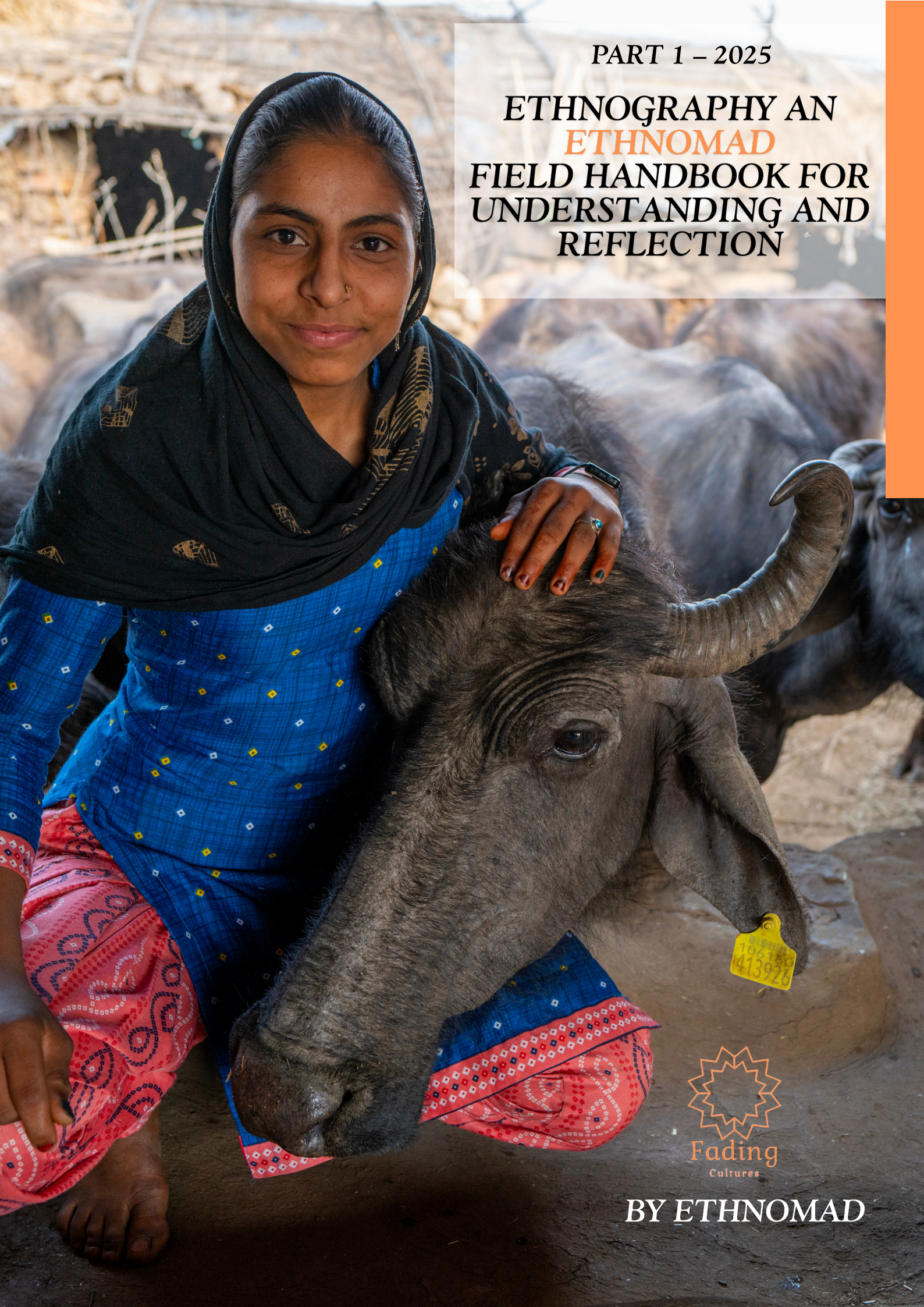


PART 1 – 2025

ETHNOGRAPHY AN ETHNOMAD FIELD HANDBOOK FOR UNDERSTANDING AND REFLECTION

Fading Cultures

BY ETHNOMAD

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide is the first in a practical three-part series created to strengthen the ethnographic and storytelling skills of those working in the field or aspiring to explore ethnography. Whether you are a student of science, culture, health, psychology, anthropology, development, or simply someone navigating everyday life, we all gain when we strive to understand ourselves and the ways of life of others more deeply.

Over the decades, we have worked across humanitarian, development, nature conservation, and cultural heritage contexts, from remote villages to disaster zones and large-scale displacements. In every setting, one truth remains clear: to plan, assist, or document responsibly, we must make time to go deeper. Even in the most urgent circumstances, a meaningful engagement of the senses is essential. We cannot truly support a community, meet its needs, or tell its story without understanding who its people are, how they live, and what matters to them.

This guide offers an introduction filled with key points to challenge your thinking. It combines practical tools and field-tested exercises to sharpen your eye, tune your ear, and help you build habits of attentiveness, respect, and reflection. These are the foundations of good ethnographic storytelling, not just for publication, but for becoming a better ally, researcher, and human being.

THE AUTHORS

Dr. Tom Corcoran is a Conservation Ethnographer, Humanitarian, and National Geographic Global Explorer devoted to preserving fading traditions and celebrating the resilience of communities living close to nature. Born in Ireland and raised in Australia, Tom's lifelong work bridges cultural heritage, traditional knowledge, and community-based conservation.

For over four decades, he has walked alongside communities across Indonesia, Pakistan, Afghanistan, India, Madagascar, Haiti, North Africa, and more, restoring heritage sites, supporting traditional livelihoods, and honouring the artistry and wisdom of people living in harmony with the land. Founder of ETHNOMAD and the Fading Cultures Project, Tom brings an ethnographer's eye and storyteller's spirit to illuminating voices too often unheard.

Roel Hakemulder is a consultant and advisor in inclusive private sector development, with over three decades of experience supporting communities and institutions in post-conflict recovery, market systems development, and pro-poor economic growth. Trained as a social anthropologist, Roel brings an ethnographer's sensitivity to context, culture, and lived experience to his work, whether advising on local economic development, gender equity, or social sustainability.

From post-war Cambodia to Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Nigeria, Tanzania and the Balkans, Roel has worked at the intersection of strategy, field practice, and policy. As lead author of the ILO's revised value chain and market systems development manual and a contributor to global good practice in enterprise development, he champions approaches that honour both economic and environmental resilience and the social fabric of communities.

STORIES AND TOOLS WITHIN

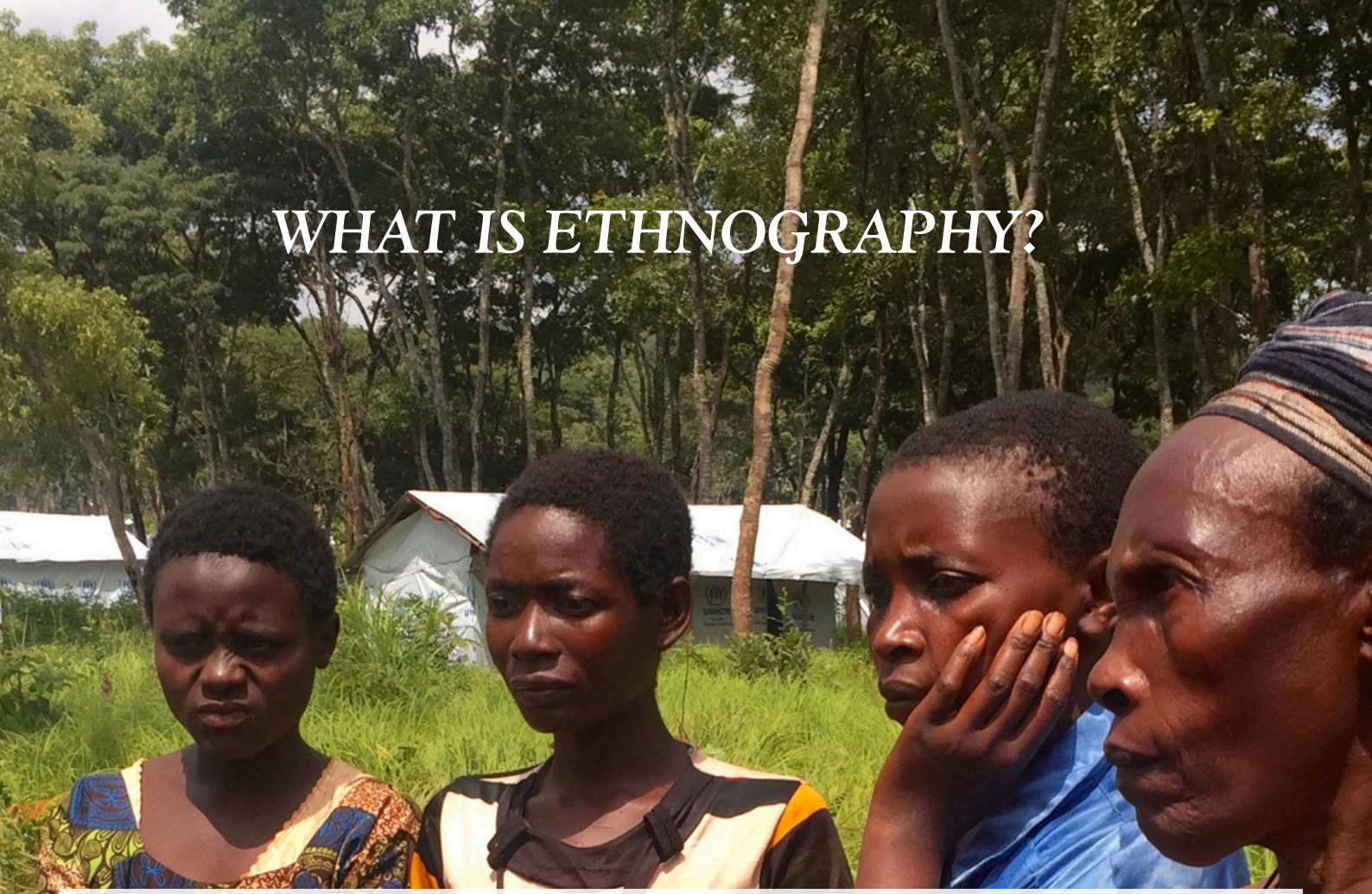
Whether observing a ritual, riding a crowded train, or listening to an old song under desert stars, you are in a moment that may never come again. Learn to see it. Learn to share it. That is where this journey begins.

Part One:

- Ethnography Uncovered: What It Is and Why It Matters
- Questions You May Ask Yourself
- Why Ethnography Matters in a Changing World
- *Observing and Understanding with all the senses*
- Sharpening Your Ethnographic Eye: Practical Exercises for the Field
- Belonging, Meaning, and the Places That Shape Us
- Toward a Decolonising Ethnography
- Photography in ethnography: A brief introduction
- *The Work is Not Done Until It Is Shared: Stories Given, Stories Returned*
- *12 Points for Better Ethnographic Storytelling*
- *Influential Ethnographers, Thinkers and Story-Tellers*

In Parts Two and Three,

- Analysis: What does the Data Say and to Whom?
- Through the Lens: Capturing Stories with Photography
- The Gatekeeper: Access, Power, and Permission
- The Value of Trust: Building Meaningful Connections
- Eco-Criticism & Grey Literature: Reading Between the Lines of Place
- Oral Traditions: Listening to the Voices, Dancing the Dances, and Exploring the Rituals That Carry Culture
- Gender: Seeing Beyond the Surface
- Ethics and Bias: Navigating the Researcher's Blind Spots
- Cultural Appropriation: Respect, Context, and Boundaries
- *AND MORE ...*



WHAT IS ETHNOGRAPHY?

Ethnography is the art and science of understanding human cultures through immersive, long-term observation and engagement. It is a research methodology with methods and a way of seeing the world, grounded in empathy, curiosity, and critical thinking. Ethnographers spend time with communities, often living among them, listening closely, observing rituals and everyday life, and recording stories, customs, language, and beliefs.

It is not just about gathering information; it is about building relationships, asking good questions, and interpreting what we see and hear with humility and respect.

Ethnography is best understood as a methodology, a research strategy grounded in immersive engagement, that employs various qualitative methods to explore culture and lived experience.

"Ethnography asks us to observe with our hearts as much as our minds."

KEY QUESTIONS IN ETHNOGRAPHY

Is ethnography about them or about us?

It is about both. Traditional ethnography focused on the *"other,"* but modern ethnography reflects on the role of the researcher and the power dynamics in knowledge production.

"You are part of the story."

Is ethnography a science or a literary form?

It is both. Ethnography uses systematic methods to collect data, but it also requires storytelling, interpretation, and creative writing to capture the essence of human experience.

Is ethnography fact or fiction

It lives between the two. Ethnography is grounded in real encounters but is always a selective, interpretive, and partial account. It is accountable truth-telling, not objective reportage. Like myth, ethnography seeks meaning more than measurement. Myths are not lies; they are profound cultural truths encoded in stories. Ethnography, too, translates lived experience into narrative. It listens for the sacred in the ordinary, the symbolic in the everyday. Both myth and ethnography remind us that what is most true is not always what can be proven, but what is believed, lived, and passed on.

Is ethnography the same now as it was in the days of Malinowski or Mead?

No. Ethnography today is more reflexive, collaborative, and ethical. It has moved away from colonial models and seeks to amplify community voices rather than speak for them.

Photograph: *Early Conversations in Crisis, Qala-e-Naw, 2018*
Inside a heat-struck UNHCR tent on the edge of Qala-e-Naw, community leaders from Northern Afghanistan shared the first testimonies of a drought that would go on to displace over 250,000 people. They spoke of failed snowfall, dying livestock, empty wells, and the silent departure of young men in search of work, first to the south, then across the border to Iran and beyond. Though the rains had recently returned, they arrived with destructive force, triggering landslides and worsening conditions. Aid agencies misread these rains as a sign of recovery; yet, on the ground, the communities told of how rains deepened the devastation of the drought.

This photograph marks one of the earliest ethnographic encounters of the crisis. As part of our approach, we sat quietly, listened deeply, and asked questions with care, not just to gather facts, but to understand rhythms of loss, resilience, and memory. Ethnography, here, is not just about extracting data. It is about entering into a space of shared understanding and reflection. These early stories allowed us to detect the unfolding emergency long before it reached formal recognition, underscoring the essential role of human insight in any meaningful response to displacement and environmental breakdown.

WHY ETHNOGRAPHY MATTERS IN DEVELOPMENT AND HUMANITARIAN WORK

Ethnography brings depth, context, and humanity to development and aid work. Here is why:

- It reveals what data alone can not: Numbers tell you that a child missed school; ethnography tells you why.
- It challenges assumptions: It disrupts cookie-cutter solutions by showing cultural complexity.
- It amplifies marginalised voices: It centres on those who are too often ignored in decision-making.
- It builds trust: Relationships and long-term presence lead to more effective and sustainable projects.
- It ensures accountability: Reflexivity helps field workers recognise their own biases and institutional blind spots.

FIELD REFLECTION – MADAGASCAR

In the forests of northern Madagascar, I sat with a farmer in a simple bamboo hut as he and his children paused their work to eat a meal of rice. We talked about his small plot of land, the declining vanilla market, the increased pressure from conservation agencies to move him out of the forest and his efforts to grow enough food for him and his family to survive. During the discussion, he told me something that stayed with me:

“Last year, a researcher came here and told me I was' poor.” He explained what it meant to be poor. Before that, I hadn’t thought of myself that way. Now I think about that a lot of the time.”

Field notes, Makira Protected Forest 2009

That moment said more than any report could. Ethnography helps us understand not just economics, but identity, how people come to see themselves, and how our language, categories, and influence shape the world of those around us.

ETHNOGRAPHIC WORK IN THE FIELD: KEY PRACTICES

- Be Present: Spend time. Be curious. Listen more than you speak. Get involved and learn through the senses.
- Use All Your Senses: Ethnography is not only about seeing; it is also about listening carefully, noticing sounds and space, and paying attention to gestures, rhythms, textures, and emotional tone. When you engage with all your senses, you do not just observe life; you begin to feel it. This deeper attentiveness helps you understand how people move through the world, how culture is lived, and how meaning is made.
- Keep a Field Journal. Record not only what you see but also how it makes you feel and what questions it raises.
- Use Thick Description: Capture sensory details, sights, sounds, smells, or touch as you create. Context matters.
- Practice Reflexivity: Question your own role, background, and assumptions.
- Gain Consent: Always ask permission before taking photos, videos, or publishing stories.
- Build Trust: Relationships are your most valuable data.
- Observe Ethics: Be transparent. Protect anonymity when needed. Respect cultural norms.
- Stay Open: Do not begin with conclusions. Let meaning emerge through observation and the research process.

ETHNOMAD Ethnographer, Emily Anna Mavridou, discuss's unification and segregation in an ongoing quest to understand her homeland of Cyprus.

OBSERVING AND UNDERSTANDING: WITH ALL THE SENSES

Understanding the forest through Minangkabau stories with conservationist, Mat Gilies

Rohingya Women's group, discussing shelter, displacement and the lived experience, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh.

Culture of the forest, learing stories of the Hari Mau (Tiger) and Silat a traditional art of movement.

Our work as ethnographers depends not only on what we observe, but how we observe, and even more deeply, on how we understand what we see. Modern neuroscience, particularly the work of Iain McGilchrist, reminds us that observation is never passive. The observer and the observed are not separate. We shape the world through our attention, just as the world shapes us in return.

McGilchrist's work on the left and right hemispheres of the brain offers a compelling metaphor, more than a metaphor, for our ethnographic approach. The left hemisphere, he explains, seeks clarity, categorisation, and control. It breaks things down into parts, labels them, and tries to fix meaning. The right hemisphere, by contrast, takes in the whole. It engages with ambiguity, relationship, and context. It is the hemisphere of nuance, empathy, metaphor, and lived experience. Both are essential. But when the left dominates, we risk losing the very reality we came to understand.

Mohammad Noor: Community leader, Stories of Statelessness Karachi, Pakistan

Mapping the foreest of Sumatra with Ramly and Amek. Logging to Tourism, ETNOMAD with National Geographic.

Gurjar tribal stories of conservation and displacement, Sariska Tiger Reserve, India

In ethnography, we must learn to see fully, to notice patterns, collect data, and define practices, as well as to listen with care, sense what is not said, and understand people within the full ecology of their lives. The world is not made of isolated facts. It is made of meaning, relationships, and stories. These cannot be reduced to numbers without losing their soul.

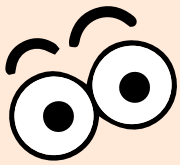
When we enter a village, a marketplace, or a refugee camp, we bring with us our histories, biases, and expectations. Attention is not neutral. It brings things into being. The way we attend, whether with openness or judgment, curiosity or categorisation, affects what emerges.

Ethnographic observation is a discipline of humility. We do not observe from above but from beside. We walk slowly. We listen fully. We allow ourselves to be shaped by place, silence, and surprise. We are not extracting truth but entering into a relationship with it.

To truly understand a community is not to master it, but to dwell in its reality long enough for it to change you.

EXERCISES TO HONE YOUR ETHNOGRAPHIC SKILLS

Ethnography is not just about what you see; it is about how you see. Writing is not just about what you know; it is about how you share what you have come to understand. Both require practice. These exercises are designed to help you slow down, observe deeply, and build the habits that make good ethnographic storytellers. Whether a student, researcher, or simply curious about culture and people, each task invites you to sharpen your attention, listen with humility, and translate experience into a meaningful narrative. Like any craft, storytelling improves with use, so begin here and keep going.



1. The One-Hour Field Note
Objective: Practice observation and descriptive writing.
Task: Sit quietly in a public or semi-public space (a market, schoolyard, community hall, temple, etc.) for one hour. Write down everything you notice: sounds, smells, body language, routines, clothing, textures, snippets of conversation.
Output: A 500-word descriptive passage (no analysis yet).
Rule: Do not interpret, just notice.

2. A Story in a Single Object
Objective: Understand the cultural value embedded in objects.
Task: Choose a single object used daily by someone in your family or community (e.g., cooking utensil, piece of clothing, tool, musical instrument). Interview the person who uses it.
Output: A short article (300–500 words) that tells the story
The object: its history, emotional connection, how it's made, and what it reveals about the person or community.

3. Quote and Context

Objective: Centre other people's voices in your writing.
Task: Interview someone about a tradition, celebration, or belief. Write a short story using at least one direct quote. Build the story around what they say, not what you think.
Output: A 400–600 word story titled with the quote itself (*e.g., "This Song Is Not Just Music to me"*).

4. The Memory Map

Objective: Explore memory and spatial storytelling.
Task: Ask someone to draw a map of a meaningful place from memory, e.g., their childhood village, a festival site, or a family home. As they draw, ask them to explain what happened in different locations.
Output: A photo or scanned image of the map and a 300-word narrative stitched together from their memories.

5. Soundscape

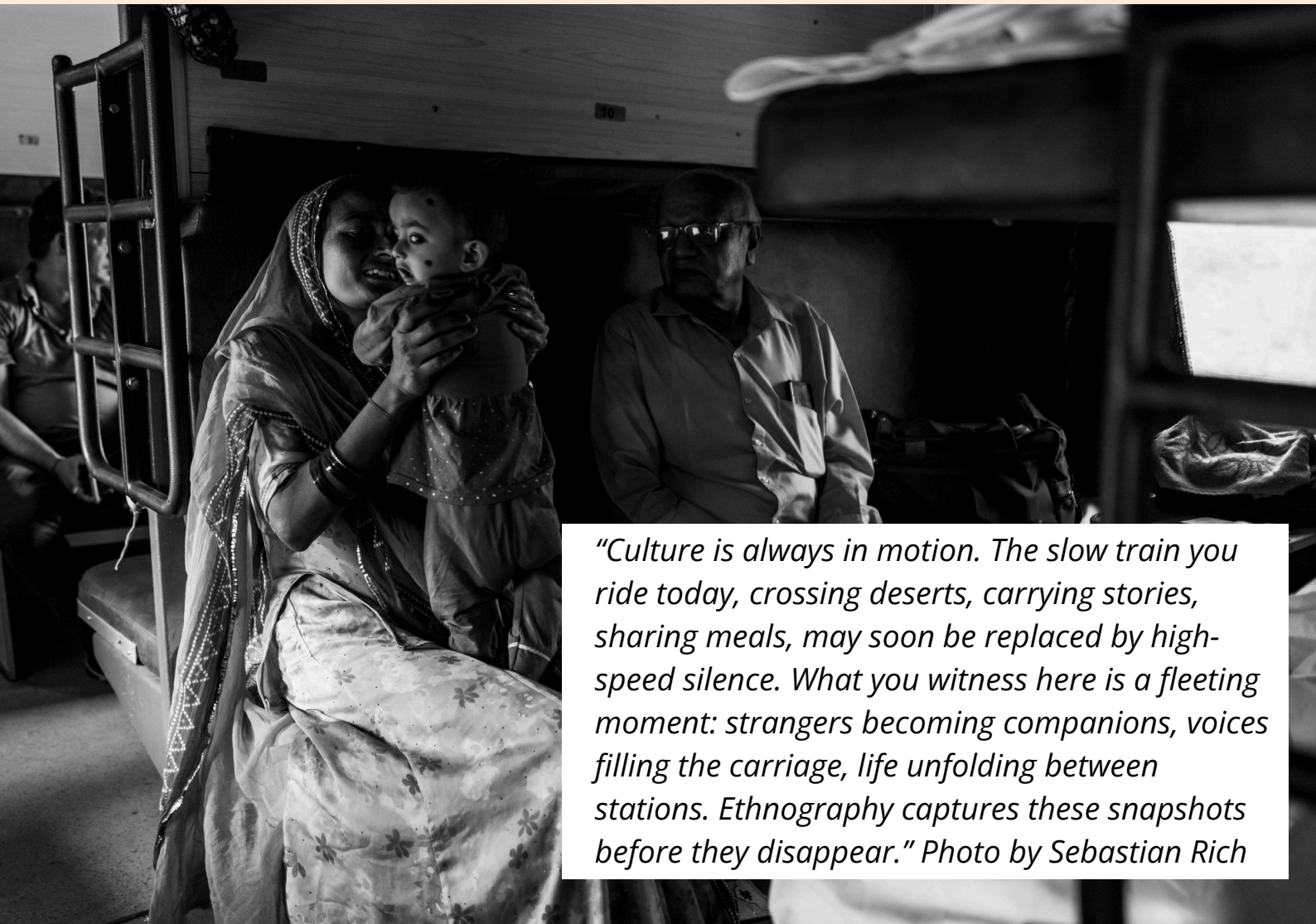
Objective: Deepen sensory ethnography and creative description.
Task: Record 2–3 minutes of natural sound from a coffee shop, train station, kitchen, or classroom. Do not film or take photos; just listen.
Output: Write a 300-word narrative describing the space, the people, and the activity, using only what you hear to guide your imagination.

6. From Ritual to Rhythm

Objective: Connect daily routines to cultural meaning.
Task: Observe or ask about a daily ritual (tea-making, hair braiding, morning prayers or an offering). Research its origin and meaning in the community.
Output: A short piece blends storytelling and interpretation, showing how small actions carry big cultural weight.

7. Rewrite Without You
Objective: Remove ego and focus on others.
Task: Take a personal travel journal entry or blog post and rewrite it without using the word "I" or referring to yourself. Let the people, place, or practice become the centre of the story.
Output: A reframed story that shifts perspective from self to subject.

8. Map the Social Ties
Objective: Visualise how relationships shape a community.
Task: Choose a community (e.g. a village, workplace, or friend group). Draw a simple map showing people and their connections. Use lines or symbols to show the nature of each relationship, support, tension, influence, trust, etc.
Output: A map and short reflection on what patterns emerge. Who connects others? Where is power held? What relationships are strong, hidden, or strained? A quick tool for seeing beyond surface dynamics.



"Culture is always in motion. The slow train you ride today, crossing deserts, carrying stories, sharing meals, may soon be replaced by high-speed silence. What you witness here is a fleeting moment: strangers becoming companions, voices filling the carriage, life unfolding between stations. Ethnography captures these snapshots before they disappear." Photo by Sebastian Rich

BELONGING, MEANING, AND THE PLACES THAT SHAPE US

In the growing field of cognitive science and cultural psychology, a recurring truth emerges: humans are not just thinkers; we are meaning-makers. This process of meaning-making, so essential to human flourishing, is deeply tied to place, belonging, and identity. Ethnography, at its heart, is about paying attention to these relationships, where people come from, where they are going, and how they understand their place in the world.

Cognitive scientist John Vervaeke, in his work on the *"meaning crisis,"* argues that modern society has lost many of its structures, rituals, myths, deep community, and shared cosmology, which once helped us navigate the world. He says,

"we suffer not just from a lack of information but also from a disconnection from relevance. People are overwhelmed not because they know too little but because what they know, no longer feels tied to who they are or what matters."

This is a crisis of meaning, and it is felt most acutely in the loss of community, tradition, and spiritual grounding.

Vervaeke calls for a return to practices that restore *"connected knowing"* ways of seeing and being that integrate the body, the mind, the place, and the other. For ethnographers, this reinforces the importance of embodied, place-based research. To understand people, we must understand the worlds they inhabit, not just their geography, but their cultural maps, spiritual narratives, and relationships that give shape to life.

WE NEED TO LEARN THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN, INFORMATION, KNOWLEDGE, AND WISDOM.

Psychologist Kelly-Ann Allen has similarly shown that belonging is not just an emotional need; it is a psychological foundation for resilience, motivation, and well-being. Her research in educational and social contexts reveals that a sense of belonging, feeling accepted, valued, and connected, is one of the strongest predictors of personal and collective thriving. Without it, disorientation grows. With it, people feel empowered, anchored, and hopeful.

In today's world, the erosion of place and the weakening of social bonds are contributing to a global crisis of disconnection. Climate change, forced migration, cultural homogenisation, and rapid urbanisation are displacing not just people, but ways of being. In this context, the ethnographer's task is not just to document fading practices, but to trace the threads of meaning that still hold people together.

Belonging is more than proximity. It is about recognition, participation, and continuity, the sense that who we are is shaped by where we are from and by those we walk alongside.

In our fieldwork, we must ask:

- How do people describe their sense of belonging?
- What rituals, spaces, or relationships help maintain it?
- What happens when belonging is disrupted?
- How are people reimagining belonging in the face of displacement, urbanisation, or loss?

To do this is not just to record data, it is to witness the sacred architecture of human meaning.

TOWARD A DECOLONISING ETHNOGRAPHY

Traditional ethnography often silenced the very people it studied. Today, we aim to decolonise this process, not only by giving voice to tribal, traditional and Indigenous perspectives, but by honouring the experiences of communities, ethnic minorities, displaced populations, and other marginalised voices. Decolonising ethnography means co-creating knowledge, questioning who gets to speak and who is heard, and committing to practices that respect autonomy, lived experience, and local systems of understanding. It invites us to examine our own power and presence in the field, and to seek partnership rather than authority.

PHOTOGRAPHY IN ETHNOGRAPHY

In Part Two, we will explore Photography within Audio-visual techniques through the lens of ethnographic research and technical practice.

Photography as Documentation

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, photography in ethnography was largely seen as a scientific tool, a way to “objectively” document the physical appearance, rituals, tools, and settings of so-called "exotic" peoples. This often reflected colonial attitudes and power imbalances. The subjects were rarely named, consulted, or even aware of how their image would be used.

Contemporary Ethnography: Photography as Collaboration and Storytelling

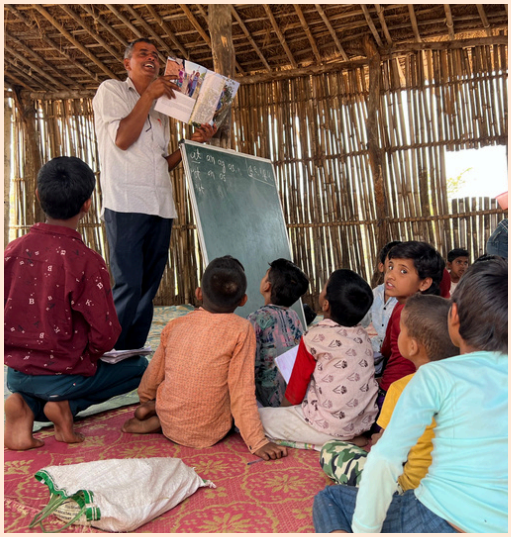
Today, the use of photography is far more reflexive and collaborative. Visual ethnographers like Sarah Pink, Marcus Banks, and Elizabeth Edwards have written extensively about how photography is not just representational, but relational. It can open dialogue, foster co-creation of knowledge, and allow for storytelling in contexts where literacy may not be central. Photography is now often used in photo elicitation interviews, participant-led photography (e.g. Photovoice), and collaborative projects where communities themselves control the lens.

Key Ideas in Visual Ethnography:

- Photography as a cultural product: Images carry cultural meanings and are interpreted differently depending on context.
- The power of the lens: Who holds the camera matters. Representation can reinforce stereotypes or challenge them.
- Photographs as fieldnotes: Images can capture sensory, spatial, and emotional dimensions of a field site that are hard to write down.
- Images as testimony: A photograph can function like a quote; it holds memory, emotion, and perspective.
- Sharing back: Visual material is increasingly seen as something that must be returned to the community, much like oral histories or research reports.

THE WORK IS NOT DONE UNTIL IT IS SHARED
STORIES GIVEN, STORIES RETURNED

Too often, academic research extracts stories, knowledge, and experiences from communities without ever returning what was taken. As ethnographers, we have an ethical responsibility to give back. The people who share their time, wisdom, and often painful histories do so with trust, and we must honour that trust. This means ensuring that those who contribute their precious stories can access the finished work, in a language and form they can understand and share. It means sitting down and sharing what we've written, asking how it feels, listening again. True ethnography is not a one-way mirror; it is a circle of dialogue, a shared act of remembering and meaning-making. If the community never sees what we say about them, we have not completed the work.



12 POINTS FOR BETTER ETHNOGRAPHIC STORYTELLING

1. Tell, Do not Invent

Ethnographic stories are not made up; they are discovered. They already exist in the world. Your task is to listen, observe, and ***"research"*** deeply enough to make sense of them.

2. Begin with a Hook, Then Build the Story.

Start with an image, emotion, or question that draws the reader in. Build momentum through structure—chronological, thematic, or circular, and end with a moment of reflection or change.

3. Write for Someone Who Knows Nothing

Assume your reader has no prior knowledge of the community, place, or practice. Clarify terms, provide context, and avoid jargon unless explained.

4. Be a Witness, Not the Hero

The story is not about you. Even when you are present, your role is to observe, listen, and translate. Ethnography centres on the lives of others, not the ego of the observer.

5. Let the Voices Be Heard

Use direct quotes. Give people names. Let their emotions, memories, humour, and contradictions come through. Their words carry the heartbeat of the story.

6. Context is Culture

Explain what makes something matter: why a gesture, object, or belief holds meaning. Avoid romanticising or exoticising; instead, offer respectful, informed understanding.

7. Observe the Small Things

Ethnography lives in details: the chipped cup, the embroidered edge, the pause before someone speaks. These fragments carry the spirit of a place.

8. Respect the Collective Effort

Every story involves a team—photographers, translators, local guides, elders, even drivers. Acknowledge them. You are not a lone author, but part of a shared effort.

9. Balance Description and Movement

Do not get lost in static detail. Let the story move. Blend action, dialogue, and reflection to keep the reader travelling alongside you.

10. Avoid Clichés and Overused Tropes

Words like “timeless,” “ancient,” or “exotic” flatten reality. Use precise language. Let the community define itself through its own rhythm and terms.

11. Ethics Over Aesthetics

Get consent, respect boundaries, and clarify how stories and images will be used. A beautiful sentence is meaningless if it misrepresents or exploits.

12. End with Meaning, Not Closure

Ethnographic stories rarely “end.” Instead of forcing resolution, leave your reader with a question, a feeling, or an insight something that lingers.

INFLUENTIAL ETHNOGRAPHERS

Margaret Mead
A pioneer of cultural anthropology, Mead's work focused on youth, gender, and culture. Her book Coming of Age in Samoa remains a foundational ethnographic text exploring adolescence in Polynesian society. She brought anthropology into public discourse and emphasised cultural relativism.

Franz Boas
Known as the "father of American anthropology," Boas rejected racial hierarchies and argued for cultural relativism, the idea that no culture is superior to another. His fieldwork among the Inuit and Native American groups reshaped the discipline, advocating for detailed, empirical ethnographic study.

Koentjaraningrat
Widely regarded as the father of modern Indonesian anthropology, Koentjaraningrat shaped the study of his country's rich cultural diversity. His research on Javanese social structure, kinship, and tradition bridged local and global scholarship, and he played a key role in training generations of Indonesian anthropologists. His work emphasised the importance of documenting and understanding traditional systems amid rapid modernisation.

Michael Jackson
A prolific anthropologist, philosopher, and poet, Jackson blends ethnographic insight with existential reflection. His fieldwork, from Sierra Leone to Aboriginal Australia and the American Midwest, centres on lived experience, human agency, and the intersubjective nature of relationships. In works like Paths Toward a Clearing and The Politics of Storytelling, Jackson explores how stories are central to identity, survival, and the negotiation of meaning in everyday life. His writing offers young ethnographers a profound model of empathy, intellectual depth, and narrative sensitivity, reminding us that ethnography is not just a method, but a mode of being in the world.

Alfred Radcliffe-Brown
A key figure in the development of structural-functionalism, Radcliffe-Brown viewed society as an interconnected system whose parts work together to maintain order and cohesion. His fieldwork in Australia and the Andaman Islands laid the groundwork for analysing kinship and social roles as vital components of cultural systems.

E**dward Evans-Pritchard**
Renowned for his classic ethnographies on the Nuer and Azande of Africa, Evans-Pritchard expanded structural-functionalism while challenging the idea of anthropology as a natural science. His writings emphasised the need to understand social systems from within their logic and cosmology, blending empathy, rigour, and a sharp critique of scientific reductionism.

Oscar Lewis
Oscar Lewis broke new ground by giving voice to the urban poor through ethnography. His seminal work, *The Children of Sánchez,* based in Mexico City, pioneered life histories and direct testimony, co-creating a landmark in anthropology and world literature. His “culture of poverty” thesis sparked wide debate and remains influential in discussions on inequality and representation.

Clifford Geertz
Best known for his influential fieldwork in Indonesia, particularly Java and Bali, Geertz introduced the concept of *“thick description,”* transforming how anthropologists interpret culture. His works, including The Religion of Java and The Interpretation of Cultures, emphasise symbolic systems, meaning-making, and the layered complexity of human societies. Geertz’s writings inspire ethnographers to look beyond surface behaviours to the deeper webs of significance in every culture.

Zora Neale Hurston
A trained anthropologist and celebrated writer, Hurston blended ethnographic fieldwork with literary storytelling. Her work among African American communities in the Southern U.S. offers a powerful model of participatory, community-rooted ethnography.

Key Thinkers on Culture, Belonging, and Biocultural Wisdom: Indigenous Scholars & Knowledge Holders

"The world in which you were born is just one model of reality. Other cultures are not failed attempts at being you; they are unique manifestations of the human spirit."

Wade Davis

Robin Wall Kimmerer – Potawatomi botanist and writer (USA)
Author of Braiding Sweetgrass, Kimmerer blends Indigenous knowledge and scientific ecology in a lyrical, practical, and deeply relational manner. She advocates reciprocity with the natural world and teaches that plants are our oldest teachers.

Gregory Cajete – Tewa scholar of Native science (USA)
An educator and author of Native Science: Natural Laws of Interdependence, Cajete explains Indigenous ways of knowing in ecological, educational, and cosmological terms, showing how Native traditions offer sustainable frameworks.

María Sabina – Mazatec healer and poet (Mexico)
While not an academic, her influence on the cultural understanding of entheogenic plants and traditional healing has been profound. Davis himself has written about her role in preserving sacred mushroom knowledge.

Wade Davis – Ethnobotanist and anthropologist (Canada). Advocate for linguistic and cultural diversity; explores Indigenous wisdom and ecology.

Ailton Krenak – Indigenous leader and philosopher (Brazil). Writes on cosmology, resistance, and Indigenous ecological knowledge.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o – Writer and theorist (Kenya). Champion of Indigenous languages and oral traditions in the decolonisation process.

Linda Tuhiwai Smith – Scholar (Māori, New Zealand). Author of Decolonising Methodologies; reclaims Indigenous research paradigms.

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson – Anishinaabe scholar and storyteller (Canada). Fuses storytelling, land-based practices, and decolonial theory.

Amadou Hampâté Bâ – Historian and ethnographer (Mali). Preserved African oral traditions; known for saying, "When an old man dies, a library burns."

Tyson Yunkaporta – Indigenous scholar and carver (Australia). Author of Sand Talk, presenting Aboriginal knowledge as a cognitive system.

Malidoma Somé – Writer and teacher (Burkina Faso). Blended Dagara traditional wisdom with Western spiritual inquiry.

Philip J. Deloria – Historian and American Indian Studies scholar (USA). Re-examines Native American identity and resistance.

Decolonial & Postcolonial Thinkers

"Epistemologies of the South affirm that all knowledges are situated, and that to know is always to know from somewhere, never from nowhere."

Boaventura de Sousa Santos

Boaventura de Sousa Santos – Sociologist (Portugal/Brazil). Advocates for epistemologies of the South and cognitive justice.

Achille Mbembe – Philosopher and theorist (Cameroon). Explores postcolonial identity, African futures, and the critique of power.

Arturo Escobar – Anthropologist (Colombia). Proposes pluriversal design and alternatives to Western development paradigms.

Bayo Akomolafe – Philosopher and poet (Nigeria). Engages postactivism, storytelling, and Indigenous cosmologies.

Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui – Sociologist and activist (Bolivia). Merges Aymara cosmology and anarchist thought to challenge colonial structures.

Gloria Anzaldúa – Chicana feminist and theorist (USA). Her "borderlands" theory challenges identity binaries and affirms cultural hybridity.

Shahidul Alam – Photographer and activist (Bangladesh). Uses visual media to challenge colonial narratives and elevate majority world voices.

Claudia von Werlhof – Feminist theorist (Austria). Known for ecofeminism and critiques of patriarchal capitalism.

S. N. Balagangadhara – Scholar (India). Rethinks Western interpretations of Indian traditions and cultural systems.

Alpa Shah – Anthropologist (India/UK). Studies inequality and Indigenous insurgency in India; author of Nightmarch.

Claude Lévi-Strauss – Anthropologist (France)
Although controversial, his work on structuralism and myth in Indigenous societies reshaped anthropology.

Marilyn Strathern – Anthropologist (UK, Papua New Guinea)
Her nuanced work on kinship, gender, and personhood—especially among the Melanesians- expanded the field's understanding of relationality outside Western norms.

Eduardo Viveiros de Castro – Anthropologist (Brazil)
He is the creator of the "perspectivism" theory based on Amerindian cosmologies. He argues that Indigenous ontologies challenge the Western nature-culture divide.

Natural Scientists & Ecological Thinkers

"We are drowning in information, while starving for wisdom. The world henceforth will be run by synthesizers, people able to put together the right information at the right time."
E. O. Wilson

E.O. Wilson – Biologist (USA). Coined "biophilia," linking biodiversity and human well-being. Proposed conserving half the planet.

Tim Flannery – Scientist and environmentalist (Australia). Known for climate science and advocating regional ecological action.

Vandana Shiva – Ecofeminist and environmental thinker (India). Defends seed sovereignty, biodiversity, and traditional farming knowledge.

Luisa Maffi – Anthropologist and linguist. Co-founder of Terralingua; pioneer of biocultural diversity.

David Abram – Cultural ecologist (USA). Reclaims embodied ways of knowing; explores animism and perception in The Spell of the Sensuous.

John Reader – Science writer and historian. Connects human evolution with geography and environmental change.

Thomas Malthus – Demographer (UK). Warned of ethical consequences of unchecked growth. (Unabridged books)

Albert Einstein – Physicist and philosopher. Reflected on wonder, science, and the limits of empirical knowledge.

Stephen Jay Gould – Palaeontologist and historian of science. Explored evolution's complexity and critiqued scientism.

Barry Lopez – Nature writer and thinker (USA)
In Arctic Dreams and Horizon, Lopez blends fieldwork, literature, and philosophical reflection, exploring humanity's relationship with land, animals, and Indigenous wisdom. A close thematic ally to Davis.

Sylvia Earle – Marine biologist (USA)
Known as "Her Deepness," Earle is a pioneering voice in ocean conservation and has long advocated for merging ecological science with global stewardship rooted in respect and awe.

Cultural Philosophers & Theorists

"You do not have to be good. You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves."

bell hooks

John Vervaeke – Cognitive scientist and philosopher (Canada). Investigates the meaning crisis and paths to wisdom.

Iain McGilchrist – Psychiatrist and thinker (UK). Proposes right–left brain dynamics as key to understanding modern disconnection.

Mircea Eliade – Historian of religion (Romania). Explored myth, ritual, and sacred space.

Martin Buber – Philosopher (Austria). Developed "I–Thou" philosophy of relational being.

Carl Jung – Psychiatrist (Switzerland). Pioneered archetypes and the collective unconscious.

Simone Weil – Mystic and philosopher (France). Explored attention, justice, and the spiritual need for rootedness.

Ivan Illich – Theologian and social critic (Austria). Criticized modern institutions; advocated for convivial tools.

James Baldwin – Writer and thinker (USA). Explored race, exile, and moral identity in modernity.

bell hooks – Feminist and cultural critic (USA). Advocated for love, healing, and justice in education and community.

Pierre Bourdieu – Sociologist (France). Analysed cultural capital and structural inequality.

Amartya Sen – Economist and philosopher (India). Created the capabilities approach to development and well-being.

Aimé Césaire – Poet and anti-colonial thinker (Martinique)
Founder of the Négritude movement, Césaire critiqued colonialism not just politically, but spiritually and ontologically.

Michel Serres – Philosopher of science and ecology (France)
His writing interweaves mythology, science, and ethics, particularly in The Natural Contract, where he urges a new relationship with Earth grounded in reciprocity.

Yuval Noah Harari – Historian (Israel). Popularised the role of shared myths and narratives in human development.

Kelly-Ann Allen – Psychologist (Australia). Specialises in belonging and its effects on mental health and education.

Eduardo Kohn – Anthropologist (USA/Ecuador). Author of How Forests Think; studies Amazonian cosmology and nonhuman personhood.

Marisol de la Cadena – Anthropologist (Peru). Explores Andean ontologies and political cosmologies in Earth Beings.

Nurit Bird-David – Anthropologist (Israel). Rethinks hunter-gatherer epistemology through relational modes of knowing.

"Culture does not vanish in silence—it fades when no one listens, when no one asks the story behind the song, the meaning behind the mark. To conserve the Earth is to conserve the ways we belong to it."

Tom Corcoran, Ethnographer, Nature and Cultural Heritage Conservationist, CEO ETHNOMAD - Fading Cultures Magazine

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Fading Cultures

Bringing Heritage Stories to Life

Through the people who live them