

## On Native Ground

by Wade Davis, Conde Nast, December 2008



Halepotra, Pemón, Akha, Makuleke...the names of these ancient peoples are unfamiliar to our ears, but their remarkable lives and cultures help us to grasp humanity's full potential. Renowned anthropologist Wade Davis spoke with Conde Nast Traveler about the riches embodied in even the most remote societies—and how many of them are putting out the welcome mat

Some people have asked, "Why does it matter to me in Chicago if some tribe in Africa disappears?" My answer is that it probably doesn't matter to you at all in Chicago if a tribe in Africa disappears. And what does it matter to a tribe in Africa if Chicago disappears? Again, not at all. But wouldn't the world be a weaker, more impoverished place were either of those to occur? Diversity is not just a foundation of stability; it is an article of faith, and it is a fundamental indicator of the way the world is supposed to be.

The dominant culture—whether it is Aztec or Greek or, today, American—always believes that it exists outside of culture, outside of history. It doesn't perceive itself as a culture; it is just the real world. We don't see our development paradigm of globalization as being what it is—simply one form of economic activity emanating from one part of the world that happens to have been very successful. We see it as the wave of history. If you don't get on that wave, you are going to miss out. The truth is, our economy is but a reflection of our culture, and our culture is but one of several thousand options. The choices that cultures make have consequences, and our choices have, by any definition, ridden roughshod over the planet.

We have this conceit in the West that while we've been busy with technological innovation, the other peoples of the world have somehow been intellectually idle. Nothing could be further from the truth. What is science but the pursuit of the truth? What is Buddhism but 2,500 years of empirical observation as to the nature of mind? The Buddhists would say that the proof of the efficacy of their science is the serenity achieved by those who pursue the path. A Tibetan monk once told me, "We don't believe that you went to the moon, but you did. You may not believe that we achieve enlightenment in one lifetime, but we do."

Other cultures are not failed attempts at being us. They are unique manifestations of the human imagination and the human heart. When asked the meaning of being human, they respond with six thousand distinct voices, and those voices collectively become the human repertoire for dealing with the challenges that will confront us as a species. The modern industrial society as we know it is three hundred years old. That shallow history shouldn't suggest that we have all the answers for the ensuing millennia.

Yet in the same way that biologists are concerned with a loss of biodiversity, so too in the realm of culture we are seeing a collapse of diversity that is truly astonishing. The most apocalyptic scenario in the realm of biological diversity scarcely approaches what we know to be the most optimistic scenario

in the realm of cultural diversity—and a great indicator of that is language loss. A language is not just a grammar and a vocabulary. It is a flash of the human spirit, the soul of a culture, the old-growth forest of the mind. Of the six thousand languages living on the earth, half are not being taught to children. That means we are living through a time when fully half of humanity's social, spiritual, ecological knowledge is being lost in a generation. This is the hidden backdrop of our age.

But why is the loss of culture so important? What does it mean that every culture is a unique facet of the human imagination? Biologists have finally proven what philosophers have always dreamed to be true: We are all relatives. If you accept that we are all cut from the same genetic cloth, then all human populations share the same potential, the same raw intellectual genius. Whether a culture realizes this potential through technological wizardry, as has been the great success of the West, or through unraveling the complex threads of memory inherent in a myth is simply a matter of choice and cultural orientation. There is no trajectory of progress in human affairs. The old Victorian idea that there was a social Darwinian ladder to success that invariably placed us at the apex of the pyramid is now seen as ethnocentric myopia.

We have this notion that indigenous people, quaint and colorful though they may be, are nevertheless frail and fragile, somehow destined to fade away as if by natural law—the implication being that they are failed attempts at being modern, at keeping up. The truth is that these are dynamic, living peoples being driven out of existence by identifiable forces: disease pathogens, egregious industrial decisions or well-intentioned but ill-conceived development schemes, or ideological conflicts. But the bottom line is that in every case we can identify a concrete and specific cause of the humanitarian crisis. This is an optimistic observation, for it suggests that if human beings are the agents of cultural destruction, we can also be the facilitators of cultural survival.

Ecotourism can be corrosive, to be sure, but it can also be profoundly empowering. If one approaches another culture with a reflexive air of superiority, overt or implicit, the impact is invariably detrimental. But if you encounter another people on their terms, open to the reality that their knowledge is as deep as your own, their insights as precise, their hopes and prayers as profound, then magic happens. I learned this as a young student of plants in the Amazon. Though trained at one of the finest universities, I went to the forest as an acolyte, knowing full well that the shaman were the masters of the botanical realm and that nothing I had learned at Harvard could compare with what they had learned in the forest.

The suggestion that none of these other peoples have meaningful contributions to make, that they are only there to entertain us or to bemuse us or to be collected, as we would collect a postcard or an experience, is just wrong. You can go to Hawaii, into the most remote part of that archipelago, and still embrace it as some post-Don Ho fantasy. Or you can do some reading and try to understand what Polynesia was—the greatest culture sphere ever brought into being by the human imagination, tens of thousands of islands flung like jewels across the southern seas.

For years, the genius of the Polynesians was denied by Western academics. That they had inhabited ten million square miles of the planet—from Hawaii to New Zealand, Samoa to Easter Island, and beyond—was a historical fact. But academics maintained that the diaspora had been accidental, a consequence of serendipitous diffusion, as if fishermen went out looking for tuna and caught islands instead. In truth, these were the greatest navigators in human history. James Cook wrote of Polynesian vessels that could do three leagues for every two leagues he could do in his mother ship. He spoke with navigators who could place pebbles in the sand accurately representing every island group in the Pacific. He found men in Tahiti who could understand the people from the Marquesas.

Even today, the navigators of Polynesia can name 250 stars in the night sky. These are sailors who

can sense the presence of a distant group of islands beyond the horizon simply by watching the reverberation of waves across the hull of their vessels. These are men and women who, in the hulls of their sacred canoes, can identify a dozen distinct wave patterns, distinguishing waves caused by local weather systems from the great currents that pulsate across the ocean and can be followed with the same ease that a terrestrial explorer can follow a river to the sea. Indeed, if you took all the genius that allowed us to put a man on the moon and applied it to understanding the ocean, what you get is Polynesia.

Culture is not trivial. It is not decorative, it is not feathers and bells. It is not even the songs we sing or the prayers we utter, all of which are symbols of our culture. Culture is a body of ethical and moral values wrapped around each individual that keeps at bay the barbaric heart which history teaches us lies just beneath the surface of every human being. It is culture that allows us to make sense out of sensation, to find order and meaning in a universe which has none. It is culture that allows us as individuals to reach always, as Lincoln said, for the better angels of our nature.

As cultural roots wither, individuals often remain shadows of their former selves, caught in time, unable to return to the past yet denied any real possibility of securing a place in the world whose values they may seek to emulate and whose wealth they long to acquire. The fate of the vast majority who sever their ties with their traditions will not be to attain the prosperity of the West but to join the legions of urban poor, trapped in squalor, struggling to survive. This is a very dangerous and explosive situation. Anthropology teaches that when people and cultures are squeezed, extreme ideologies sometimes emerge, inspired by strange and unexpected beliefs. Al Qaeda, the Maoists in Nepal, the Shining Path in Peru, the Khmer Rouge of Pol Pot—all these malevolent groups emerged out of chaotic conditions of cultural disintegration and disenfranchisement. So the plight of indigenous peoples' cultural survival is not only a matter of human rights but also of geo-political stability.

This is not to suggest that cultures should be reduced to zoological specimens in a rain forest park of the mind. Change is the one constant. All peoples are always dancing with new possibilities for life. Neither change nor technology is a threat to culture. The Lakota Sioux didn't stop being Sioux when they gave up the bow and arrow for the rifle any more than American farmers stopped being farmers when they gave up the horse and plow for the tractor.

No one should be denied the brilliance of modernity. If I rip my arm off in a car accident, I don't want to be taken to an herbalist, and nor does anyone else. Our goal should not be to freeze cultures in time but to find ways to allow all peoples to engage in the brilliance of modernity without that engagement demanding the death of their ethnicity.

The question is to figure out how free people can choose the components of their lives in a truly multicultural, pluralistic world. I recently visited the polar Eskimo in northern Greenland. They live in wonderful houses imported from Denmark. They have DVDs, TVs, cell phones, a fine health clinic, a fully stocked co-op store, and a community hall where elders gather. What they don't have are snowmobiles. They continue to hunt and travel by dog team, with at least ten dogs for every person. They saw what happened when the Inuit of the Canadian Arctic became dependent on machines, and they recognized that maintaining their dogs was a cultural pivot. Even though you can get to your hunting area faster on a snowmobile, once you're there, you're severely limited by the need for oil, gasoline, and so on; and the whole idea of free-form movement over sacred geography, over the landscape of your tradition, is impossible. On a deeper level, the very act of keeping the dogs alive and trained demands skills that root people in their tradition in a very powerful way. The people have their language, which is taught in school; they have their dogs; the men are still hunters. The culture has changed, but it hasn't been transformed.

Tourism, one of the largest sectors of the global economy, can be a tremendous force for good, and if done with respect it sends a strong message. Because visitors are prepared to pay, they are essentially saying, This stuff matters, this counts. People in whatever culture measure the legitimacy of an institution at some level by economic values. A technique that doesn't produce food in the forest will be dropped; a technique that does will be picked up. Compared with the threats implied by, for instance, the unconstrained extraction of oil or egregious industrial logging, ecotourism is benign. One example is the Cofán, an extraordinarily isolated tribe that had the misfortune to live on top of what became Ecuador's oil supply. When I was there in 1974, Lago Agrio looked pretty dreary—an exploding whorehouse town, oil pipelines, roads across the Andes, colonists pouring in, a government not just insensitive but completely dismissive of anything indigenous. Traditionally, the chief in the Cofán community was a shaman, because the only threat was from forces of the metaphysical realm. When oil was found, suddenly the forces were very real, very concrete. So the Cofán selected Randy Borman as their chief. The son of missionaries, Randy grew up Cofán, spoke the language as his mother tongue, and lived in the community. He was not only thought of as a brother but was equipped to go up to Quito, to speak English, to speak Spanish. He began a political process to secure Cofán land and started an ecotourism operation that the Cofán controlled one hundred percent. People would fly in to learn about Cofán culture: How do the people make curare? What is the nature of their medicinal botany? What are their stories and myths? What is the nature of their social relations?

When you visit another culture, try to reach beyond the mere exoticism. If you sit and talk with a child in Peru, for example, who believes that the mountain is a deity, an Apu spirit that will direct his destiny, consider for a moment what he is really saying. Think about what that really means, and how different that is from being raised in America and believing that a mountain is just a pile of rocks. Now, forget who's right. After all, who is to say? The interesting observation is how the belief system changes with the relationship to the land.

I was raised in British Columbia to believe that the vast temperate rain forests existed to be cut. That was the foundation of the ideology of scientific forestry that I was taught in school and that I practiced as a logger in the woods. It made me totally different from my friends among the Kwakiutl, who believed that those same forests were the abode of the Crooked Beak of Heaven and the cannibal spirits who dwell at the north end of the world, spirits that young men had to confront during the Hamatsa initiation. Was that forest mere cellulose or was it the domain of the spirits? Those who believed the latter had lived with a very light ecological footprint for several thousand years. My worldview had laid waste to the landscape in less than two generations.

In Australia, people frequently travel to Uluru, or Ayers Rock. They have heard that it is sacred and invariably are impressed by its scale and beauty. Perhaps they buy some Aboriginal art or music, spend a little time with an Aboriginal tour guide. They've had a cultural experience of a sort. But if they had a chance to go to a deeper reality, they might understand what the Aboriginal worldview teaches us about the very nature of existence.

When the British first arrived on the shores of Australia, they encountered a people with a rudimentary material culture, with no knowledge of ceramics or agriculture—an entire island continent where nobody had ever attempted, or so it appeared, to improve upon their lot. The British, by contrast, had made a cult of progress. Everything about the Aboriginal people offended them.

The British, of course, had no way of appreciating the subtlety of the Aboriginal mind, which exists in two parallel universes—the phenomenalist realm and the world of the Dreaming. These were and remain a people with no notion of linear time. Theirs is one of the great experiments in human thought. Whereas the entire ethos of the British was the pursuit of change, the essence of the Aboriginal civilization was the notion that the world exists as a perfect whole, and that the singular duty of human-

ity is to maintain the land, through ritual activity, precisely as it existed when the Rainbow Serpent embarked on the journey of creation. The Logos of the Dreaming was constancy, balance, symmetry. In the moment, there is deductive reasoning—on a hunt, for instance, when the men pay attention to signs with a perspicacity that would put Sherlock Holmes to shame. But in life there is only the Dreaming, in which every thought, every plant and animal, is inextricably linked as a single impulse, the inspiration of the first dawning. Had humanity followed this track in the human imagination, it is true that we would never have put a man on the moon. But we would certainly not be speaking of our capacity to compromise the life supports of the planet. I have never in all my travels been so moved by a vision of another possibility, born 55,000 years ago.

Being a responsible traveler implies being informed, and this requires effort. If you are joining a tour group, find out the operator's history, who works for them, what kind of efforts they've made to pay back the communities in which they are active, what kind of partnerships they have with those communities. How is the local community engaged, how many benefit, and how is revenue shared? How do they choose their guides and other employees? Hospitality is a universal cultural impulse. In almost every case, indigenous societies throughout the world already have structures in place to welcome visitors. There's really no excuse anymore for not dealing directly with the leadership of these communities and facilitating the economic exchange with them.

And stay away from ecotourism operations that flaunt their ability to bring you to the most remote, least contacted of tribal societies. Those who make such promises are most likely distorting the truth or—if the people truly are isolated—acting irresponsibly. A trip based on such a premise is ethnographic voyeurism. Moral and ethical issues aside, assume for a moment that an operator could deliver such an encounter. What possible dialogue could ensue in the moment? None at all. All a traveler could do is gawk, and in this there is something obscene. The more valid and rewarding experience is to go where the balance between your authority and economic charisma is matched by the authority and charisma of the other. Then a real dialogue is possible.

It's exciting to go to places where, in spite of all the ravages of the twentieth century, cultures are still vibrant and alive. You can visit remote parts of Tibet, Nepal, the Andes in Peru. One of my favorite places is Cuzco, the ancient capital of the Inca and the center today of a remarkable pan-Andean culture, informed by both Spanish and pre-Columbian roots. The Quechua language is respected and maintained, spoken by millions; agricultural systems are intact; old forms of labor exchange are thriving; traditional rituals are not only still practiced but are honored by the highest levels of the Peruvian government.

It may sound naive, but when you enter a cross-cultural situation, you are by definition an ambassador for your culture. Decency and pride dictate that we present ourselves well, with respect and integrity. Think of every such cultural encounter as a reciprocal obligation. If you make a promise to return to a village, to send a photograph, keep it. Always leave behind more than you bring away, give more than you take. Whether we travel as tourists, journalists, or academic anthropologists, it is our comparative wealth that allows us to be in these places, to have these life-affirming interactions. This is always a privilege but never a right. The goal of travel is to return transformed. And that's the gift of engagement with another cultural reality.