

Life support

In the name of western-style materialism and so-called progress, a different way of life practised by small tribes across the world is being destroyed. As a consequence, we are all losing critical knowledge about the connection between human existence and nature

WORDS BY *Stephen Corry*

When I was 18, I assumed western civilisation was the pinnacle of human achievement; I was then astonished to discover tribal people who led fulfilling lives without any of the paraphernalia we deem essential. So I decided to work for the world's most vulnerable tribes. After all no one else in the world faces total genocide; no one else stands to lose literally everything. That is surely reason enough to care.

As this vocation took root, so did a question: what are the essential characteristics, if any, of being human? What do we really need and, more importantly, what could we do without? For me this was not an academic, but a personal quest. How could I discover what 'I' was unless I could strip out what was mere conditioning? Luckily, I discovered Survival International, volunteered, and tramped off to Amazonia to see what, if anything, we could usefully do about the tribes' plight.

Both that vocation and my inquiry into the human condition were much exercised over the following decades. Now, through outlining what I have gained from tribal peoples, I contend that we all have a duty to take proper notice of them. Far from being a marginal issue, or anything to do with harking back to a past era, I believe this is one of the most important challenges we face.

The problems experienced by tribal peoples represent the sharpest end of racism. If we can make room for people so very different from ourselves, then surely we will find space for our neighbour who lives much as we do, but is merely another colour. Yet there is something more: by showing us it is possible to live so differently, tribal peoples unlock the secrets common to all humanity. These core values are, I believe, simple and obvious but, like magic tricks, are overlaid with smoke and mirrors to fool those who don't look hard enough.

The biggest trick of all is the idea of 'progress', a belief we have been indoctrinated in. This hocus-pocus asserts that only certain societies are advanced. These 'high' cultures are those most similar to our own (naturally). They make lots of things, including powerful weapons; live in populous towns; erect permanent, large buildings; are (usually) literate with written laws and so forth; they are stratified and have leaders, with poor workers (formerly, slaves) doing the heavy stuff. Everyone not in this position, so the lie continues, has to 'catch up' or is doomed to disappear. Those who raise questions about the desirability of all this trumpery, let alone its truth, are derided as woolly romantics.

But this is just 20th-century spin on what was previously, and more honestly, seen as European colonialism and, going back further, as the spread of Christendom, or Rome. All derived from the same tenet: our way of life is inherently superior to those of the thousands of societies that have evolved entirely different ways of coping. It's a clever trick: it underpins and excuses many of the world's inequalities, and passes off the theft of tribal land as "for their own good".

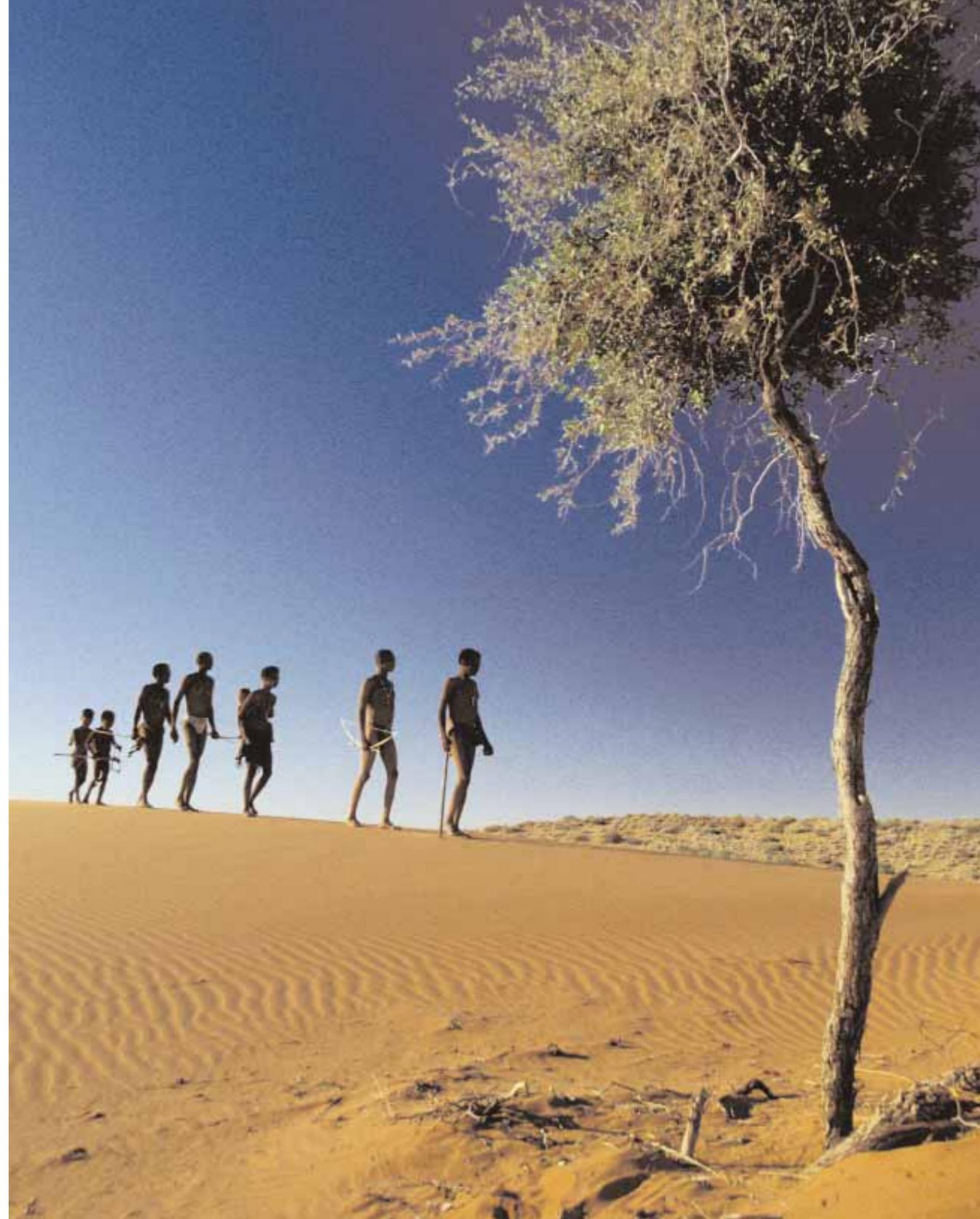
For example, take schooling, healthcare and good nutrition, three great shibboleths of development. For millennia, every people on earth has had its own claim to all three. Anyone who failed to do so would have disappeared. Many Inuit eat virtually nothing but raw meat; Masai consume little other than milk; poisonous manioc is a staple for many Amazonians. The number of medicines is equally astonishing. No one has counted, but there must be several thousand substances that are used to heal. By and large they work. If they didn't, they wouldn't be used: people, including tribal people, are not stupid.

The image of what we understand by 'modern' is now forged by the aspirations of the urban middle classes in parts of Europe and North America, and those educated by them. These people – and the media which represents them – are now almost entirely divorced from anything to do with plants, animals or weather, and generally have only a superficial knowledge of truly different peoples. They are powerful and enjoy a lifestyle undeniably envied by much of the poorer world, which provides their cheap labour and raw materials, but they – we – actually represent only a tiny minority of the world's people and only one way to live.

Forget about remote tribespeople: the millions of slum dwellers of Rio, Nairobi or Calcutta will go to their graves without any access to the benefits we assume constitute progress. For them the discoveries of Alexander Graham Bell, Pasteur, Fleming, the Wright brothers, Benz or Ford might just as well never have happened. In their usually brief span between birth and grave, most people alive in the world today will never have a motorcar, board an aeroplane, or be given antibiotics. They will never make a telephone call, let alone use the internet, or vote.

If we count peoples, rather than individuals, the scales are even more lopsided. Assuming different tongues to be a rough indicator of different societies, we can reckon on nearly 7,000 languages in the world. Probably more than 90% belong to

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Opposite: Bushmen of the Kalahari, an indigenous people who have existed in southern Africa for 20,000 years



The Brazilian Cuiva tribe lives in harmony with the environment and can provide valuable lessons to the west



A Yanomami hunter in the northern Amazon, Brazil

tribespeople. Numbering about 150 million individuals, they comprise the vast majority of the diversity of humankind.

This is another reason for us neither to wreck them nor to stand back and watch them being destroyed by others: diversity has always been advantageous for the human species and there is no reason to think it will not prove so again. For example, tribal peoples have little to fear from oil running out, and their feats of endurance make our own survival experts look like campsite toddlers. A Brazilian Indian, Karapiru, emerged from the forest recently after spending 12 years living entirely on his own. He survived well and, unlike Robinson Crusoe, had no need to scavenge from shipwrecks or recruit a manservant.

It is a commonplace that tribespeople are expert at surviving in what we think of as the wild, and it has become axiomatic that they are fine conservationists. But this has never struck me as overly noteworthy. If you live in a society without reading or TV, then you spend a prodigious amount of time observing your surroundings. If you have to get your own food and shelter, then you are inevitably going to know the animals and plants – how they react with each other and with the weather, sun, moon and stars – in astonishing detail.

Tribal people are naturally experts in this, but perhaps not that much more so than European peasants. As a lad in 1950s' Norfolk, I knew many country folk whose easy and intimate knowledge of nature would now be deemed vast and rare. However much that might be sneered at by urban bureaucrats, the disappearance of such knowledge is a loss, not because it looks back to any golden age, but because our apparent divorce from nature induces a dangerous misunderstanding of who we really are. It engenders a sense of not belonging to anything bigger than us; and that erodes our responsibilities.

I believe there are common threads in the diversity of human societies, but they are not our false gods of progress, materialism and leadership. The comic-strip explorer demands of the tribesman: "Take me to your leader!" But most numerically smaller societies have no leaders. Quite the contrary, they have mechanisms to ridicule anyone who tries to acquire power. As an anthropological adage goes: "One word from the chief and everyone does just as he pleases!"

Those who think humans are selfish by nature should look at the American Indian potlatch tradition, where the people ritually destroyed their accumulated wealth. Or take the example of hunting societies where the hunter must always give away his own kill, relying on others to provide his meat. Being a brilliant hunter – and some are always better than others – is not desirable because you eat less; except that it is good really, because many see you as their benefactor.

A beautiful example of the futility of acquisitiveness was, until recently, enacted by the Cuiva of the Orinoco. Travelling by canoe, one Cuiva band visiting another would be heard well before landing. This gave the hosts time to conceal everything they owned. In the course of the long, ritualised conversation that followed, the visitors would gradually, but repeatedly, start asking for things. After much prodding, the hosts would show their goods, and one by one give them away. This palaver would go on for hours; at its completion the hosts would have given away everything they possessed, and asked for and received everything the visitors had. As all Cuiva owned more or less the same, which actually didn't amount to much, the exercise seemed pointless.

The Cuiva took the idea to its extreme, but there are many societies where possessions are automatically given away to anyone who admires or asks for them.

SURVIVAL INTERNATIONAL

All peoples have an acute sense of reciprocity. Indeed, its ubiquity is an indication that the paradoxical idea of giving being better than receiving has been around for a very long time, and is certainly far older than the notion of trade for profit (which is here to stay, of course). People's desire to give and share is perhaps the single most important trait that enabled humans to dominate. From sharing comes collaboration, and then enterprises are formed which build on the accumulation and transmission of group knowledge. Perhaps the most beneficial result is our ability to live well in hostile climates. Our species was born in the African forests, and may have got no further without the desire to give away both things and knowledge.

Sharing, caring and humour are I believe the common threads that bind humanity. Those who cannot look after themselves are cared for by kith and kin. That is self-evident: no tribe would survive unless children were cared for, and of course even other primates look after their young. They also take care of the old and economically useless people. It is true that some societies abandon the very ancient in times of great scarcity. But if you think that we have left this primitive habit behind, then look at the scandals in our old people's homes.

In spite of our capacity for brutality we are human because we share and care for each other, not because we want to grab more. In tribal societies this engenders a palpable sense of belonging. From when the tribe welcomes the newborn to his or her passage through life, usually marked with ritual steps from childhood, adolescence, newly-wed, to parent and elder, everyone always feels supported and part of a whole. They know their place in the cycle of generations, they know their responsibilities to the group, and accept death in a way that many of us might envy. Indeed, it is this sense of complete belonging that has always most impressed

me about the tribes I have visited, perhaps because it is so different to our own society where so many are adrift.

People who feel lost often react with fear and violence. Of course tribal peoples are not free from conflict, but the seeds of both responsibility and freedom lie in their sense of belonging. We belong; we owe our life, both to each other and to the wider world. This is a truth that must be relearned everywhere by each generation. It is the most important lesson and one we forget at our peril. Perhaps it is not going too far to assert that if we succeed in destroying tribal peoples we would be a step closer to destroying ourselves, for then there would be no one to show us any alternative to our consuming greed. I don't believe it will come to that: I am an optimist. But if it is true that real progress and civilisation are a measure of how societies treat their vulnerable minorities, then maybe it's time to get up to date. ■

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WHERE TO FIND OUT MORE

READ A full transcript of the RSA/Survival International Lecture "Fighting for the Kalahari" on 4 October, at which Stephen Corry was in conversation with Bushmen Roy Sesana and Jumanda Gakelebone, is available at www.theRSA.org/events