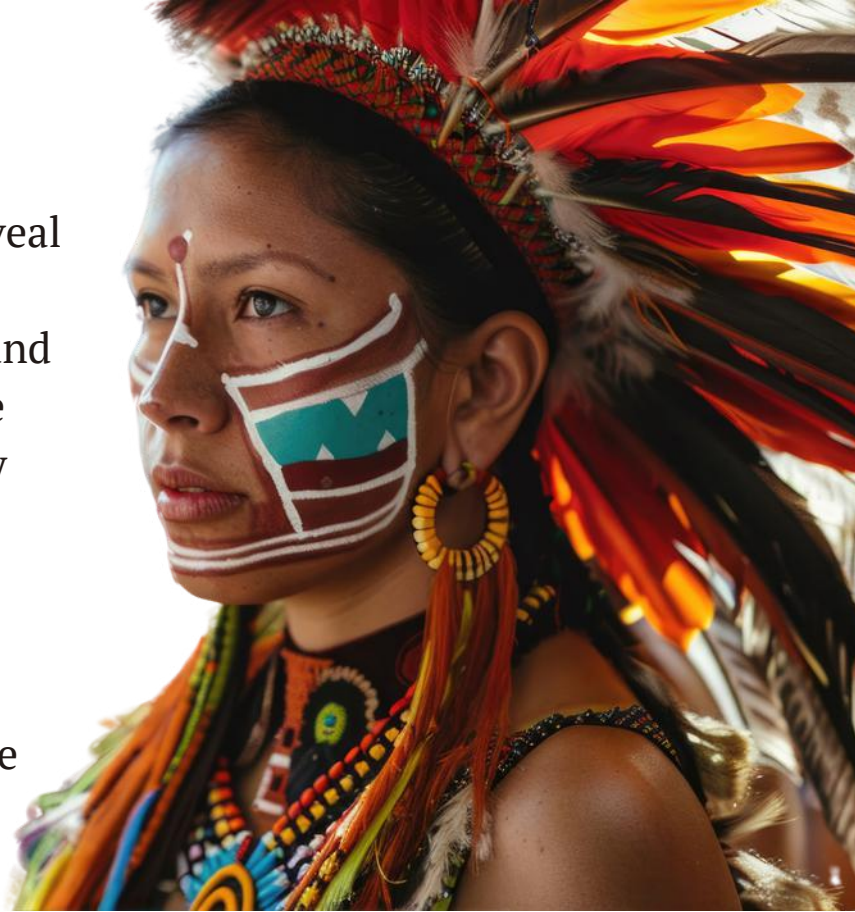
In Buddhist traditions, weddings take on a unique perspective shaped by the core teachings of Buddhism. At the heart of Buddhist philosophy is the belief that attachment, or “*tanha*”, is the root cause of suffering. This principle creates an intriguing dynamic when applied to marriage, a union often centred on emotional bonds. Buddhist weddings tend to be simple and focused on the spiritual growth of the couple. Monks bless the marriage, offering teachings and chanting sutras to guide the couple toward mindfulness, compassion, and mutual understanding. Instead of viewing marriage as a source of attachment, Buddhist rituals emphasise balance and the shared journey toward enlightenment. This approach fosters a union that seeks harmony not only between partners but also with the broader world, reflecting the Buddhist ideal of interconnectedness and the alleviation of suffering.

As marriage rates decline in Western countries, the traditions of Pacific Island societies before the arrival of missionaries reveal a fascinating intersection of cultural ingenuity and environmental stewardship. In these island nations, where resources were limited by geography, marriage was less about individual unions and more about sustaining the delicate balance of community and environment. John Reader highlights how, in these societies, practices like pre-marital sexual freedom were employed not as a rejection of moral codes but as a practical measure to control population growth and ensure resource stability. Hierarchies determined access to specific foods, reinforcing social order and resource allocation.

In Fiji, marriage ceremonies were deeply communal, with the exchange of *tabua* (whale's teeth) symbolizing alliances that united families and strengthened the social fabric. These events were a reflection of collective values—rituals and feasts carefully designed to honor both cultural heritage and environmental limits. Similarly, Reader's insights on Pacific societies reveal how these ceremonies often served dual purposes: celebrating unions while reaffirming a commitment to resource conservation and social cohesion.

In contrast, marriage in other regions, such as Mexico, reflects a different kind of cultural blending. The "*lazo*" ceremony, in which the couple is symbolically bound with a ribbon or rosary, speaks to a fusion of indigenous and colonial traditions, emphasizing eternal unity. Both examples highlight how marriage, whether shaped by necessity or faith, reflects the profound interplay between cultural identity and survival strategies.

Wedding rituals worldwide reveal humanity's shared need to celebrate love, commitment, and family. Beyond the couple, the roles of family and community are integral to the success and longevity of these unions. In many Indigenous cultures, marriage is less about the individuals and more about the kinship ties it creates.



For example, in Native American cultures, the words used to describe family members, such as “mother” or “cousin,” often signify rights and responsibilities within the family and the larger community. The Iroquois language exemplifies this through terms that go beyond familial labels, embedding social obligations and mutual support into the fabric of relationships. Such traditions underscore how marriage extends responsibility not just to the couple but to everyone around them, reinforcing communal bonds and ensuring collective resilience.

Whether through the multiday splendour of Hindu weddings, the matrilineal customs of the Minangkabau, or the unique resilience of Saharawi traditions that allow divorce to be considered a likely part of a relationship, these ceremonies reflect cultural identity and unity. As marriage evolves globally, these rituals remind us of its enduring power to unite people and create collective joy and the importance of family.

In the remote regions of southwestern China, the Tujia people preserve a tradition as intricate as the embroidery adorning their ceremonial garments: the "crying marriage." Rooted in centuries of folklore and historical custom, this ritual blends sorrow, artistry, and resilience into an emotional tapestry that speaks to the *Tujia's* enduring spirit.

The tradition, once widespread across Sichuan Province, now thrives primarily among the *Tujia*, an ethnic group with a population exceeding eight million. For the Tujia, the crying ritual is not merely a performance but an essential rite of passage, a cultural benchmark of a bride's virtue and intelligence. Her ability to weave heartfelt emotions into melodic "crying songs" demonstrates her filial piety and cultural refinement. These songs, simultaneously mournful and celebratory, reflect her reluctance to leave her family and her readiness to embrace a new life.

Historical records trace the origins of this custom to the Warring States Period (475–221 BCE) when a Zhao State princess wept at her mother's feet before departing to marry into the Yan State. Her tears, a mix of sorrow and duty, became the prototype for a tradition that evolved into a symbol of love, sacrifice, and cultural identity. This ancient story breathes life into the practice in the *Tujia* heartlands, carrying echoes of feudal China's matrimonial complexities.

The crying ritual begins a month before the wedding. The bride sits in her family's hall each evening, her laments filling the air with poignant refrains. Over time, her mother, grandmother, and female relatives join her, creating a crescendo of weeping that binds generations together. The ritual becomes a communal act, a performance of collective memory where each voice contributes to a chorus of love, loss, and laughter.

While the *Tujia* cry to honour tradition, the ritual also serves as a veiled critique of arranged marriages in China's feudal past. Historically, brides often had no agency in choosing their spouses, leading to outpourings of genuine sorrow during the ceremonies. In some regions, the ritual even included scolding the matchmaker—a rare act of rebellion in a society that imposed strict obedience on women. In the countryside, where matchmakers still play pivotal roles, the tradition persists, albeit with a more playful tone. Matchmakers, ironically, are believed to attract bad luck if not scolded, turning their verbal punishment into a curious badge of honour.

The artistry of the crying songs varies, with words and melodies tailored to the bride's emotions, the family's history, and the village's cultural nuances. These exaggerated yet artful performances often carry bittersweet humour, enhancing the festive atmosphere while acknowledging the emotional weight of marriage.

Today, as modernity encroaches on rural life, the *Tujia's* crying marriage is a poignant reminder of their cultural resilience. The ritual preserves a unique form of emotional expression and bridges the past and present, linking the *Tujia* people to their ancestors while sharing their stories with the world. In their tears, one finds sorrow and a profound celebration of love, unity, and the strength to embrace change.

The world's wedding rituals, in their diversity, reveal the many ways humans celebrate love, commitment, and family. Whether through the multiday festivities of a Hindu wedding, the crying customs of the *Tuja*, or the unique embrace of divorce among the Saharawi, these traditions offer windows into how different societies navigate life's milestones.

In a time when the meaning of marriage is shifting in many parts of the world, these rituals remind us of its enduring power to bring people together, celebrate identity, and create moments of collective joy in the rituals of extending the family line.





In a world of shifting values and evolving traditions, weddings are a profound affirmation of humanity's shared need to connect and celebrate. They are far more than ceremonies of love; they are rituals of community, resilience, and identity, weaving together the past, present, and future. Each union, whether steeped in ancient tradition or modern reinvention, speaks to our innate desire to honour the bonds that sustain us, reminding us that in marriage, we find both the partnership and the timeless threads of cultural continuity and collective hope.

"Yarni radiates timeless elegance in her traditional Minangkabau wedding attire, adorned with intricate gold embroidery and the iconic sutiang headdress—a symbol of heritage, strength, and grace."



SACRED LATVIAN PIRTS



by Agnese Abolina and Masha Segal,
Human Collective.

SWEAT BATHING: A UNIVERSAL HUMAN EXPERIENCE

“Sweat bathing cultures worldwide embody so much of what it is to be human, a ritual honed by generations of instinct and embodied knowledge” (Social Sauna - Bathing and Wellbathing, catalogue by Jane Withers Studio), creating space for reconnection to the earthly and elemental. Among these practices, Latvia’s pirts have, for centuries, been a place for physical cleansing and a sacred space for healing, emotional release, and spiritual connection.

While sweating rituals across the world have evolved uniquely, beneath their distinct expressions - from the Egyptians, who absorbed steam during therapeutic massages, to the Japanese, who heated cave walls with fire to sweat - astonishing similarities emerge with how the local knowledge and connection with nature is emphasised and used for healing. The earliest sweat bathing structures were circular spaces made from stakes covered with skins built over a dugout depression, evoking the representation of a mother’s womb: a warm, moist, dark cradle of love. These spaces were designed for hygiene and transformation - a place to shed physical and emotional layers and be reborn.

The Latvian pirts carry this transformative essence, passed down from generation to generation as a holistic approach to well-being. Yet, like many global traditions, the sacredness of sweat bathing has been challenged over time. Many bathhouses have transitioned into venues for socialising or recreation, losing their connection to the rituals’ deeper meaning. This leads us to ask: Has the essence of these rituals been diluted in the modern world? Can we rediscover their deeper significance and restore their role in healing and renewal? By examining these traditions, we may uncover the profound healing potential that they still hold today.

LATVIAN PIRTS

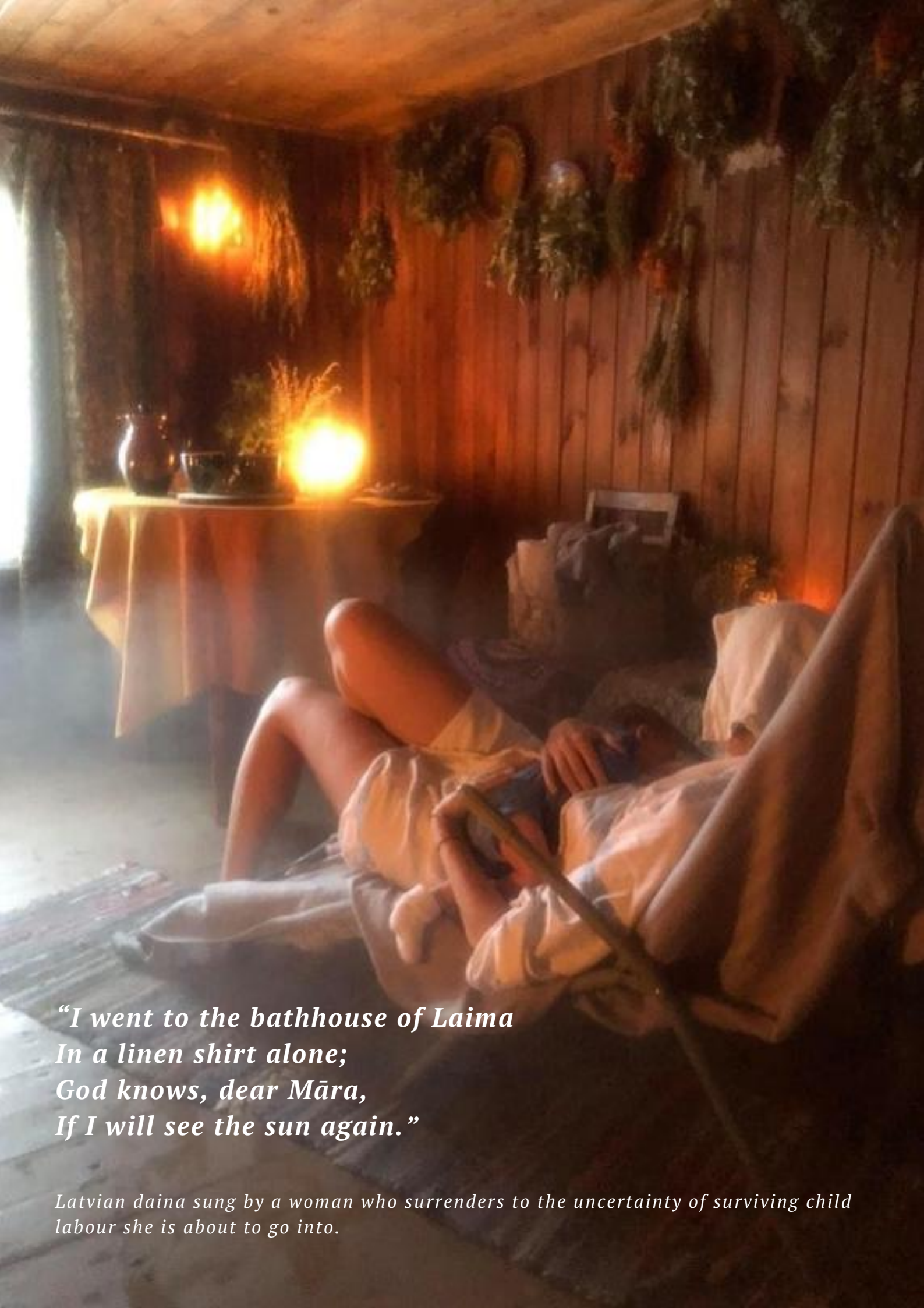
Historical records of bathhouses across centuries reflect how time, perception, and external pressures have shaped and altered the pirts tradition. Remarkably, the essence of the Latvian pirts ritual has endured, persisting even during oppressive eras. As an example, the Soviet occupation distorted the sacred practice to such an extent that it has been reduced to mere feasting and drinking with a hot room set aside as a 'by the way'. During the different occupation periods, Latvian tradition keepers, deeply knowledgeable in herbalism and pirts' spiritual and healing practices, were labelled witches and severely persecuted. The fear of persecution caused many traditional healing methods to be lost, as women hesitated to pass down their knowledge.

Nevertheless, in some places, pirts remained true to its original purpose as one of the most sacred spaces on a family's land. Its significance lies in its deep connection to Latvian identity, uniquely integrating folklore, mythology, and ecological wisdom. Up until the last century, with its cleansing smoke rich in phenols that possess strong antiseptic and soothing properties, it played a central role in life's key moments. It was the primary setting for childbirth, a place where deities Laima and Māra - life-givers and nurturers in Latvian mythology - were invited and honoured, where families united weekly, where health was restored, and the intimacy with oneself and others was rediscovered. It was also a space to prepare the bodies of the deceased to return to the soil. This intimate connection to the rhythms of life highlights the sacred and nurturing nature of pirts.



As folklorist Gvido Tobis explains, 'Traditionally, Latvians achieve an altered state of consciousness by wandering alone in the woods and the meadows - being in nature for extended periods, and going to pirts.'



A woman is seated on a wooden chair in a rustic, wood-paneled room. She is wearing a white, long-sleeved linen shirt and is looking down at her hands, which are resting on her lap. The room is dimly lit, with warm, glowing lights from a table in the background and a window on the left. The walls are covered in vertical wooden planks, and there are decorative elements like wreaths and a small table with a white cloth. The overall atmosphere is intimate and contemplative.

*“I went to the bathhouse of Laima
In a linen shirt alone;
God knows, dear Māra,
If I will see the sun again.”*

Latvian daina sung by a woman who surrenders to the uncertainty of surviving child labour she is about to go into.

THE PROCESS



In the Latvian language, 'gars' represents both the bathhouse steam and the human spirit, symbolising a transformation of one's inner being through the sweat bathing ritual. As the bathhouse heats up, the visitor is introduced to a herbal brew, enabling the first instance of mindfully connecting with the senses, setting intention, and preparing to surrender to the journey. Lasting 3 to 5 hours and under the guidance of a pirts master, the ritual unfolds in a sequence: warming up, cleansing with scrubs, followed by whisking that exposes the body to the hot air and increases blood circulation. This is followed by cooling down in a body of water, possibly through a floating or flying ritual that takes place in the water, and finally, warming up again. Folk songs known as "*dainas*," of which more than 300 relate to pirts, often hummed or sung during pirts rituals, guide participants in surrendering to the experience.



In rituals, each medium holds significance: the branches used in the whisks, the wood chosen for heating the space, the herbal teas, scrubs, oils, kinds of offerings brought for deities, and folksongs that accompany the process. Plants play a prominent role due to their specific properties and functions. Linden, for example, is revered in folklore for its feminine power and anti-inflammatory properties; the birch leaves have powerful antioxidants among other healing qualities and are the main plant foraged for the whisks, while hops calm down and relax and are used for analgesic effects, contributing to childbirth rituals and easing neuroses. Those plants are just a few out of many of which no parts are wasted.

Each pirts master brings their own artistry, selecting specific plants, folk songs, or techniques to create a deeply personal journey. Still, the true heart of the master lies in holding space for others, allowing them to relax, feel themselves, be honest, and for the process to unfold in its unique way.





Sweat bathing offers access to states of consciousness that shift perspectives on our ways of navigating life.

BRIDGING GENERATIONS: THE LIVING LEGACY OF THE PIRTS

Globally, we are witnessing the revival of bathhouses not only as places for relaxation or entertainment but as sanctuaries free from competition or consumption. A growing movement seeks to restore bathhouses' original essence, breathing new life into these sacred traditions and ensuring that they once again become spaces of intentional care, meditative presence, and elemental connection, highlighting their transformative potential and encouraging individuals to embrace slowness, nurturing emotional and physical well-being, and foster genuine connection. These spaces are reclaimed as places for people to explore the depths of personal and shared human experience through ceremonial practice.



Latvian pirts have survived together through folk songs and herbal knowledge through the efforts of dedicated pirts masters, researchers, and the generational memory of the land and its people. Despite historical challenges, it is increasingly celebrated as an essential part of Latvia's cultural heritage, revealing traditions' living nature. Some rituals are being rediscovered and revitalised, some have faded, some evolved, yet others are interpreted and newly created. This ongoing revival reflects a collective desire to reconnect with ancient wisdom and rediscover sweat bathing's transformative power for the next generations.

Sweat bathing offers access to states of consciousness that shift perspectives on our ways of navigating life. Most importantly, it empowers us to notice more connected ways to live, embrace healing, and trust the body that always knows.



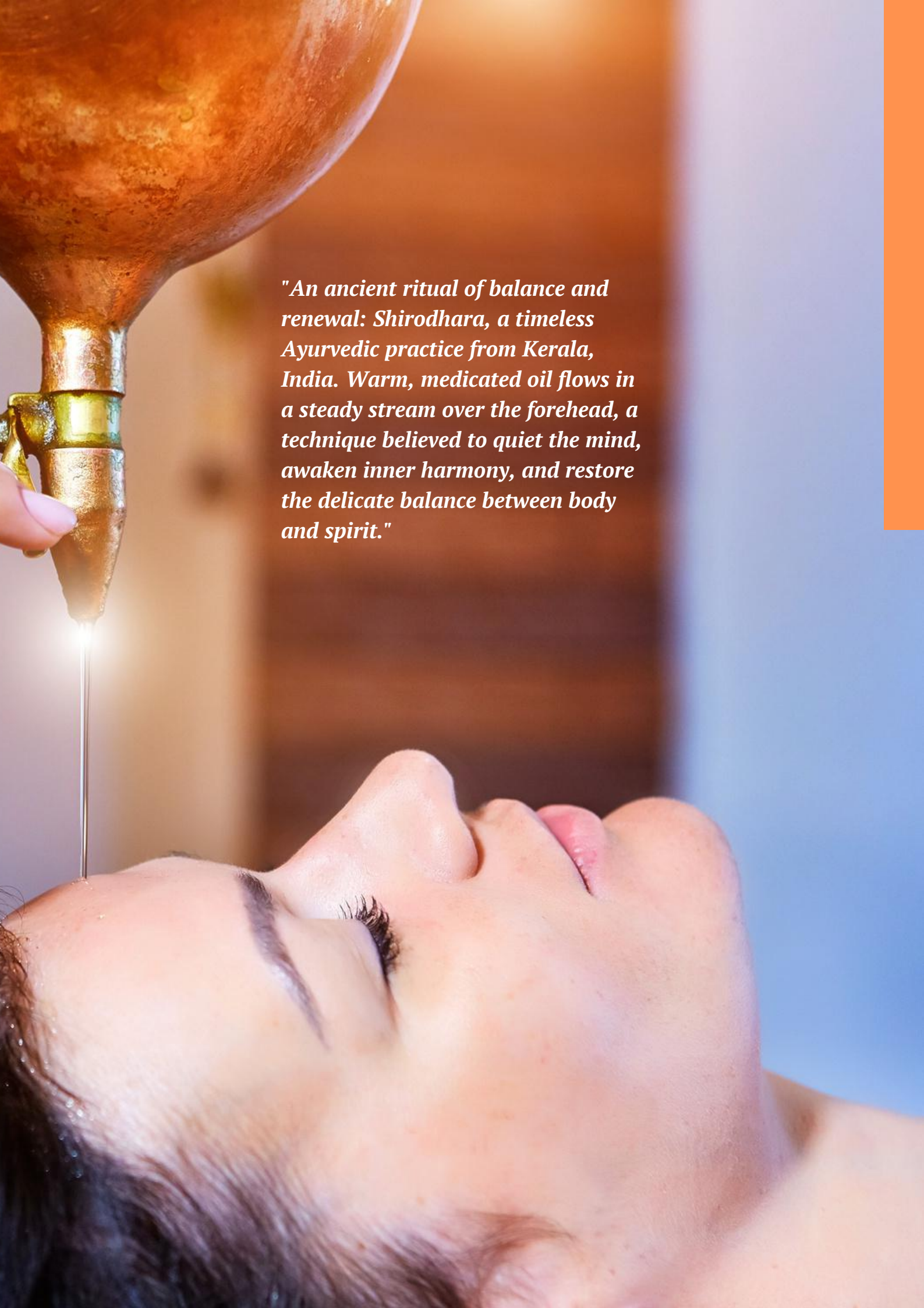
Acknowledgements to Human Collective's research for a feature documentary in the making: 'Latvian Myth' as well as Dr Ieva Ančevska's, Ričards Batarags and Janīna Kursīte, Inese and Nauris Mālnieks, Jane Withers and Ria Hawthorn.
Photos: by Agate Silova's (Latvian traditional sauna master) and Pirts Spirit's (Benoit de Bock), Pirts museum, Guna Staņko.

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A close-up photograph of a hand hovering just above a person's head, suggesting a healing or diagnostic gesture. The background is softly blurred with warm, glowing bokeh lights. The title text is overlaid on the upper portion of the image.

RE-DISCOVERING AYURVEDA

by Amara Doshi
Photos by Ethnomad

A close-up photograph of a woman lying down, her eyes closed, receiving a Shirodhara treatment. A brass funnel is held above her forehead, pouring a thin stream of warm, medicated oil. The background is softly blurred, showing a warm, golden light. The woman's face is the central focus, with her nose and lips visible. The oil stream is captured in mid-air, creating a delicate, shimmering line. The overall mood is serene and peaceful.

"An ancient ritual of balance and renewal: Shirodhara, a timeless Ayurvedic practice from Kerala, India. Warm, medicated oil flows in a steady stream over the forehead, a technique believed to quiet the mind, awaken inner harmony, and restore the delicate balance between body and spirit."



Dr Pritam Pal, a close friend and tireless humanitarian. She has devoted her life to working with tribal communities to improve health outcomes while advocating for women's rights throughout India. She is a firm advocate for Ayurveda as a way of life.

"Timeless Wisdom: How Ayurveda Balances Body, Mind, and Spirit in a Modern World"

The rhythmic chants of ancient mantras echoed through the temple as the ocean churned, and Vasuki, the serpent, writhed between the gods and demons. The air was thick with tension, and the poison Halahala seeped into the universe, threatening all life. In desperation, the gods turned to Lord Shiva, the compassionate one regarded as both destroyer and restorer. Understanding the gravity of the situation, Shiva swallowed the poison to save all of creation. His wife, Parvati, ran to him and held his neck tightly to prevent the poison from descending into his body. As a result, Shiva's neck turned blue, earning him the name Neelkanth, or "the blue-throated one." This story, deeply rooted in Hindu mythology, illustrates the struggles of maintaining balance—with nature, ecology, and the spirit—a core tenet of Ayurveda.

Dr Pritam Pal first learned this story as a child, sitting cross-legged at her grandmother's feet. She would narrate it with such passion that I could almost see Shiva's blue throat glowing in the twilight of her lamplit room. Ayurveda, she would tell me, is the way to honour the balance Shiva upheld.

Ayurveda, which dates back to around 4000 BC, is more than mythology. While its roots lie in ancient texts like the *Charaka Samhita*, its knowledge has been enriched over centuries. Yet, Ayurveda was not static, Pilgrims, travellers, and even conquerors such as the Greeks and the English brought new insights and practices that expanded Ayurvedic understanding. While Western science has only recently begun to explore areas such as the gut-brain connection and openly address menopause, Ayurveda has long recognised and addressed these aspects of health over thousands of years. Menopause, as an example, is a natural transition documented in Ayurveda as "*Rajonivritti*", which translates to "*the cessation of menstruation*" ("*Raja*" meaning *menstrual blood* and "*nivritti*" meaning *cessation*). It lists a myriad of treatments and practices to balance the system. This is just one example of how ancient Ayurvedic knowledge was far ahead in addressing life's natural cycles and transitions.


Dr Pritam Pal highlights how much of our ancient knowledge has been overlooked and deserves to be better understood, respected and explored. Ayurveda's emphasis on holistic treatment, the interconnectedness of the body and mind, and its understanding of natural life stages offer valuable lessons for modern health sciences.

For example, while Western science has only recently begun to explore the intricate relationship between the gut and brain, Ayurveda has long recognized this connection through the concept of *Agni* (*digestive fire*). In Ayurvedic philosophy, *Agni* is more than just the body's ability to break down food; it is the vital force that transforms nutrients into energy, governs metabolism, and influences mental clarity. When *Agni* burns brightly, digestion is efficient, the body is nourished, and the mind remains balanced.

However, when it weakens—whether due to stress, poor diet, or seasonal changes—toxins (*Ama*) accumulate, leading to sluggishness, anxiety, or even depression. This ancient understanding mirrors modern research on the gut-brain axis, which has uncovered how an imbalance in gut bacteria and chronic inflammation can contribute to mood disorders and cognitive decline.

Ayurvedic texts describe different types of *Agni*—from steady and balanced (*Samagni*) to erratic (*Vishamagni*), excessive (*Tikshnagni*), or weak (*Mandagni*), each influencing not only physical digestion but also emotional stability. A person with *Vishamagni*, for example, may experience inconsistent digestion along with mood swings and anxiety, while *Mandagni*—a sluggish digestive fire—can manifest as lethargy, brain fog, and a sense of heaviness in both body and mind. These insights, developed thousands of years ago, align with contemporary studies showing that gut health directly affects neurotransmitter production, stress response, and mental resilience. As Western medicine delves deeper into the gut-brain connection, it is increasingly validating what Ayurveda has long taught: digestion is not just about food—it is the foundation of overall well-being.





Practices such as consuming warm, easily digestible foods and incorporating spices like ginger, turmeric, and black pepper align with today's understanding of promoting a healthy microbiome. These spices, rich in anti-inflammatory and antioxidant properties, are now celebrated in modern dietary trends for their role in reducing inflammation and supporting overall gut health, bridging the gap between ancient wisdom and contemporary nutrition.

Detoxification practices such as "*Panchakarma*" and the use of herbs like Triphala target "*Ama*" and support overall health.

Ayurveda also emphasises the importance of fermented foods such as buttermilk (“*Takra*”), which are now recognised for their probiotic benefits in gut health. Furthermore, Ayurveda’s daily routines (“*Dinacharya*”) and seasonal practices (“*Ritucharya*”) align with modern research on circadian rhythms and their impact on metabolism, mood, and overall health.

Dinacharya refers to the structured daily habits that align the body with natural cycles, emphasising the importance of waking up before sunrise, cleansing rituals, self-massage (*Abhyanga*), mindful eating, and set sleeping patterns. These practices are designed to regulate digestion, energy levels, and mental clarity by syncing with the body’s internal clock. Research confirms that disrupted circadian rhythms—caused by irregular sleep, late-night eating, or screen exposure—can negatively impact metabolism, immunity, and mental health, reinforcing Ayurveda’s emphasis on structured daily routines.

Similarly, *Ritucharya*—Ayurveda’s seasonal regimen—adapts diet, lifestyle, and self-care to the shifting energies of nature. Each season corresponds to different *doshic* influences (*Vata*, *Pitta*, *Kapha*), requiring adjustments in food choices, physical activity, and meditation practices to maintain balance. For instance, during winter, which is dominated by *Kapha* energy, warming foods, vigorous exercise, and early rising are recommended to counter sluggishness, much like modern advice to combat Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) through light exposure and movement. As science delves deeper into the effects of seasonal changes on hormonal balance, mood disorders, and immune function, Ayurveda’s age-old wisdom on living in harmony with nature finds increasing relevance in contemporary health and wellness research.

AYURVEDA IS NATURE

In a world where wellness trends rise and fall, Ayurveda stands as a testament to time-tested wisdom. Rooted in the ancient Indus Valley, this holistic approach to health is now resonating globally with those seeking a deeper connection to their body, mind, and spirit. Unlike modern medical systems that often isolate symptoms from their root causes, Ayurveda views health as an intricate web, interwoven with nature's rhythms and the balance of the five elements—earth, water, fire, air, and space. This philosophy underscores the idea that true well-being is not achieved in isolation but through harmony with the natural world.

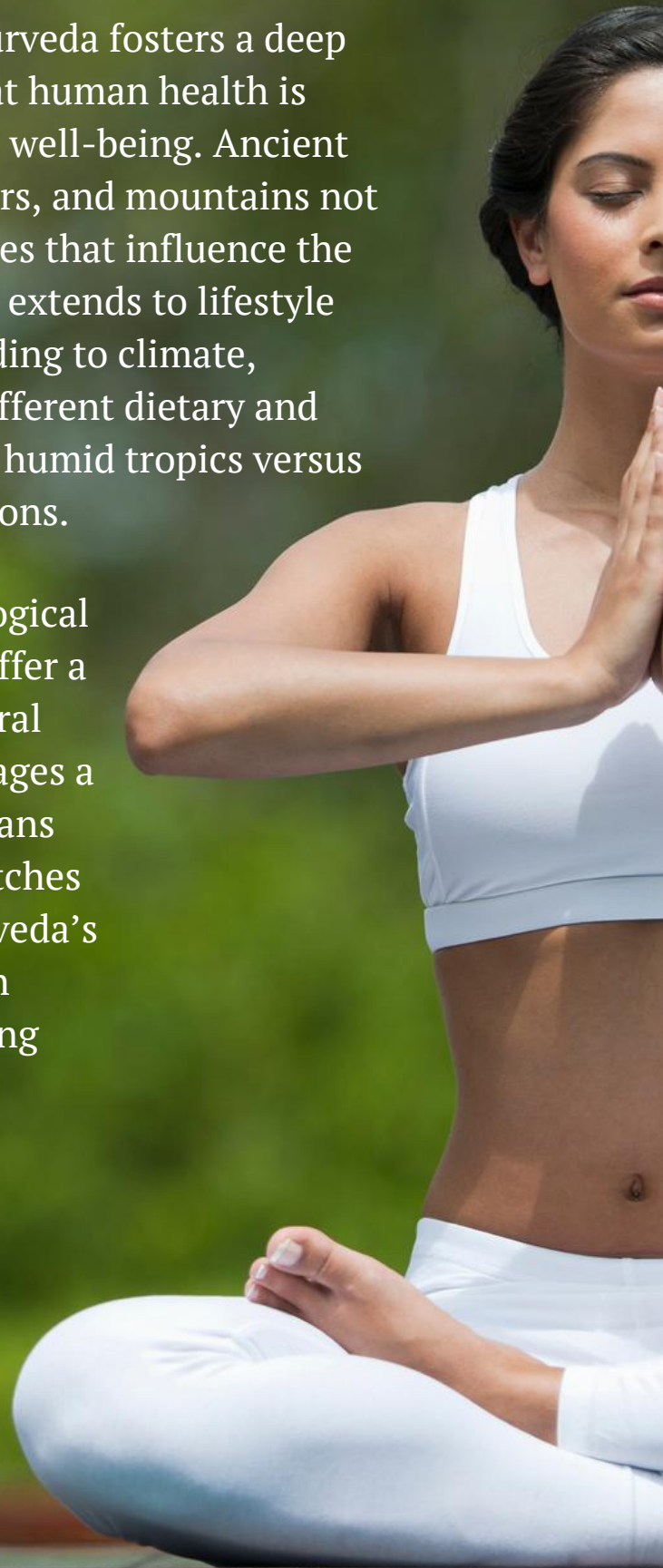
Ayurveda's sustainable practices, such as using locally sourced herbs, eco-friendly oils, and seasonally appropriate treatments, also align with contemporary environmental concerns, offering solutions that honour both the individual and the planet.


Traditional Ayurvedic medicine prioritises the preservation of biodiversity, advocating for wild-harvested or ethically cultivated plants rather than mass-produced pharmaceuticals that contribute to deforestation and habitat loss. Herbal remedies like *neem*, *tulsi*, and *ashwagandha* are not just chosen for their therapeutic properties but also for their role in maintaining ecological balance.

Furthermore, Ayurveda discourages overexploitation of resources, emphasising responsible consumption—whether in diet, self-care, or daily routines. Using copper vessels for water purification, applying herbal pastes instead of chemical-laden cosmetics, and relying on natural fibres in clothing reflect an eco-conscious way of life that predates today's sustainability movements.

More than a system of medicine, Ayurveda fosters a deep reverence for nature, recognising that human health is intrinsically linked to environmental well-being. Ancient Ayurvedic texts describe forests, rivers, and mountains not just as landscapes but as living entities that influence the body's constitution. This connection extends to lifestyle recommendations, which vary according to climate, altitude, and geography—advising different dietary and herbal choices for those living in the humid tropics versus dry deserts or cold mountainous regions.

In an era of climate change and ecological degradation, Ayurveda's principles offer a way forward—one that respects natural cycles, minimises waste, and encourages a symbiotic relationship between humans and the Earth. As modern science catches up with these age-old insights, Ayurveda's role as both a wellness system and an environmental philosophy is becoming ever more relevant.



A close-up photograph of a person's hands using a dark stone pestle to grind ingredients in a large, light-colored stone mortar. The mortar contains a yellowish-orange powder. The background is a blurred kitchen or pharmacy setting with numerous glass jars and containers on shelves. The lighting is warm and natural. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

“This enduring relevance underscores the depth of insight contained in Ayurveda’s earliest texts. As an Indian woman nearing 70, I have made Ayurveda practice central to my life, not merely as a medicinal practice working primarily with women, but in creating my holistic lifestyle as best I can. For me, it is about achieving balance—in mind, body, and spirit—and leading a life in harmony with the environment and the natural rhythms of the universe.”

Much like Shiva balancing the poison in his throat, Ayurveda teaches us to balance the physical and emotional toxins that modern life inundates us with. It is not about waiting for illness to strike and seeking a cure. Instead, it is about maintaining health through mindful living. The philosophy of Ayurveda evaluates the entire being—mind, body, and spirit—and aims to treat the whole person rather than isolated symptoms or diseases. Through a combination of herbal medicines, yoga, massage, detoxification, and the use of oils, Ayurveda offers a holistic approach to well-being.

Central to Ayurvedic philosophy are the five elements: earth, water, fire, air, and space. These elements exist both in the universe and within us, influencing every aspect of our being. It is about the elements within us. The air that fills our lungs, the water that hydrates our cells, the fire that fuels our digestion? Ayurveda emphasises that maintaining harmony among these elements is vital for health. For instance, water represents hydration and fluidity, reminding us of the importance of drinking enough water daily to nourish our cells and maintain bodily functions.

Movement, represented by air, is equally crucial. Regular physical activity—whether yoga, walking, gardening or dance—helps balance energy and keeps the body strong. Earth symbolises grounding and stability, which can be achieved through a diet rich in whole, unprocessed foods that replenish and sustain the body.

A philosophy unique to Ayurveda is the concept of the three Doshas: Vata, Pitta, and Kapha. These three Doshas form the foundation for understanding the human body and mind. Derived from the five elements, the Doshas represent energies that shape individual constitutions, or Prakruti, which is the unique balance of these energies in each person.

- *Vata*, associated with air and space, governs movement, creativity, and the nervous system, influencing everything from physical mobility to mental agility.
- *Pitta*, linked to fire and water, oversees metabolism, digestion, and biochemical processes, regulating the body's temperature and transformation.
- *Kapha*, connected to earth and water, provides structure and stability, forming the skeletal system and ensuring physical endurance and emotional grounding.

By understanding your *Prakruti*, Ayurveda helps tailor lifestyle, diet, and habits to maintain balance and achieve optimal health. For instance, a person with a dominant Vata constitution might focus on grounding practices like warm foods and calming routines, while someone with a Pitta nature may prioritize cooling foods and stress-reducing activities.



"What Modern Medicine Often Overlooks: Ayurveda Embraces Individuality, Treating Each Person as Unique While Blending Science with Personalised Healing. What we are hearing today as new ways of thinking about health are, ancient knowledge"

"Shirodhara: A Profound Ayurvedic Therapy Where Warm Herbal Oil Streams Gently Over the Forehead, Harmonizing the Doshas, Alleviating Stress, and Nourishing the Mind, Body, and Spirit. Best Done Regularly for Lasting Balance and Well-Being."



Shirodhara, one of Ayurveda's most renowned therapies from Kerala, is an experience everyone should encounter. This practice involves the continuous pouring of warm herbal oil onto the forehead, specifically on the third eye, a process derived from the Sanskrit words 'Shiras' (head) and 'Dhara' (stream). The oil, a carefully prepared blend of herbs, carries an aroma reminiscent of ancient forests. As the steady stream of oil trickles onto the forehead, it creates a sense of time slowing down. Thoughts and burdens seemingly dissolve, carried away by the rhythmic flow. The therapy soothes the mind, instilling an unparalleled sense of calm and clarity. Many describe it as a profound cleansing, washing away layers of stress and mental fatigue, leaving a renewed sense of balance. *Shirodhara* stands as a powerful example of how Ayurveda addresses not only physical health but also mental and emotional well-being.

As the sky turns crimson, the setting sun casts long shadows across Jaipur's ancient forts and temples, illuminating the intricate carvings that whisper of centuries past. The air is thick with the scent of sandalwood and marigolds, mingling with the distant echoes of temple bells and the Mosque's call to prayer. Here, in the heart of Rajasthan, where history and tradition stand side by side, Ayurveda is not just a practice—it is a way of life, as enduring as the ancient walls that have withstood the passage of time.

For Dr Pritam Pal, Ayurveda is not a mere system of medicine but a philosophy woven into the rhythms of existence. From the sacred fire of *Agni*, which fuels both digestion and thought, to the daily rituals of *Dinacharya* and the seasonal shifts of *Ritucharya*, Ayurveda teaches us that balance is not something to be achieved once but something to be maintained every day. Practices like *Shirodhara*, where warm oil flows in a steady stream to still the mind, or *Panchakarma*, a ritual of deep purification, are not indulgences but reminders of a truth that Ayurveda has always known—health is harmony.

Yet, this is only the beginning of a wisdom that stretches back thousands of years, its depth still largely unexplored. Modern science is only now catching up to Ayurveda's insights, confirming what it has always understood: the gut shapes the mind, the seasons shape the body, and true healing comes not from treating symptoms but from understanding the self in relation to the world.

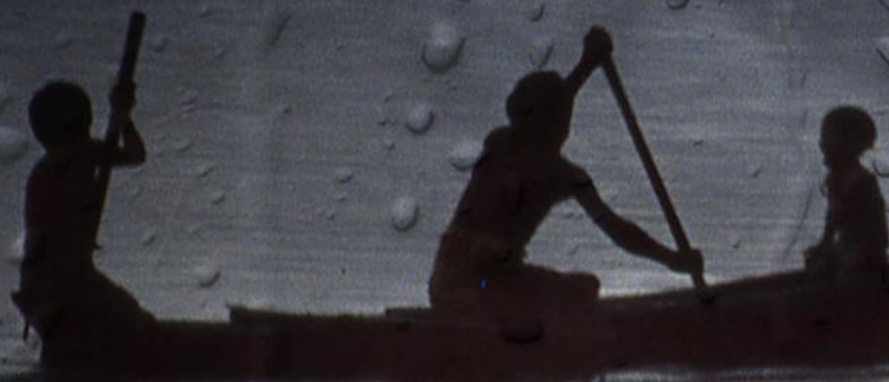
Ayurveda is not simply about the past—it is about the future. It is about living in alignment with nature, with balance in body, mind, and spirit. Much like Shiva holding the poison in his throat to preserve creation, Ayurveda teaches us that life itself is an act of balance—one that, when honoured, leads not only to healing but to a deeper, more meaningful existence.

A few key books to provide deeper insights into Ayurvedic practice:



- Dr Vasant Lad – The Complete Book of Ayurvedic Home Remedies (Practical self-care, herbal remedies, and easy-to-follow guidance)
- Maya Tiwari – The Path of Practice: A Woman’s Book of Ayurvedic Healing (Focuses on self-healing rituals, diet, and holistic wellness, especially for women)
- Ananta Ripa Ajmera – The Ayurveda Way: 108 Practices from the World’s Oldest Health System





by James Pierce
& Ethnomad Photography



**"Finding Our Way:
The Ancient Art of Navigation"**

Navigation is one of humanity's most ancient and universal skills. Every journey—whether to the corner shop, a child's school, or across uncharted terrain—is a testament to our ability to find our way in a complex world. Yet navigation is far more than a practical act of moving from point A to point B. It is a story that weaves together culture, survival, and ingenuity, reflecting how humans have connected with their environment and each other across millennia.

Long before GPS satellites floated silently above the Earth, our ancestors looked to the stars, the wind, and the subtle whispers of the natural world to guide them. Perhaps no group exemplifies this mastery more than the Polynesians, whose ancient navigators, or wayfinders, undertook daring voyages across the vast Pacific, guided only by their knowledge of celestial patterns, ocean swells, and bird migrations. For the Polynesians, navigation was more than a skill; it was a profound cultural practice, a testament to human resilience and ingenuity.

But the art of navigation is not confined to the open seas. Across the golden sands of the Sahara, Bedouin nomads read the desert's shifting dunes as if they were a map. On the other side of the planet, Indigenous people of Australia traversed their vast lands guided by songlines, the intricate oral maps tied to ancestral stories. Then, in the skies, the early aviators like Amelia Earhart charted new paths, combining courage with the ancient wisdom of celestial navigation.

“Each of these practices reflects the universal human drive to explore, discover, adapt, and connect.”

Interestingly, the ways we navigate have often been shaped by societal roles, challenging long-held assumptions about gender and ability. While men are often celebrated as history's hunters and explorers, women in many societies have been equally skilled navigators and hunters. From the *Agta* women of the Philippines, who masterfully track game, to the *Martu* women of Australia, whose knowledge of the desert is unparalleled, these stories challenge outdated narratives and remind us that navigation is a shared human endeavour.

This article delves into the act of "*finding our way*," exploring how diverse cultures across history have turned navigation into an art form. It celebrates the ingenuity of ancient wayfinders, the resilience of those who traverse challenging landscapes, and the deep cultural connections that continue to shape our journeys. Whether guided by the stars, the land, or modern technology, the essence of navigation remains unchanged: a quest to understand our place in the world and forge connections across distances.

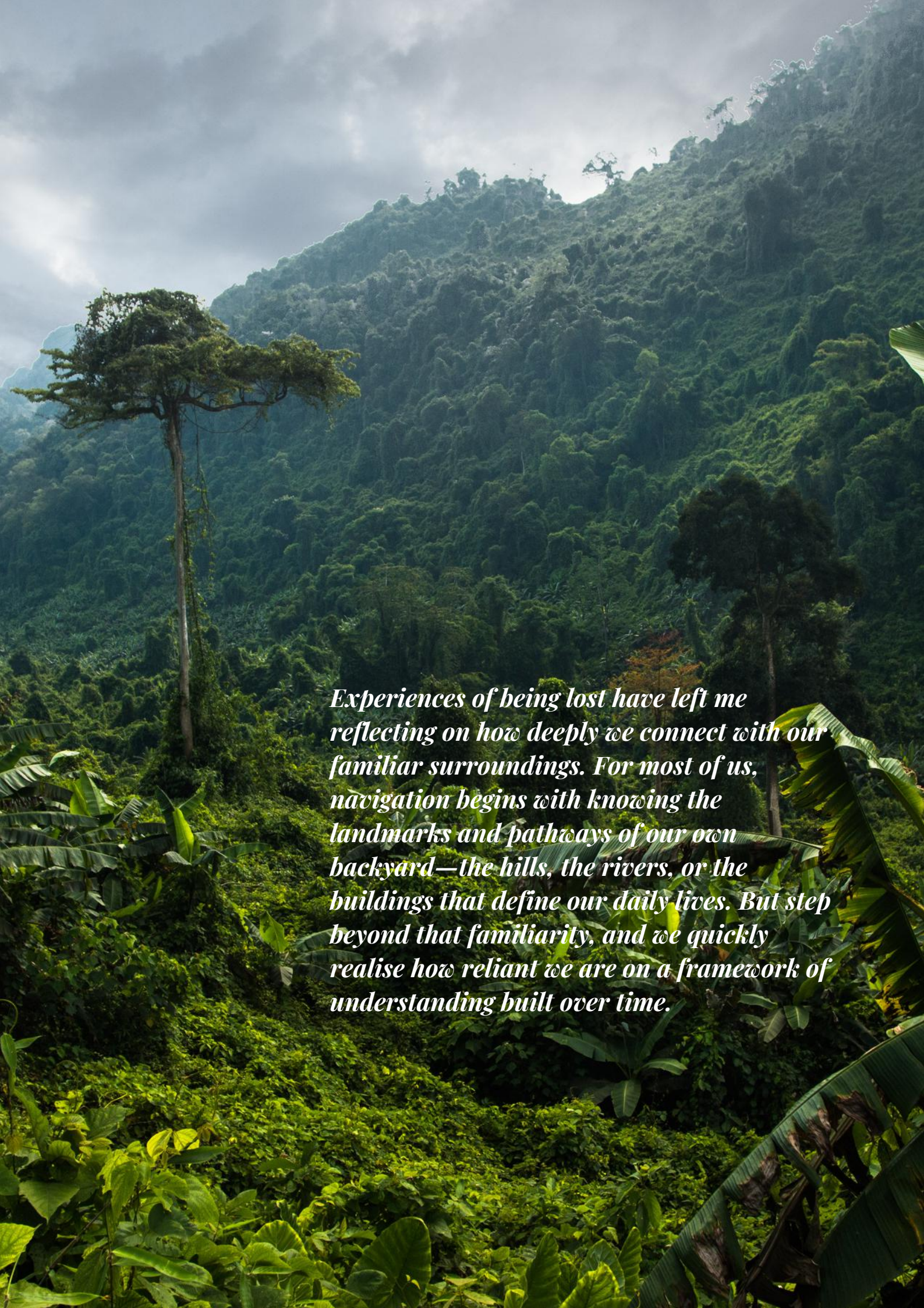


On Land

Land navigation throws up many different obstacles to navigation. As a young traveller, I once found myself lost in the dense forests of West Java with two fellow adventurers, Daniel from Hawaii and John from Australia, along with our guide, Ali, who was more of a city journalist than a jungle guide. We had met Ali at the Gradjagan surf camp in East Java, known as G-Land, where he invited us on an adventure to explore potential surf spots in West Java. From our base, which we reached on bikes followed by canoe, we set out on foot to a remote surf spot called “*Ombak Tujuh*,” (seven waves). Ali proposed that this place would rival the legendary G-Land waves. While the surf was a little underwhelming that day, our journey home soon made up for any loss of adventure. High tide forced us to return to our camp via an inland forest track.

Ali had taken directions from local fishermen, which appeared easy enough at first. However, the open palm forest soon turned to long elephant grass that stood well above John's head, who stood 6 feet 6 inches. Before long, one trail became three, and our sense of direction, along with our sense of humour, soon failed us.

We found ourselves without water, food, or a torch as night fell. The feeling was not one of danger or hopelessness but of deep frustration. Our attempts to agree on a direction were futile, with each of us convinced of a different route. The landscape itself worked against us: marshy ground forced detours and the tall grass overhead obscured our view, subtly pushing us in unintended directions, then small trails led us in loops. The dense humidity weighed on us as we sat in the darkness, the forest alive with unseen activity. Exhausted, we dozed lightly on our surfboards until dawn, only to discover we had zigzagged deeper into the wilderness, unknowingly walking a half-day past our camp. Remarkably, on the most densely populated island in the world, we had gone two days without encountering another person.

A lush, green mountain landscape with dense tropical forest. A prominent tree stands on the left side of the frame. The sky is overcast with grey clouds. The foreground is filled with various tropical plants, including banana leaves.

Experiences of being lost have left me reflecting on how deeply we connect with our familiar surroundings. For most of us, navigation begins with knowing the landmarks and pathways of our own backyard—the hills, the rivers, or the buildings that define our daily lives. But step beyond that familiarity, and we quickly realise how reliant we are on a framework of understanding built over time.

For us, salvation came in the form of distant hammering. Following the sound, we stumbled upon a group of men building a hut. They welcomed us, offering tea and some fruit before pointing us toward the nearest village another hour or so. To this day, that humbling experience reminds me of how easily we can become disoriented in unfamiliar landscapes and how easily our navigation skills can be disrupted if we fail to tune in.

Over the decades since, I have found myself disoriented a number of times, hiking in forests and the desert, walking in unfamiliar cities, and even for a time at sea. While technology has made it much simpler for us to know where we are, there are no doubt times when we wish we paid greater attention to our inner navigator and honed our natural skills a bit more regularly.



Across the golden sands of the Sahara, Bedouin nomads continue to chart their paths using methods honed over centuries, relying on a deep understanding of their environment. Anthropologist Donald Powell Cole, who studied the “*Al Murrah Bedouin*” of Saudi Arabia's Empty Quarter, documented their extraordinary ability to navigate the desert’s shifting landscapes. Unlike static landmarks that could easily vanish in the sands, Bedouins used the subtle shapes of dunes and the way wind sculpted their surfaces as guides. They relied on the position of the sun during the day and the stars at night, such as Orion and the Big Dipper, to orient themselves.

Routes were memorised as a series of waypoints—a particular tree, a well, or a rock formation—combined with distances measured by the time it took to travel between them. The steady pace of their camels became a natural timer, enabling precise estimations of distance. In addition to environmental cues, Bedouins could interpret animal behaviour, like bird flight patterns or tracks, to locate water. Cole’s research highlights how these techniques were more than just practical survival skills; they were a deeply embedded cultural practice requiring remarkable memory and intuition. This reliance on environmental cues and innate knowledge created a navigation system that was not only practical but poetic, reflecting a profound connection to their surroundings.

Likewise, the Indigenous peoples of Australia have moved across their vast and varied homelands—not with compasses or maps, but through a sophisticated system of memory, observation, and song. To the untrained eye, the ochre sands of the Outback, the dense eucalyptus woodlands, and the shifting floodplains of Arnhem Land might appear featureless, and daunting.



But for those who have lived on this land for over 65,000 years, the terrain is a well-marked canvas, layered with meaning, guidance, and ancestral wisdom.

At the heart of Indigenous navigation lies the songline—a unique oral mapping system that encodes the landscape into melody and verse. These oral traditional mapping methods passed down through generations, transform travel into a spiritual journey. Each note corresponds to a ridge, a waterhole, a hidden cave, or a sacred site, guiding wayfarers across thousands of miles with a precision that rivals modern GPS. “*If you know the song,*” one Yolŋu elder from Arnhem Land once explained, “*you will never be lost.*”

But Indigenous Australians are not only master navigators—they are legendary trackers, able to read the land in ways that defy conventional understanding. Their ability to follow faint footprints over hard earth, distinguish a single animal’s gait among countless tracks, or sense a predator’s presence before it emerges is more than a skill; it is an art. The *Pintupi* and *Warlpiri* peoples of the Central Desert, for instance, can look at a disturbance in the sand and reconstruct an entire narrative: the species that passed, how fast it was moving, whether it was frightened or calm, and even if it was carrying young.

Tracking is a symphony of senses, a practice that combines acute visual memory, tactile sensitivity, and environmental intuition. Indigenous trackers can determine the age of a footprint by analysing its sharpness, the impact of wind erosion, and the shifting of tiny grains of sand. They listen to the calls of birds, which can betray the presence of a snake or a human intruder. They read the subtle indentations in vegetation that indicate an animal’s recent passage or a hidden burrow.

The image shows a close-up of ancient rock art on a sandstone surface. The artwork is composed of numerous small, interconnected figures and patterns, primarily rendered in shades of red and yellow ochre. A prominent feature is a large, stylized kangaroo-like animal in the upper center, depicted with a fan-like tail and a body covered in fine lines. Below it, there are several fish-like shapes, some with distinct fins and scales. The overall composition is dense and intricate, with various other animal forms and abstract patterns scattered throughout. The background is the natural texture and color of the sandstone, which varies from light tan to deep brown. A dark, semi-transparent text box is overlaid on the lower portion of the image, containing a descriptive paragraph.

Ancient Echoes on Stone – Painted in red and yellow ochre, this rock art—believed to be thousands of years old—depicts a kangaroo, fish, and other animals vital to Indigenous Australian life. Found in a remote sandstone shelter, these artworks are more than simple depictions; they are part of a vast storytelling tradition, mapping hunting grounds, spiritual beliefs, and ancestral connections to the land. Passed down through generations, they serve as a living record of survival, adaptation, and deep respect for Country.

During the colonial era, these skills became a matter of legend—and, at times, exploitation. Indigenous men were often employed by European settlers and law enforcement to track down missing persons, escaped convicts, and even notorious outlaws. Their abilities were so renowned that some were sent abroad to assist in military efforts, including in the jungles of Southeast Asia during World War II.

Yet, far from being relics of the past, these tracking skills remain essential today. In the Kimberley, Indigenous rangers use traditional knowledge to monitor endangered species, track illegal poaching, and assist in fire management through controlled burns, a practice known as cultural burning. In 2020, an Indigenous tracker in the Northern Territory helped locate a lost three-year-old boy in the bush, his sharp eyes detecting subtle foot imprints invisible to search-and-rescue teams.

Modern science is beginning to understand just how profound this expertise is. Studies on Indigenous cognition suggest that their spatial memory—honed over generations of reading the landscape—is among the most advanced in the world. Researchers have even found that Aboriginal tracking techniques outperform high-tech forensic methods in certain conditions, proving that this ancient knowledge holds value far beyond its traditional roots.

For Indigenous Australians, navigation and tracking are more than survival skills; they are a way of seeing the world, a way of reading Country—a term that embodies the deep spiritual and physical relationship between people and land. Navigating the Outback is not just about traversing space but also about walking in the footsteps of ancestors, singing the land awake, and keeping knowledge alive at every step.

Navigation expertise is not just a skill of the past; it remains alive in the heart of one of the world's most complex and bustling cities—London.

Known for their encyclopedic knowledge of London's labyrinthine streets, Black Cab drivers must pass one of the most rigorous navigation tests in the world, aptly named "*The Knowledge*." Introduced in 1865, this test requires drivers to memorise approximately 25,000 streets, 100,000 landmarks, and the most efficient routes across the city. It takes an average of three to four years of dedicated study to pass, with candidates navigating the city by moped, methodically plotting out routes and recalling thousands of connections between roads and destinations.

Mastering "*The Knowledge*" is not just a mental feat—it physically reshapes the brain. Studies by neuroscientists at University College London (UCL) have shown that London cab drivers develop a significantly larger hippocampus, the region of the brain associated with spatial memory and navigation. Research led by Professor Eleanor Maguire in 2000 found that the posterior hippocampus—the area involved in spatial mapping—was more developed in Black Cab drivers than in the general population. The longer a driver had been on the job, the more pronounced this brain adaptation became. More recent studies suggest that this deep engagement with mental mapping and spatial problem-solving may have long-term cognitive benefits. Research published in "*Current Biology*" indicates that individuals with highly developed navigation skills, such as Black Cab drivers and paramedics, show a lower prevalence of dementia and other neurodegenerative diseases later in life.

This challenges the increasing reliance on GPS-based navigation, which removes the need for active spatial memory and may contribute to cognitive decline over time.

Despite their deep-rooted place in London's heritage, Black Cabs are rapidly disappearing. Data from "Transport for London" (TfL) shows that the number of licensed Black Cab drivers has dropped by nearly 50% in the past decade, with numbers falling from approximately 21,000 in 2013 to just over 10,000 today. The decline is attributed to multiple factors:

The rise of ride-sharing apps like Uber, which offer cheaper fares and greater flexibility; the high cost and years-long commitment required to pass "The Knowledge", which deters new entrants; London's transition to electric vehicles, making it financially challenging for drivers to stay in the industry;

The impact of COVID-19 drastically reduced demand for Black Cabs, forcing many drivers out of work permanently.

London's Black Cab drivers are more than just transport providers; they are living repositories of urban geography, cultural history, and an approach to navigation that predates modern technology.

As their numbers dwindle, so does a cognitive and cultural tradition that has shaped the city's movement for generations. The question remains: will we allow "*The Knowledge*" to become a relic of the past, or can this unparalleled expertise find a place in the city's future of navigation?





By Sea

Wayfinders fixed their gaze on a guiding star, adjusting their course as it shifted through the night. When one star dipped below the horizon, another rose to take its place, creating a seamless celestial guide. Polynesian navigators also relied on the ocean's colour, the reflection of clouds, and the behaviour of birds to detect land. Frigatebirds, for example, rarely ventured far from shore, and their flight patterns at dawn or dusk often pointed the way. Schools of fish and drifting debris further hinted at underwater features or currents leading to islands.

Polynesian wayfinding was not merely a method of travel and navigation— ***it was an intricate symphony of observation, intuition, and inherited knowledge.*** These early explorers transformed the vast Pacific Ocean, once seen as an impassable void, into a well-charted network of routes and destinations. Apprentices, known as “*pwo*” in some Polynesian cultures, trained under master navigators to memorise the stars’ positions, their seasonal changes, and how they interacted with the horizon. Their rigorous training demanded technical mastery and an intuitive connection to the ocean’s rhythms, making their navigational techniques a testament to human ingenuity.

Central to Polynesian navigation was interpreting the ocean’s swells. Waves generated by distant storms travelled thousands of miles across the Pacific, creating a rhythmic pulse that skilled navigators could feel, even with their eyes closed. By aligning their canoe with these swells, navigators could maintain a steady course. When swells interacted with underwater landforms, subtle changes in wave patterns—imperceptible to the untrained eye—offered vital clues.

Polynesians referred to their routes as “*sea roads*,” invisible paths connecting islands across the ocean. These routes were etched into memory through deep immersion in nature. Wayfinders recalled specific landmarks, such as the rising of a particular star, the scent of seaweed, or the flight patterns of birds, creating mental maps as reliable as any chart.

Stars were the linchpins of Polynesian navigation. Drawing from traditions documented by navigators such as *Mau Piailug*, the star compass divided the horizon into 4 and then 32 directional points, each aligned with the rising and setting of specific stars.

One remarkable technique was “*etak*,” a system of mental navigation that imagined reference points, such as islands, moving past the canoe. This dynamic mental map required immense focus and was integral to long voyages. Unlike Western navigation, which places the traveler at the center of a fixed coordinate system, *etak* flips the perspective—the navigator envisions themselves as stationary while the islands and stars move around them. This allows for an incredibly fluid and dynamic way of perceiving direction and distance across the open ocean.

Navigation for Polynesians was as much about spiritual connection as technical precision. Women, often excluded from the role of master navigator, played vital roles in preserving oral traditions, encoding star paths and sea conditions into chants and songs passed down through generations. These melodies, steeped in ritual, served as cultural repositories and navigational guides.

The techniques of Polynesian wayfinding nearly vanished with the introduction of Western tools. However, the late 20th century saw a revival led by the Polynesian Voyaging Society and master navigator Mau Piailug. Their double-hulled canoe, Hōkūle’a, reignited interest in traditional navigation, inspiring a new generation to embrace their cultural heritage. Hōkūle’a’s journeys today underscore the enduring relevance of these ancient skills and their role in fostering cultural pride.

Polynesian navigation reminds us of the intimate bond between humans and nature. By reading the subtle cues embedded in the natural world—the pulse of the waves, the flight of birds, the glow of the stars—these early wayfinders achieved feats that modern tools, for all their precision, often struggle to replicate. Their legacy invites us to reflect on our relationship with the environment and to seek inspiration from the wisdom of the past.



"Glen Hooper, skipper of the catamaran "Bohica", navigates a narrow channel within Australia's Great Barrier Reef. Even with modern navigation tools and the vessel's shallow draft, the maneuver is challenging. By his side, his son Kade keeps a watchful eye on the markers, ensuring Bohica glides safely through this breathtaking yet demanding marine landscape."

For the ancient Egyptians, the Nile River was more than just a source of water—it was the primary highway for transportation, trade, and communication. Unlike cultures that relied on overland routes, Egyptians built an extensive network of riverboats, using the predictable cycles of the Nile's flow to their advantage. The river's annual inundation created a natural calendar, and traders, farmers, and builders synchronised their activities with its rising and falling waters.

The Nile's current naturally flows from south to north, carrying vessels toward the Mediterranean, while the prevailing north-to-south winds allowed ships to travel upriver by simply raising sails. This dual-direction navigation system gave Egyptians a unique advantage—an efficient, year-round transportation system long before roads or cartography were widely developed. The reliance on the river meant that boats became central to Egyptian civilization, from trade and religious ceremonies to burial practices, as seen in the solar barque of Pharaoh Khufu, buried near the Great Pyramid of Giza, to carry his soul into the afterlife.

While river navigation relied heavily on currents and seasonal patterns, Egyptian sailors who ventured into the Mediterranean or the Red Sea turned to the stars for guidance. The North Star (*then called "Thuban" in the constellation Draco*) played a crucial role in Egyptian celestial navigation. Unlike today's *Polaris*, which marks true north, Thuban held a nearly fixed position in the ancient sky, making it an essential reference point for sailors aligning their course.

The importance of the North Star extended beyond navigation—Egyptians associated it with divine order (*Ma'at*), believing that the heavens mirrored the earth's structure. Pharaohs were often depicted sailing through the sky in celestial barques, reinforcing the idea that cosmic forces guided their rule. The alignment of temples and pyramids with key celestial bodies suggests that Egyptian knowledge of astronomy extended beyond religious symbolism and had practical applications for travel and orientation.



Vikings roamed the treacherous North Atlantic with their legendary longships, equipped with sunstones that refracted sunlight even on overcast days. Mentioned in Icelandic sagas and later tested by modern researchers, sunstones worked by refracting polarised light, revealing the sun's location even when obscured by fog or overcast skies. This was crucial in the North Atlantic, where heavy cloud cover often made traditional celestial navigation difficult. Danish archaeologist Thorkild Ramskou first proposed in 1967 that Vikings might have utilised light-polarising minerals, such as cordierite or Iceland spar (calcite), to aid in navigation under cloudy skies.

Building upon Ramskou's hypothesis, a 2011 study demonstrated that Iceland spar could indeed help determine the sun's direction with a precision of a few degrees, even in cloudy or twilight conditions. Scientists believe that Vikings may have used Iceland spar (a form of calcite) or cordierite, both of which polarise light and could be rotated to find the sun's direction.



Yet navigation applies whenever we move, land, sea and air. In the early days of aviation, navigating the skies brought its own challenges. "*Amelia Mary Earhart*," one of the most celebrated aviators in history, embodied the pioneering spirit of her time. It was likely that navigation error led to her peril. Her flights were not just about technical prowess; they were a dance with the elements, guided by rudimentary maps, compasses, and an unwavering determination to break boundaries.


Air Navigation: A Dance Between Stars and Satellites

How do pilots find their way through the vast, boundless sky? The answer is a fascinating blend of ancient wisdom and cutting-edge technology, a story of humankind's enduring quest to navigate the unknown. From the shimmering constellations that guided early aviators to the invisible precision of satellites today, air navigation is a testament to our ability to adapt and innovate.

Imagine being a pilot in the golden age of aviation, soaring over endless oceans with nothing but a sextant and the stars to guide you. ***Celestial navigation*** was the cornerstone of early long-distance flights, relying on measurements of celestial bodies to determine position. While today's pilots rarely consult the heavens, the principles behind these techniques live on in modern inertial systems, which serve as vital backups for navigation even in an age dominated by satellites.

Today, the skies are ruled by precision technologies, and aviation has pioneered their development. The ***Wide Area Augmentation System (WAAS)***, a sophisticated evolution of GPS, provides pilots with unmatched accuracy, transforming how flights are planned and executed. This technological leap ensures safer, more efficient journeys, even in challenging conditions.

The Earth itself offers its own navigational wonders. Rather than flying straight lines on a flat map, aircraft follow Great Circle Routes, the shortest path between two points on a sphere. These invisible arcs allow pilots to save significant time and fuel, proving that even the natural geometry of our planet holds the keys to mastering the skies.

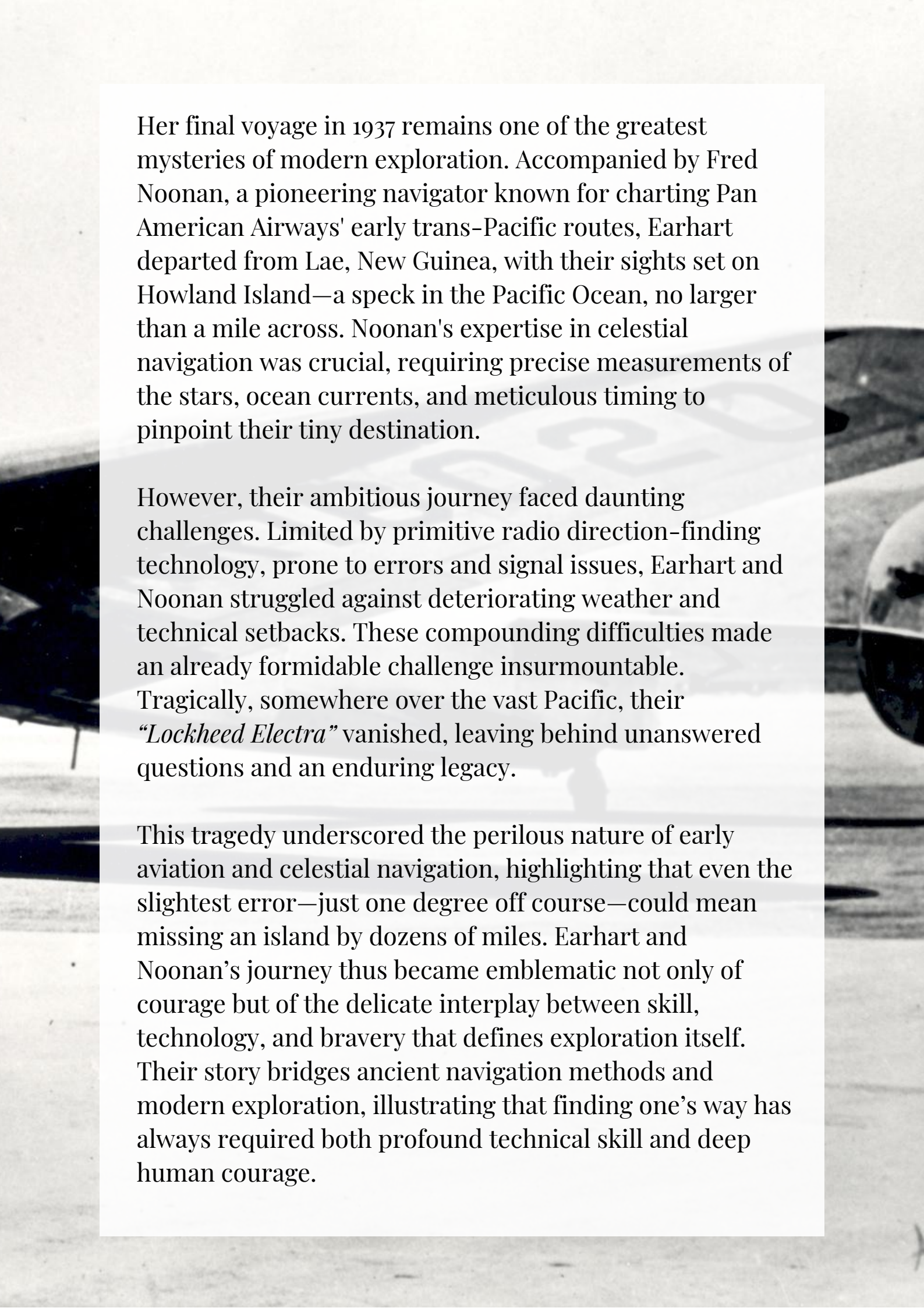


Even with these advancements, pilots remain connected to time-honoured traditions. Techniques like *dead reckoning*, where position is estimated based on speed, time, and heading, remain essential to every aviator's toolkit. It is a skill rooted in the early days of exploration, now serving as a reliable fallback when modern systems falter.

Air navigation is where history meets innovation—a discipline that honours the wisdom of the past while embracing the promise of the future. From the ancient art of celestial navigation to the modern marvels of GPS, it's a journey of discovery that ensures we can always find our way, no matter how far we've come.



"Amelia Earhart stands poised before her aircraft, a timeless icon of courage and exploration. In 1932, she etched her name into history as the first woman to complete a solo flight across the Atlantic Ocean, defying both the limits of aviation and societal expectations of her time."



Her final voyage in 1937 remains one of the greatest mysteries of modern exploration. Accompanied by Fred Noonan, a pioneering navigator known for charting Pan American Airways' early trans-Pacific routes, Earhart departed from Lae, New Guinea, with their sights set on Howland Island—a speck in the Pacific Ocean, no larger than a mile across. Noonan's expertise in celestial navigation was crucial, requiring precise measurements of the stars, ocean currents, and meticulous timing to pinpoint their tiny destination.

However, their ambitious journey faced daunting challenges. Limited by primitive radio direction-finding technology, prone to errors and signal issues, Earhart and Noonan struggled against deteriorating weather and technical setbacks. These compounding difficulties made an already formidable challenge insurmountable. Tragically, somewhere over the vast Pacific, their “*Lockheed Electra*” vanished, leaving behind unanswered questions and an enduring legacy.

This tragedy underscored the perilous nature of early aviation and celestial navigation, highlighting that even the slightest error—just one degree off course—could mean missing an island by dozens of miles. Earhart and Noonan’s journey thus became emblematic not only of courage but of the delicate interplay between skill, technology, and bravery that defines exploration itself. Their story bridges ancient navigation methods and modern exploration, illustrating that finding one’s way has always required both profound technical skill and deep human courage.

Echoes in the Dark:

In the heart of the Australian Outback, where the red desert fractures into hidden caverns, an ancient pathway winds into the depths. Here, in the pitch-black silence of Koonalda Cave, long before the Great Pyramids were built, early Australians left their mark—finger-traced patterns on rock walls, etched into the very memory of the land. These 20,000-year-old markings, among the oldest known artistic traditions in the world, hint at something deeper: not only did Indigenous Australians venture into these underground realms, but they possessed the extraordinary ability to navigate them without light.

For Indigenous cultures, caves are more than mere shelters—they are portals to the Dreaming, sacred spaces where the past and present merge. From the ochre-painted rock galleries of Arnhem Land to the vast limestone sinkholes of the Nullarbor Plain, Australia's first peoples have long explored the subterranean world, developing a unique set of survival and navigational skills. While modern archaeology continues to uncover their methods, recent research on human echolocation, sensory adaptation, and Indigenous environmental awareness suggests that these ancient explorers relied on techniques still largely misunderstood today.

Navigating without light presents a profound challenge. Yet, many Indigenous communities across the world, from the San people of southern Africa to the Maya of Central America, developed ways to move through caves using sound, airflow, and memory. Australian Aboriginal groups, renowned for their extraordinary tracking abilities on open land, likely extended this expertise underground—where the only clues to direction come from the subtlest shifts in the environment. One theory suggests that airflow was a key navigational tool.

In limestone caves, cool air often indicates an opening, while warm stagnant pockets signal a dead end. Indigenous trackers, accustomed to reading invisible signs in the landscape above, may have used this skill to detect exits and underground chambers.



But perhaps the most astonishing technique is human echolocation—a method now recognised in scientific studies. In this method, individuals navigate by producing clicks or vocalisations and interpreting the returning echoes. Research led by Dr Lore Thaler at Durham University found that both blind and sighted individuals can learn echolocation, with MRI scans showing that their brains adapt by repurposing the visual cortex for auditory processing.

In effect, sound becomes sight. While no direct evidence exists that Indigenous Australians used echolocation, parallels can be drawn from other Indigenous groups that relied on rhythmic claps, vocal tones, or the resonance of other sounds to sense their surroundings in complete darkness. The acoustics of caves, where sound bounces in predictable ways, would have made this an effective strategy.

In places like Koonalda Cave, researchers believe that the ancient finger-marked symbols may have served a dual purpose as an artistic expression and a form of wayfinding. Studies by researchers such as Kevin Sharpe and Leslie Van Gelder have focused on finger flutings in European caves, providing insights that may apply to Koonalda.

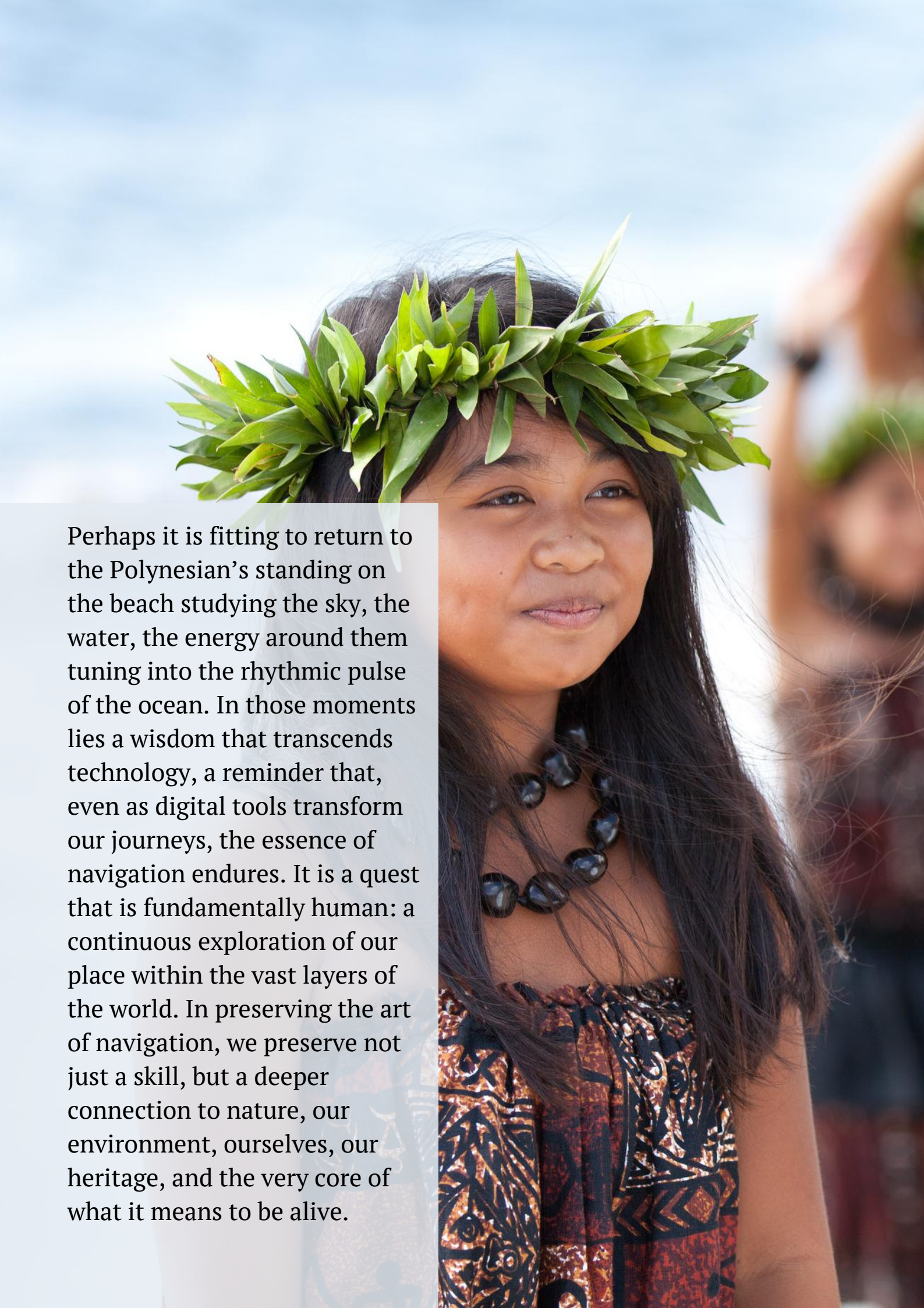
Similar to the songlines that map Australia's vast open landscapes, these engravings may have functioned as spatial memory aids, helping travellers remember key junctions and sacred locations underground. A parallel exists in the famous Lascaux and Chauvet caves of France, where Ice Age artists painted bison, horses, and geometric symbols deep inside cavern systems. Some archaeologists believe these paintings may have marked important waypoints or designated spiritual zones, much like Australia's rock shelters.

Meanwhile, Indigenous oral traditions continue to preserve underground knowledge. The *Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara* (APY) people of central Australia speak of "*tjukurpa*," the Dreaming stories that encode knowledge of waterholes, caves, and sacred places passed down through generations.

Today, scientists studying human cognition and navigation are beginning to realise what Indigenous cultures have long known: the human brain is capable of far more sophisticated spatial awareness than previously thought. Research on blind echolocators, Indigenous trackers, taxi drivers, sailors and traditional cave explorers is reshaping our understanding of sensory adaptation.



The timeless stories of navigators offer hope and inspiration. From Polynesian wayfinders feeling their way across vast oceans, Bedouins reading the subtle shifts of desert sands, taxi drivers committing 25,000 streets, 100,000 landmarks to memory and Indigenous Australians following intricate songlines across their homeland, navigation remains an integral expression of culture, heritage, and the human spirit. Even in an age dominated by satellites and smartphones, these ancient methods remind us that navigation is about more than mere directions—it is about curiosity, courage, and the enduring human drive to explore and connect.



Perhaps it is fitting to return to the Polynesian's standing on the beach studying the sky, the water, the energy around them tuning into the rhythmic pulse of the ocean. In those moments lies a wisdom that transcends technology, a reminder that, even as digital tools transform our journeys, the essence of navigation endures. It is a quest that is fundamentally human: a continuous exploration of our place within the vast layers of the world. In preserving the art of navigation, we preserve not just a skill, but a deeper connection to nature, our environment, ourselves, our heritage, and the very core of what it means to be alive.

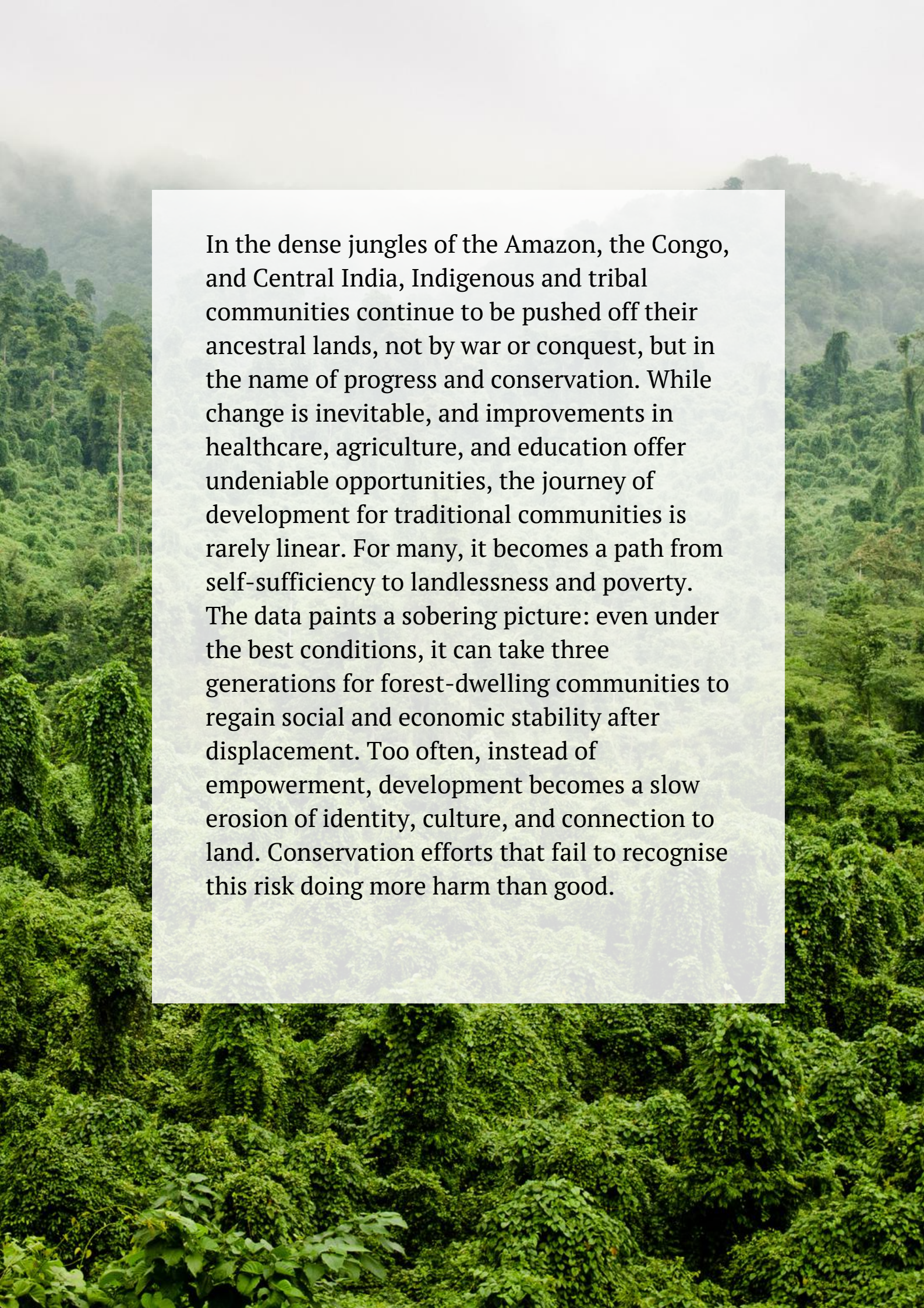


by Tom Corcoran
& Ethnomad Photography

A close-up portrait of a young Indigenous woman with traditional face paint and a flower in her hair. She has orange and black paint on her face and is wearing a necklace with a white and red geometric pattern. The background is blurred, showing a thatched roof.

When Conservation Hurts:

The Hidden Struggle of Indigenous,
Tribal, and Traditional Stewards

A photograph of a dense, lush green jungle with misty mountains in the background. The text is overlaid on a semi-transparent white box in the center of the image.

In the dense jungles of the Amazon, the Congo, and Central India, Indigenous and tribal communities continue to be pushed off their ancestral lands, not by war or conquest, but in the name of progress and conservation. While change is inevitable, and improvements in healthcare, agriculture, and education offer undeniable opportunities, the journey of development for traditional communities is rarely linear. For many, it becomes a path from self-sufficiency to landlessness and poverty. The data paints a sobering picture: even under the best conditions, it can take three generations for forest-dwelling communities to regain social and economic stability after displacement. Too often, instead of empowerment, development becomes a slow erosion of identity, culture, and connection to land. Conservation efforts that fail to recognise this risk doing more harm than good.

In central India, a Baiga elder gazes at the land her people have nurtured for generations. Renowned for their intricate tattoos, the Baiga women embody the deep cultural connection their tribe shares with the land. The Baigas, often referred to as the "*caretakers of the soil*," believe the earth is their mother and resist ploughing it repeatedly. They practice a unique form of shifting cultivation called "*Bewar*," which relies on natural cycles and minimal disruption to the land. Traditionally, their livelihoods depended on the forest's bounty, including the collection of wild mushrooms, leafy greens, and fruits. Their staple food, Sikiya millet, grows naturally on Bewar patches and is used to prepare rice and their signature "*ghas ki roti*."

However, as displacement disrupts these practices, this intricate knowledge and self-sustaining way of life are increasingly at risk. "*The jungle is only here because of us*," she says, her voice heavy with despair. This sentiment, echoed time and again throughout my life by tribal and traditional communities worldwide, underscores the profound connection between these communities and their lands. Forced evictions have driven her family away from the Kanha Tiger Reserve, severing ties to their heritage and identity.

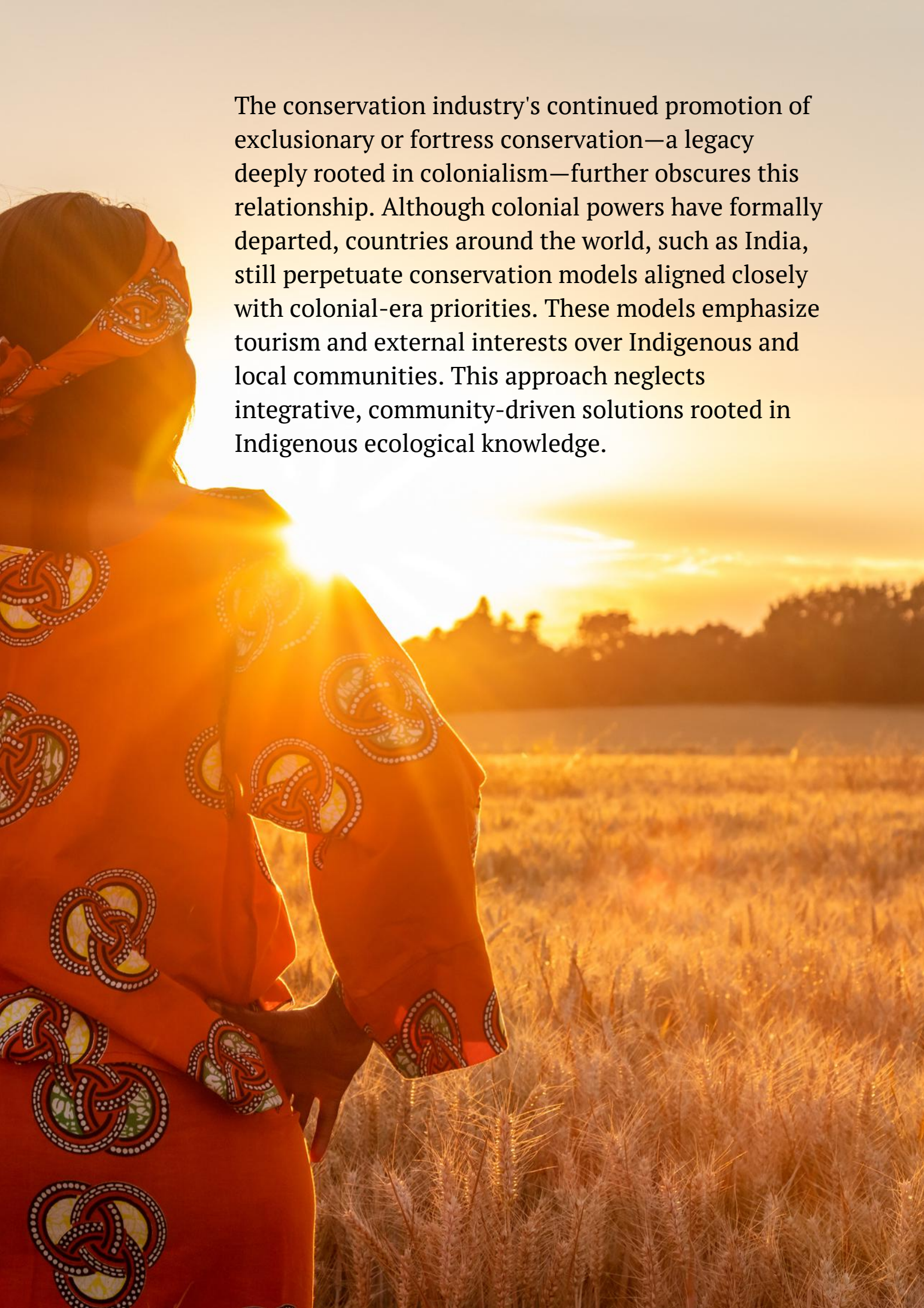
Stories like that of the Baiga resonate across continents, illustrating how the global conservation movement often marginalises the very communities that have been nature's stewards for generations. This narrative repeats itself in countless regions, highlighting the ongoing disconnect between conservation efforts and the lived experiences of those most deeply connected to the land.



The Myth of Pristine Wilderness

Our human heritage and culture are inseparable from the land, yet this relationship is often overlooked in conservation narratives. Contrary to romanticised notions of "untouched wilderness," many areas now protected for conservation were actively shaped and managed by Indigenous communities long before contemporary environmental initiatives began. Researchers such as M. Kat Anderson and Frank Lake have extensively documented how Native American tribes—including the Ahwahneechee of Yosemite Valley, the Blackfeet of the Great Plains, and the Anishinaabe peoples of the Great Lakes region—sustainably managed these landscapes through controlled burning, selective harvesting, and seasonal migration.

For instance, Anderson's research in her book "Tending the Wild" reveals how the Ahwahneechee regularly set controlled fires to prevent dense forest growth, maintain open meadows, and promote biodiversity. According to environmental historian Mark David Spence, the forced removal of these communities during the establishment of Yosemite National Park disrupted these carefully balanced ecological practices, dramatically altering landscapes that had been sustainably managed by Indigenous stewardship for centuries.

A woman wearing a vibrant orange sari with intricate white and black patterns is seen from the side, looking out over a vast, golden field of tall grasses. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a warm, golden glow that illuminates the scene. The background shows a line of trees under a bright, hazy sky.

The conservation industry's continued promotion of exclusionary or fortress conservation—a legacy deeply rooted in colonialism—further obscures this relationship. Although colonial powers have formally departed, countries around the world, such as India, still perpetuate conservation models aligned closely with colonial-era priorities. These models emphasize tourism and external interests over Indigenous and local communities. This approach neglects integrative, community-driven solutions rooted in Indigenous ecological knowledge.

This exclusionary approach traces back to North America with the establishment of Yellowstone National Park in the 19th century, which forcibly removed over 300 Indigenous people from the Crow, Shoshone, and Bannock tribes to create a "wilderness" for tourism. Iconic photographs by Ansel Adams significantly reinforced the myth of an "empty wilderness," depicting landscapes such as Yosemite as untouched, majestic, and devoid of human presence. Though widely celebrated for their beauty, Adams' images inadvertently erased Indigenous histories and justified further displacement under the guise of conservation.

Globally, the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues highlights that 80% of the planet's biodiversity is found within Indigenous lands, emphasizing the crucial role Indigenous stewardship plays in ecological health. Yet, the fortress conservation model has displaced millions of tribal peoples across Africa, India, and Southeast Asia, fracturing communities and severing their ancestral connections to the land. Recognising the constructed nature of the "empty wilderness" narrative underscores the urgent need to prioritize Indigenous rights and knowledge within contemporary conservation practices, ensuring sustainable and just environmental management globally.





Two Maasai women look out across their ancestral lands, now under threat from conservation-driven displacement in areas such as Tanzania's Ngorongoro Conservation Area. Their presence symbolises both resilience and resistance, embodying generations of traditional stewardship and highlighting the urgent need for better conservation models that respect Indigenous and tribal rights, knowledge, and their deep-rooted connection to the land.

Displacement in the Name of Conservation

Today, more than 200,000 protected areas cover 15% of the Earth's land surface. However, this expansion has led to the displacement of millions of Indigenous people worldwide. In India alone, more than 100,000 Indigenous people had been evicted by 2009, and recent studies indicate the displacement continues. A study covering 26 protected areas from 1999 to 2019 documented the displacement of 13,445 families, predominantly Indigenous communities, due to wildlife conservation policies. Additionally, the National Tiger Conservation Authority reported that 56,247 families had been evicted since 1972 for tiger conservation across 50 tiger reserves. These figures, drawn from reports by Survival International and advocacy groups, highlight the growing human cost associated with exclusionary conservation models.

Such large-scale displacement emphasizes the urgent need to balance ecological preservation with human rights. Displacement disrupts livelihoods and cultural heritage, severing bonds that tie communities to their ancestral lands. The loss of these connections results in a profound erosion of identity and traditional ecological knowledge, which cannot be easily restored.

Moreover, displacement and exclusionary policies have sometimes facilitated exploitative practices by outsiders employed by conservation agencies, including poaching, illegal logging, and wildlife trafficking. Investigations in the Congo Basin revealed park rangers and officials involved in illegal logging operations, and similar issues have been documented in Southeast Asia, where conservation personnel have facilitated wildlife trafficking. In Madagascar, exploitation of valuable hardwoods such as rosewood by individuals connected to conservation projects further underscores the challenges of ensuring accountability and ethical practices within protected areas.

These instances highlight systemic issues that undermine conservation goals and harm indigenous communities. These activities, such as illegal logging, poaching, and exploitation of natural resources, not only undermine conservation goals but also exacerbate the displacement and marginalisation of indigenous communities, reinforcing cycles of ecological and cultural harm. While these zones ostensibly exist to safeguard flora and fauna, they often come at the expense of indigenous communities. For instance, in Kenya's Maasai Mara, they have been displaced to make way for national parks and luxury safari lodges, severing their ties to ancestral lands and disrupting their pastoral traditions. Such cases illustrate how conservation efforts frequently prioritise tourism and profit over the rights and livelihoods of indigenous peoples. In India alone, over 100,000 people were evicted from national parks by 2009, according to research published in the *Journal of Human Rights*. With millions more deprived of their livelihoods. Similar patterns emerge across Africa and Southeast Asia—displacement justified by the false notion that human presence is incompatible with conservation.

The human cost of such evictions is devastating. Communities lose access to sacred sites, ancestral lands, and natural resources vital for survival. It is important to recognise that living alongside wildlife is far from easy. Each year, hundreds of indigenous and tribal people are killed by tigers, lions, and other wildlife. Despite these challenges, the pathway to a better life should emerge from within the community, grounded in their traditions and aspirations rather than imposed by external forces. Resettled families frequently endure poverty, malnutrition, and social disintegration. Meanwhile, the ecosystems they once protected often suffer—poaching, wildfires, and unsustainable tourism rise without traditional custodians.

Cultural Marginalisation and Resilience

Displacement is not merely physical; it is a cultural severance. The loss of land disrupts the inheritance of heritage and knowledge, breaking the continuity of traditions that define communities. This cultural displacement is often ignored in favour of policies prioritising economic gains or external conservation models. Poverty, too, is often misunderstood. While we may assume people are poor because they live simple lives, for many, poverty is a life without a connection to their land. Their land provides meaning, purpose, and identity, and when it is lost, poverty becomes more than economic—it is a profound disconnection from their heritage and place in the world. This disconnect arises from external narratives that redefine well-being and impose new standards of success, often alienating communities from their cultural identities and values. I once had a conversation with a man in the Makira forest of Madagascar, and he shared how a researcher visiting his hut deep in the forest had explained to him that he was poor. Until then, he said, he thought he and his family were fine, but now he knows he is poor.

This profound moment underscores how perceptions of poverty, shaped by external narratives, can erode a community's sense of self-worth and purpose. One displaced Rohingya elder from a forest community in Burma poignantly remarked, “When we are removed from our land, it is like losing our shadow.

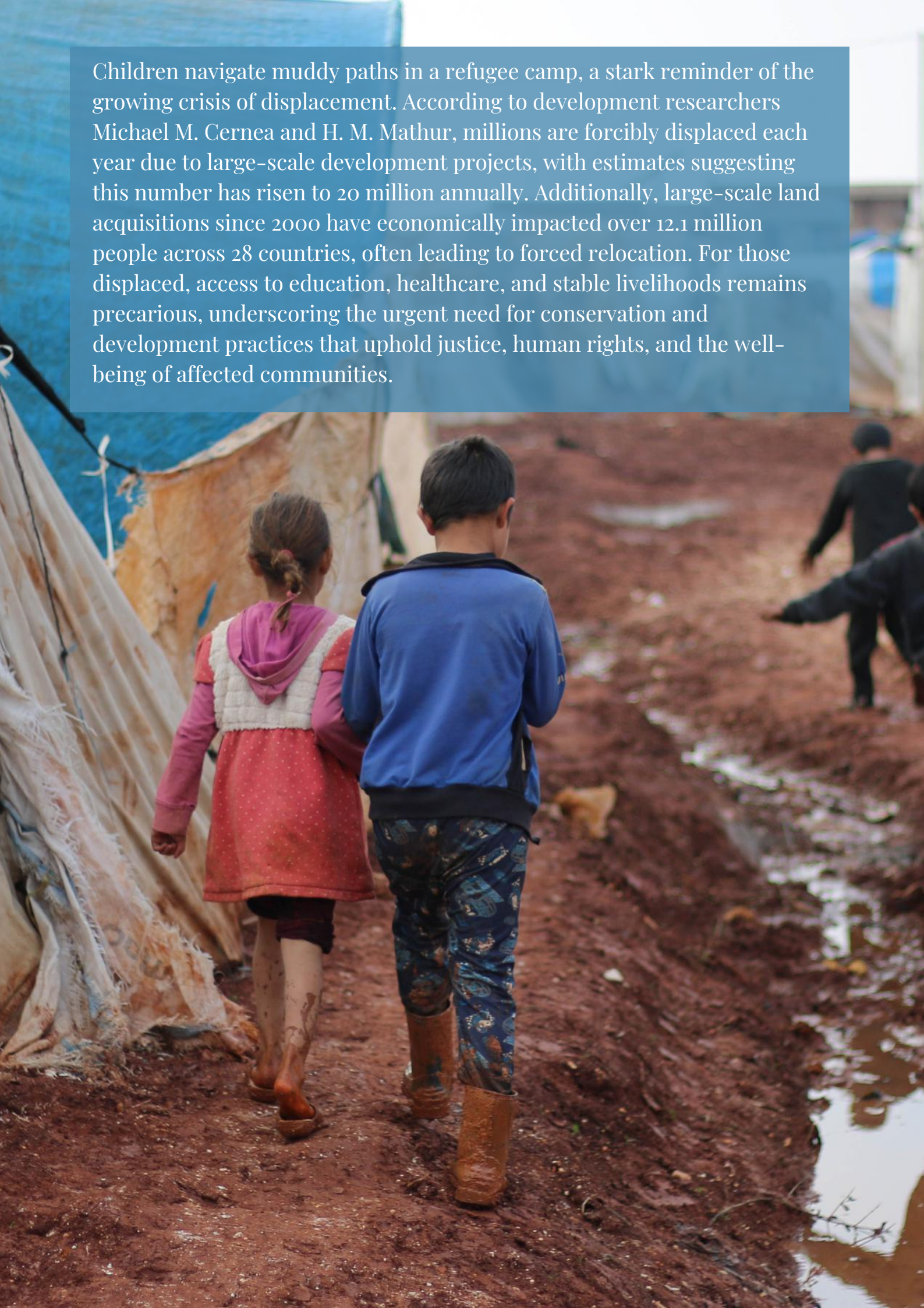
We cannot exist without it,” she explained. She spoke of how they used to tell the activities of the day by their shadow, a practice rooted in their connection to the land, the trees, and the movement of the sun. “Now, outside my homeland, my shadow has also gone.” Their sacred groves, songs, and ceremonies tied to the land fade away, leaving a void that no compensation can fill.

Forced removal severs communities from their spiritual and cultural connections to the land, further marginalising already vulnerable groups. Numerous studies have highlighted how marginalised communities face the erosion of their cultural identities under dominant power structures. For instance, a report from the United Nations points out how displacement often disrupts traditional knowledge systems, while a recent study published in the *Journal of Human Rights* elaborates on the compounding effects of multi-generational poverty linked to such displacements. These studies underscore the severe and lasting impact on cultural identity and economic stability. The same survey found that displaced individuals often remain trapped in poverty for up to three generations if they escape poverty at all.

This multi-generational impact is compounded by the loss of traditional knowledge, social networks, and access to natural resources, creating a cycle of marginalisation that is difficult to break. However, some of these communities also exhibit remarkable resilience, employing strategies to maintain their cultural knowledge and traditions even if they are hidden from outsiders. Many secretly pass down oral traditions, medicinal knowledge, and spiritual practices to the next generation, safeguarding their heritage in the face of external pressures.

From practising centuries-old agricultural methods to advocating for legal recognition of their lands, these communities persist in their fight to preserve their identity against overwhelming odds. In conversations with displaced tribal people, I have often seen their resilience reflected in the medicinal powders and plants they carried halfway around the world from their homeland. These items are not merely utilitarian; they represent a lifeline to their heritage and a means for their community to continue practising their traditional knowledge despite being uprooted.

Children navigate muddy paths in a refugee camp, a stark reminder of the growing crisis of displacement. According to development researchers Michael M. Cernea and H. M. Mathur, millions are forcibly displaced each year due to large-scale development projects, with estimates suggesting this number has risen to 20 million annually. Additionally, large-scale land acquisitions since 2000 have economically impacted over 12.1 million people across 28 countries, often leading to forced relocation. For those displaced, access to education, healthcare, and stable livelihoods remains precarious, underscoring the urgent need for conservation and development practices that uphold justice, human rights, and the well-being of affected communities.



A New Paradigm: Inclusive Conservation

The future of conservation depends on a radical shift—one that values indigenous knowledge and upholds their rights. A standout example is Australia's Indigenous Protected Areas (IPAs) program, which supports Aboriginal communities in managing over 74 million hectares of land, blending traditional ecological knowledge with modern conservation techniques. This initiative has proven successful in improving biodiversity, strengthening cultural heritage and creating employment opportunities for indigenous peoples. A 2022 study published in *Nature Sustainability* highlights how indigenous-managed forests in the Amazon store 36% more carbon per hectare than non-indigenous areas, underscoring the tangible ecological benefits of tribal stewardship. Similarly, recent findings from the journal *Marine Policy* reveal that indigenous co-management of coastal fisheries in Canada has led to a 25% increase in fish population recovery rates.

These examples demonstrate that inclusive conservation models are ethical and remarkably effective. Studies from the Amazon, Bolivia, and Guatemala reveal that forests thrive under indigenous management. Recent research highlights specific practices such as controlled fire management, which prevents catastrophic wildfires and promotes regrowth, and biodiversity mapping by indigenous communities, which identifies and protects critical habitats for endangered species. These methods conserve ecosystems and integrate traditional knowledge with modern science to achieve sustainable outcomes. Deforestation rates are significantly lower in territories where tribal communities retain control.




International frameworks like the Inter-American Court of Human Rights and ILO Convention No. 169 affirm the collective land rights of indigenous peoples, yet implementation remains inconsistent. Actual progress requires legal recognition and the integration of Indigenous voices into conservation planning and governance.

Positive examples of indigenous-led conservation are abundant, and they also reflect the rich cultural heritage embedded in the land. These practices demonstrate how traditional knowledge and heritage are essential to sustainable ecological stewardship. In Australia, the Indigenous Ranger Program empowers Aboriginal communities to manage over 1.5 million square kilometres of land and sea. This initiative restores ecosystems and revitalises cultural practices, such as controlled fire burning, which reduces wildfires and enriches biodiversity. Similarly, in Hawaii, the traditional ahupua'a system of watershed management—which integrates land, river, and ocean stewardship—is being revived to combat pollution and overfishing.

In the marine realm, the *Vezo people*—the semi-nomadic coastal inhabitants of southern Madagascar—have long sustained their lives through intricate ecological knowledge, traditions, and practices that harmonise with the ocean's rhythms. Renowned for their exceptional seafaring and fishing skills, the Vezo possess a profound connection to their marine environment, often referring to themselves simply as "*people of the sea.*"

Facing declining fish stocks due to increased commercial fishing pressures, habitat degradation, and climate change impacts, the Vezo communities proactively embraced the concept of Locally Managed Marine Areas (LMMAs). By integrating traditional governance structures and customary laws known as "Dina," the Vezo established clear rules to protect key breeding and fishing areas. These community-driven conservation initiatives have proven extraordinarily successful, resulting in a remarkable 65% increase in fish stocks.

For the Vezo, conservation is deeply intertwined with cultural identity and survival.



Their customary marine tenure systems, local knowledge of breeding cycles, seasonal closures, and restrictions on certain fishing practices exemplify how traditional ecological wisdom can yield practical and measurable conservation outcomes.

However, despite their notable successes, the Vezo often find themselves caught between their sustainable traditions and external conservation frameworks, which sometimes impose restrictive measures without adequate consultation or consideration of indigenous livelihoods.

The Vezo experience vividly demonstrates the potential—and the pitfalls—of integrating Indigenous practices into broader conservation strategies. It highlights the critical importance of empowering local communities and recognising traditional knowledge not merely as supplementary but as central to effective environmental stewardship. Their story reminds us that conservation approaches must thoughtfully engage local communities to avoid unintended harm, ensuring that marine ecosystems thrive harmoniously with the human cultures that depend upon them.

The plight of displaced tribes and traditional and indigenous communities starkly reveals the ethical and practical shortcomings of exclusionary, or fortress, conservation. Drawing from decades of experience, immersive research and powerful accounts of communities worldwide, we must recognise that conservation is fundamentally a human endeavour. Our responsibility as custodians of nature and culture demands that we amplify the voices of these communities, respect their profound wisdom, and actively support their pursuit of justice.

Proper conservation is not about separating humans from nature but about nurturing a harmonious coexistence rooted in ancient traditions and sustainable practices coupled with the latest science. Throughout history, traditional and indigenous communities have exemplified intuitive stewardship of their environments—guardians whose intricate ecological understanding ensures ecosystems thrive. From dense tropical forests and rugged mountain ranges to meandering rivers and vast oceans, nature flourishes most vividly when nurtured by those who have cared for it through countless generations.

Heritage, unlike history, does not reside merely in written records or ancient relics; it is alive, vibrant, and deeply embedded in every song, story, and dance, intimately connected to the landscapes and waters that sustain life. Outsiders often emphasise documentation and the need for material wealth, overlooking the immense wisdom preserved within oral traditions, sustainable livelihoods, and rich ecological knowledge of societies whose management systems are recorded in ways other than written words. To forge a meaningful path forward, conservation efforts must continue to work to support and centre these living traditions, respecting communities' autonomy to shape their cultural evolution.

Let our shared vision of conservation embrace collaboration, inclusivity, and deep respect—fostering a partnership where humanity and nature coexist and thrive together. Only through such unity can we safeguard the extraordinary layers of life that enrich our planet, ensuring heritage remains vibrant, resilient, and flourishing for future generations.

"An intricately carved American Indian totem pole from the Pacific Northwest Coast embodies stories of ancestral wisdom, ecological harmony, and cultural resilience—serving as a poignant symbol that effective conservation thrives when it honors and integrates indigenous relationships with nature rather than excludes them."



Culture



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Heritage
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*Through the people
who live them*

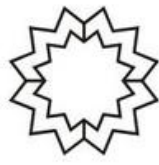


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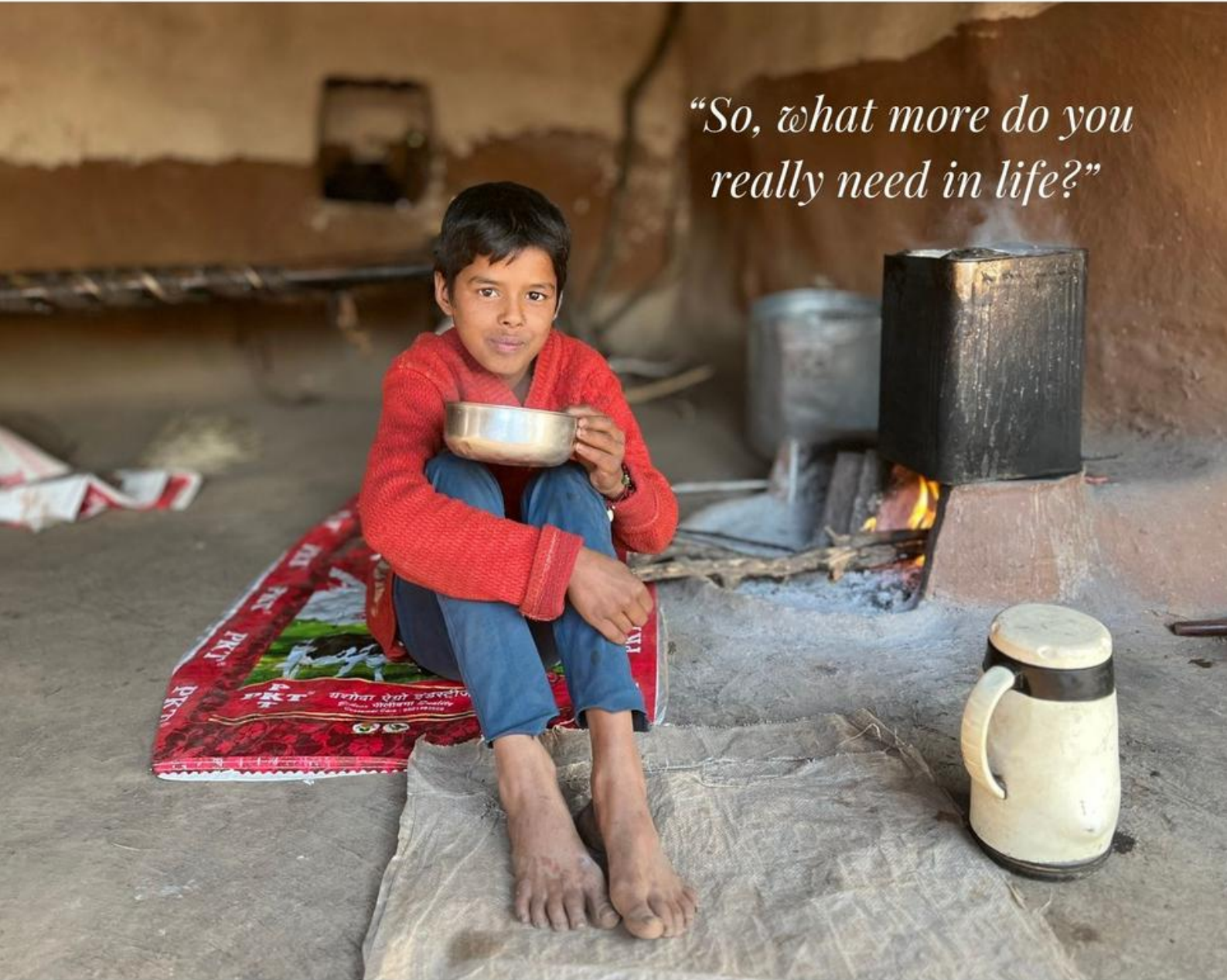


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*“So, what more do you
really need in life?”*



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