CRUSHING COLONIALISM

THE MAGAZINE

September 2026 | Edition 12



THE ART OF BEADING
Honoring tradition, one bead at a time.

ULAMA: THE HIP BALL GAME
A tradition of strength and unity.

WE RISE WITH THE SUN
A living celebration of memory and identity.

LOLE O KA LĀ
Where tradition becomes fashion.

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Some traditions survive because they are written down. Others survive because they are lived.

Across generations, Indigenous Peoples have carried languages, ceremonies, songs, craftsmanship, stories, and ways of relating to the land despite centuries of displacement, assimilation, and policies designed to erase them. Their endurance is not accidental. It is the result of countless acts of care—of elders teaching children, artists practicing ancestral techniques, families gathering to celebrate, and communities choosing, every day, to remember.

This issue of *The Magazine* is dedicated to those acts.

Preserving Indigenous traditions is not about nostalgia or looking to the past. It is about recognizing that tradition is alive. It grows, adapts, and finds new forms while remaining rooted in the knowledge of those who came before.

In these pages, you will meet culture bearers who are ensuring that ancestral practices continue to shape the present. You will step onto the ballcourt where *Ullamaliztli* is played not merely as a sport, but as a living expression of community and identity. You will join Kichwas as they celebrate *Inti Raymi*, where memory, spirituality, and belonging move together in every step. You will follow the making of a Hawaiian *kapa holokū*, where each fiber, natural dye, and carved pattern carries generations of *'ike'* (knowledge). Through an intimate interview and a vibrant photo essay, you will also discover how Indigenous beadwork continues to tell stories of family, resilience, and cultural continuity, one bead at a time.

While these traditions come from different nations, languages, and landscapes, they are united by a common thread: each reminds us that culture is something we inherit, but also something we choose to sustain.

At a time when globalization often rewards speed over patience and uniformity over diversity, Indigenous traditions offer another way forward. They teach us that identity is strengthened through community, that knowledge is built through relationships, and that caring for culture is inseparable from caring for one another and for the lands that sustain us.

Preservation, then, is not simply about safeguarding the past. It is about creating the conditions for future generations to inherit living traditions with the same richness, beauty, and meaning they hold today.

We hope this issue invites you to slow down, listen closely, and appreciate the extraordinary work of those who continue to protect and reimagine Indigenous traditions around the world. Their stories remind us that culture does not endure on its own—it endures because people dedicate their lives to carrying it forward.

Thank you for joining us in celebrating these living legacies.



Isabel María Riofrío Miranda
Editor-in-Chief, *The Magazine*





Photo credit: Aatif Ammad, July 8, 2026.

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**Throughout The Magazine, we default to using Indigenous place names unless otherwise stated. Colonial names are indicated in quotation marks for context.*

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THE LAST KEEPERS OF A SILVER LEGACY

BY AATIF AMMAD

Naseem Jahan, a resident of Lakhnau (a city in northern India renowned for its centuries-old crafts, Nawabi culture, rich history, and celebrated cuisine), owns almost nothing that the world would consider valuable. She has no house, no car, no jewelry—not even a mobile phone. Yet there is one possession she treasures above everything else: a five-decade-old piece of footwear.

Resting it gently in her lap, Jahan smiles before breaking the silence. "My mother gave these to me on my wedding day in 1975," she said softly. "She bought them with her savings and told me, 'This is my gift to you, my daughter.' They were handcrafted in Lakhnau's Sarrafa market," famous for Nagra artisans.

What was once simply a wedding gift has, over the years, become the most precious thing she owns. To Jahan, it is not merely an heirloom but a living archive of her past, of a mother who is no longer alive, of her wedding day, and of a Lakhnau she says now exists only in memory.



Naseem Jahan displays her five-decade-old silver nagras, which she plans to pass on to her granddaughter after soaring silver prices made purchasing a new pair unaffordable. Photo credit: Aatif Ammad, July 8, 2026.

She admitted that there were times when financial hardship pushed her to consider selling it, but she could never bring herself to do it. "Many times I thought of selling it," she said. "But every time my conscience stopped me. After all, it isn't just a piece of footwear."

For Jahan, it has long ceased to be an object of value. It has become a repository of memory, carrying with it the warmth of her mother's affection and the echoes of a life she once lived.

Holding it close, she looked up and said, almost as if searching for words that did not exist, "Look at it... how can I ever explain to the world what it means to me?". Only then does she reveal what she has been cradling so protectively all along: a 300-gram pair of handcrafted silver Nagras, the traditional wedding slippers of Lakhnau, which for Jahan are worth far more than their weight in silver.

Nagra, or chandi ke paposh, the Urdu term for silver footwear, is one of Lakhnau's most distinctive yet rapidly vanishing artisanal traditions. Once synonymous with Nawabi opulence and royal patronage, the craft now survives through only six or seven master artisans, as its production demands highly specialized silversmithing techniques and exceptional craftsmanship.

For generations, silver Nagras have been more than ceremonial footwear in Lakhnau. According to Sandeep Soni, a 50-year-old silver trader, they emerged under the patronage of the Nawabs of Awadh, who commissioned master craftsmen to create elaborate silver footwear as symbols of rank and refinement. "These were never ordinary slippers," Soni said. "They reflected a family's status, wealth, and identity." Their painstaking hand engraving and intricate floral patterns drew from Lakhnau's celebrated tradition of Naqqashi (a traditional South Asian art of ornamental engraving and painting rooted in Mughal-era craftsmanship), making each pair both a work of art and a marker of prestige. Though once reserved for royalty, silver Nagras later became an indispensable part of weddings, where they came to symbolize prosperity, honor, and the beginning of a new life for brides and grooms.

DISPATCHES FROM OUR RELATIVES

Yet, Soni says their significance extended far beyond the ceremony. "From what I heard from my Elders, a silver Nagra was considered an investment as well for a woman," he said. "Throughout my career dealing in silver, I have seen thousands of women come to sell their Nagras whenever they faced financial difficulties. They were not just footwear; they were financial backing." Their intrinsic silver value allowed families to preserve them for decades before selling or melting them in times of need, making silver Nagras both treasured heirlooms and a dependable reserve of wealth.

For Jahan, however, the Nagras carry a significance that goes far beyond their monetary value. In a few months, when her granddaughter gets married, she will part with the pair she has treasured for more than five decades. It was not her grand daughter who wanted to inherit them. She had gone to the market hoping to buy a new pair, but returned empty-handed. The sharp rise in silver prices over the past few months had pushed the cost of a 200-gram pair to nearly ₹70k (USD 725).

"We are a lower middle-class family," Jahan said. "How can we spend nearly ₹70k on a pair of Nagras when that is almost half of my granddaughter's entire wedding budget?" Yet the thought of a bride in the family marrying without Nagras was unimaginable.

"A bride in our family is incomplete without them," she said. "Let her take mine. I am old now. She can get them polished and make them her own. Let her wear them and cherish them, just as I did." Jahan says her granddaughter's wedding will bring two farewells: one to the young bride beginning a new life and another to the family heirloom Jahan has treasured for over 50 years. "Every time I think about giving them away, I become emotional," she said. "But I find peace knowing they will stay within the family. My mother's gift will continue its journey through another generation."

Just months ago, Jahan says, a pair of Nagras weighing 150 to 300 grams typically cost between ₹15k (USD 155) and ₹25k (USD 260). Today, soaring silver prices have nearly quadrupled their value, placing them beyond the reach of many families.

WHEN WAR REACHED LAKHNAU'S WORKSHOPS

Back in 2023, silver prices in India were stable at ₹70k–₹80k (USD 725–USD 830) per kilogram before climbing to about ₹90k (USD 930) in 2024. However, the prices surged dramatically earlier this year after the "U.S." and "Israel" attacked Iran, briefly reaching ₹450k (USD 4,670) per kilogram. Although prices temporarily retreated following the ceasefire in April of this year, silver continues to trade at around ₹250k (USD 2,595) per kilogram.

The unprecedented price surge has increased the cost of crafting silver Nagras, while simultaneously reducing consumer demand. For artisans who had already weathered decades of declining patronage, shifting fashion trends and rising production costs, the spike has proved devastating. Artisans, Nawabs, and experts say the craft has now entered its most precarious phase, particularly after the war in Iran, as soaring raw material costs and shrinking orders threaten the survival of a centuries-old tradition passed down through generations.

Mohammad Ishfaq, 70, comes from a family that has crafted Nagras for generations. Sitting in his modest workshop in Lakhnau, he says there was never any question of choosing another profession. "My father made Nagras. So did my grandfather and my great-grandfather. This is all our family has ever known," Ishfaq said.

According to him, while men still buy Nagras for weddings, brides have sustained the craft for decades. Nearly 95% of all orders now come from women, with only about 5% from grooms. "A silver Nagra has always been an essential part of a bride's wedding," he said. For years, he watched demand decline gradually, but he says the war changed everything.

"When the war began in February [2026], silver prices shot up almost overnight. We had nothing to do with that war, yet it destroyed our livelihoods," he says. "Just last year, we could make a pair of Nagras using 200 grams of silver for around ₹25k (USD 260). Today, the raw material alone costs nearly ₹50k (USD 520), and the finished pair sells for ₹60k–70k (USD 620-USD 725)."



Three pairs of handcrafted silver nagras made by artisan Mohammad Ishfaq in June for brides marrying this winter. He once crafted seven to nine pairs each month, but soaring silver prices have made them unaffordable for many couples. Photo credit: Aatif Ammad, July 8, 2026.

He fears the conflict has pushed the craft to the edge of extinction. "I taught this art to my children, but if prices remain this high, people will stop buying Nagras altogether. What future will this profession have then?" Although Ishfaq still receives some orders, they have declined by more than half. Many fellow artisans, he says, have received none.

"Some craftsmen didn't get a single order for months. One by one, they abandoned the profession because they simply couldn't survive. I only pray this war ends, and silver prices come down. I can't bear to watch a craft that has lived in my family for generations die before my eyes."

Zuhaib Rashid Bangroo, an economist and a specialist in India's manufacturing sector at the Isaac Centre for Public Policy, an independent policy wing of economists, former bureaucrats, and industry experts in New Delhi, says the silver market has undergone a structural shift. Bangroo says India's heavy reliance on imported silver has magnified the impact of the global price surge. According to him, when imports of precious metals rise sharply, governments often increase duties and introduce restrictions to protect foreign exchange reserves, pushing domestic prices even higher.

"Those additional import costs are ultimately passed on to consumers, which is why silver in India often trades above international prices," Bangroo says. "And history suggests that once precious metals witness such a sharp surge, prices rarely return to their earlier levels. Even if silver becomes cheaper, I don't expect it to fall below ₹200k (USD 2,075) per kilogram anytime soon."

WHEN A CRAFT LOSES ITS KEEPERS

As crises continue, remaining craftsmen are leaving the craft altogether. One of them is Kuldeep Gautam, 40, who now spends his days selling jewelry in a small showroom instead of shaping silver into Nagras.

Until recently, he was among nearly 30 artisans practising the craft in Lakhnau and earned ₹40k–50k (USD 415–USD 518) a month, selling at least 8 to 10 pairs of Nagras. Business had slowed over the years, he says, but it remained steady enough to support their families. Then came the war.

"Everything changed within days," Kuldeep recalled. "When silver prices skyrocketed, we could no longer afford the raw material, and customers stopped placing orders. None of us imagined that a war taking place thousands of kilometers away would end our livelihoods. We kept asking ourselves what we had done to deserve this."

With no work coming in and his savings exhausted, Kuldeep left behind the craft he had spent years mastering and accepted a job as a jewelry salesman.

"Making Nagras wasn't just my profession, it was who I was," he says. "Today I stand behind a counter selling ornaments made by others. I earn barely ₹15k ($155) a month, struggle to pay my children's school fees, and whenever I walk past my old workshop, I can't bring myself to look inside. It feels like I've lost a part of myself." Despite everything, he still dreams of returning to his work. "If buyers came back tomorrow, I'd leave this job without a second thought. But the orders have disappeared, and with them, the life we built around this craft."

On the outskirts of Lakhnau lives Nawab Masud Abdullah, the eighth-generation descendant of Nawab Muhammad Ali Shah, the ninth Nawab of Awadh (present-day Lakhnau), who ruled the kingdom from 1837 until he died in 1842 and was one of the last custodians of the city's royal legacy. He says silver Nagras, once an everyday symbol of Awadhi royalty, have quietly faded from public life. "My ancestors wore them with pride, and over time the tradition spread far beyond the royal families," Abdullah says. "People, particularly brides across Lakhnau, made them an essential part of their weddings and identity."

Abdullah said that Nagras were a symbol of royalty in a way because they were made of silver, a precious metal that was accessible only to the rich and influential during the Nawabi era. The Nawabs and members of their families wore them during court meetings, functions, and other important occasions, which distinguished them from the rest of the people.

"In those days, Nagras were very heavy," Abdullah said. "A single pair used to weigh anywhere between 500 grams and one kilogram. That is why the Nawabs wore them only on special occasions."

However, Abdullah said that with the end of the Nawabi period in the 1850s, artisans were left with fewer customers. To create demand among ordinary people, they gradually reduced the weight of the Nagras, making them as light as 100 to 300 grams.

"That was the period when Nagras entered the lives of common people," he said. "Since then, they have no longer remained just a symbol of royalty but have gradually become part of everyday wear among people." He remembers buying a pair decades ago for just ₹600 (USD 6). Today, he says, soaring silver prices have made them a luxury few can afford, while the craftsmen who once kept the tradition alive are disappearing even faster.

"I know only two or three artisans who still make authentic silver Nagras," he says. "If this continues, Lakhnau won't just lose another craft, it will lose a part of its history and soul."

DISPATCHES FROM OUR RELATIVES



Nawab Masud Abdullah at his palace in Lucknow, displaying the silver Nagras he and his wife wore at their wedding 45 years ago, a treasured heirloom that has remained in their family ever since. Photo credit: Aatif Ammad, July 7, 2026.

THE WEDDING TRADITION THAT BECAME A LUXURY

For 25-year-old Anjum Syeed, who is due to marry in November this year, silver Nagras will remain a dream rather than a part of her wedding. The soaring cost of silver has forced her family to abandon a tradition they had hoped to continue. Raised in a lower middle-class household, Safiya says her family simply cannot justify spending ₹65k (USD 675) on a pair of wedding slippers when the entire wedding budget is around ₹120k (USD 1,245).

"If they were priced around ₹15k ($155) or ₹20k ($207), we would have found a way," she says. "But today, a single pair costs more than half of everything we've set aside for the wedding. It's beyond our means."

What hurts her most is not missing out on a luxury, but watching a family custom come to an end. Her mother once owned a pair of silver Nagras but was forced to sell them during financial hardship, believing they could always buy another pair later. "None of us imagined silver would become this expensive," Safiya said. "I grew up believing I would wear Nagras on my wedding day, just like the women before me. Instead, I'll be the first in my family to get married without them."

She says it is difficult to accept that a conflict unfolding thousands of kilometers away could reshape one of the happiest days of her life. "I always pictured myself wearing silver Nagras in my wedding photographs. I never thought a war in another part of the world would take that away from me."

Azhar Hussain, 50, another Nagra artisan on the verge of abandoning the profession, says demand has collapsed to levels he has never witnessed before.

"In a normal year, we would make at least 50 pairs. This year, we've made only seven," Hussain says. "Many brides still come to our workshop, but the moment they hear the price, they walk away. Grooms have almost completely stopped buying Nagras since silver prices surged."

He says the dwindling demand has left him questioning whether he can continue. "If brides can no longer afford them, how can this craft survive? I have spent my life making Nagras, but now I'm beginning to wonder if it's time to leave it behind," he says with a deep sense of regret.

About the author

Aatif Ammad is an independent journalist based in South Asia. His work has been published in Al Jazeera, SAAG Anthology, Down To Earth, Article-14.com, India Times, Boomlive, Careers 360, the core.in, TMS, and others. He primarily reports on finance, economics, education, the environment, and social issues, with emphasis on data-driven and field-based journalism.

INTYWAN PUNLLAYANCHIK: WE RISE WITH THE SUN

BY ADINA FARINANGO

Every June for a whole week, I dance under the moon and watch the sun come out. My heartbeat aligns to the rhythm of the earth; my feet stomp to each beat. With every stomp, I awaken the land, myself, and the memory carried by Inti Raymi—the Kichwa celebration in "Otavalo, Ecuador", that honors the sun, the harvest, and our ancestral connection to the earth. Between the sounds of flutes, harmonicas, guitars, and violins, I let the music carry me, my feet joining the circle in an unbroken rhythm. I find myself existing between dimensions, surrounded by the mountains that have watched over my family for generations. I exist in this space, and I realize that I am home. I am in the presence of all my community.



Illustration by Kichwa artist Adina Farinango

Being born and raised outside of my territory, in the diaspora of Lenapehoking (in "New York City"), taught me from an early age that no matter where the seed grows, the roots extend all the way back home. My homelands lie in Imbabura, a province in the northern Andes of "Ecuador." The country is home to 800,000 Kichwa Otavalo people nationwide, known across "Ecuador" and around the world for our textiles, traditions, music, and Indigenous resistance. Beyond "Ecuador," our community is also known worldwide for traveling across territories carrying our culture to every corner.

For the Kichwa Otavalo people, migration is both ancestral and contemporary—rooted in centuries-old trade routes while also shaped today by the economic realities that compel many to leave their communities. This is how I was born and raised outside my homeland. The reality of the Kichwa Otavalo community is that we are all over the world, carrying our culture with us—always keeping the body connected to the territory. Our traditions are so deeply embedded within our memory that colonial borders don't exist; colonial calendars aren't necessary for us to know that June is time to celebrate. Wherever we are, we will celebrate and adapt to our surroundings. Inti Raymi is a reunion, a symbol of gathering, whether we are in our territory or celebrating far from it.

Inti Raymi honors the sun, the winter solstice, and the earth, celebrating the reciprocal relationship between people and the land through gratitude for its abundance. It is a celebration of *Allpa Mama*, or Mother Earth, for the crops harvested, a celebration of gratitude to the sun and to all our surroundings, for everything that has nourished us throughout the year. It is a time of purification and reciprocity, where every element of nature plays a vital role in the ceremony. For nearly two weeks, we dance to unite our energy together and give it back to the land in an act of reciprocity.

My earliest memory of Inti Raymi is celebrating it from afar. Every year, our community gathered in a different rented venue, bringing together hundreds of Kichwa families traveling from neighboring states alongside Kichwas from various territories across "Ecuador." It was days of back-to-back dancing, shared food, and community events. As a child, I did not question our celebrations. My mom would dress me, and I spent

that time playing with other kids, occasionally going into the circle to dance with the adults. I did not realize then that for the adults, gathering was far more than a celebration. It was a necessity, a way to heal collective homesickness even for a little bit, to hold on to our roots and assert our presence away from our homelands. Even in the temporary rented spaces, the energy was undeniably strong. Through our music and our presence, we recreated the feeling of home, even far from "Otavalo." The rhythm of our feet stomping carried a powerful force. As I grew older, I continued celebrating, dancing with intention and eventually picking up an instrument myself.

Although I had visited "Ecuador" as a baby, I was too young to remember it. It wasn't until I returned as a teenager that I consciously experienced Inti Raymi in our homeland. Being able to move back and forth to and from "Ecuador" is a profound privilege—one that many members of my community are denied because of restrictive immigration policies. Migration has physically separated many of us from our Kichwa territory and traditions. Yet it is also the reason Inti Raymi continues to be celebrated far beyond "Ecuador," carried across borders by those determined to keep our culture, identity, and community alive. This forced separation is exactly how celebrating Inti Raymi outside of the territory I was born in is important, and why it is carried so fiercely to this day. It is a powerful reminder that while migration policies may restrict our bodies, no colonial border can prevent our celebrations from enduring, reaffirming that body and territory are inseparable.

When I return to "Otavalo," I fully immerse myself in what Inti Raymi means for my community: it is the time of year we all look forward to the most, an honor for the sun held in conjunction with our love for the Allpa Mama, our families, our cultural pride, and our gratitude for the corn that nourishes us. Living in the diaspora reshaped my relationship with Inti Raymi. I had to rediscover the celebration through the lens of our homeland and the community that has kept it alive. I found its meaning in the quiet moments at home with my family before the celebrations even began. There was a different kind of freedom in celebrating on our own territory, without the curfews that had shaped my experience elsewhere.

Going back to "Otavalo" allowed me to connect with Inti Raymi in a much deeper way. Dancing at the feet of *Taita Imbabura* and *Mama Cotacachi*, the mountains that watched my grandparents grow up, we moved in a circle around the musicians at its center. It was there that I learned every movement carried meaning and every ritual served a purpose. Dancing in a circle is a reminder that our communities remain united, bound to one another and to the land. The stomping of our feet is an act of waking the earth. Our dancing, music, and chants are all offerings, an act of reciprocity for the land. It is a time when the celebration fills our communities with a powerful, collective energy. We dance from home to home, where each family welcomes us with open arms. In return for the music we bring, they offer food and drink in an act of reciprocity and gratitude, sustaining both the celebration and those who carry it until sunrise.

There are so many layers to what I feel that I don't think words could ever fully do it justice. More than a celebration, Inti Raymi is a ceremony—one that carries a profound spiritual and emotional power. I felt it most when I learned how to play the rondin and immersed myself even more deeply, moving from dancing on the outer circle to actively driving the energy of the dance circle. I came to understand that playing an instrument means guiding the energy of the people dancing, giving cues on when to change the circle's direction, and guiding the dancers when to stomp harder. Learning how to play the rondin opened a new way of being part of this celebration. It transformed the way I experienced music, and the way I gave and received energy through it. It is said that during Inti Raymi, the *Ayas* (or spirits) join us as we dance, moving alongside us throughout the celebration. I remember when I first joined the circle to play the rondin, I was nervous. But with time, I felt like I gained more energy and confidence. There was one moment, in particular, when I felt the *Ayas* join me in the circle. Their presence guided the connection between my body, the rhythm of the instruments, the force of our footsteps, and the land beneath us. For a brief moment, I felt transported somewhere beyond myself.

I dance hard for my grandpa and all my relatives who aren't here anymore, so they can hear me and my music across galaxies and dimensions. I dance for my friends who can't make it back to our territory because of migration and colonial borders. I dance for them, imagining them back home, and willing my stomps and energy to reverberate across the miles and beyond borders. When my feet strike the earth, I carry all of that energy into the circle with me. Each stomp becomes more than the weight of my own body—it is the collective force of everyone dancing beside me. Together, we stomp with such strength that the vibrations seem to travel across the land, connecting our communities, our ancestors, and the territories that hold our history.

Playing the rondin as a Kichwa woman is a powerful act. While women have always been central to Inti Raymi, playing instruments was rarely part of their role in previous generations. Today, as more of us take up the rondin and join the music, we are opening space for other women to do the same. According to the Andean agroecological calendar, used by the Kichwa Otavalo people, Inti Raymi is a time of masculine energy—a season associated with strength, vitality, and action. I can feel that energy moving through me. I stop worrying about how I dance or whether my steps are graceful. I simply surrender to the rhythm, stomping harder, moving more freely, as the shifting energies of the ceremony carry me. But as more women play,

we are actively shaping the future of the celebrations for new generations, creating that future and seeing it happen in real time. It comes from a place of love for my culture. It is my responsibility to help carry this legacy forward and pass it on to the next generation, just as those before me shaped the person I am today.

Inti Raymi is also a political act. It asserts our presence in defiance of the forces that sought to erase this celebration through colonization, cultural suppression, and the imposition of foreign religious beliefs. Despite all of that, we are actively celebrating our traditions. We don't need a national holiday to remind us to celebrate; we don't need financial support to organize our celebration. We do it because it is a part of us. In recent years, the co-opting of celebrations has been more frequent, though the folklorization did not start with my generation. It has been happening for decades, becoming so deeply normalized that many don't even question it. "Ecuador" loves to market itself as a proud "multicultural" country when selling tourism, yet the state becomes violent the moment that Indigenous people rise, asking for basic human rights.

The hypocrisy is everywhere: politicians using our traditional clothing for photo ops, non-Indigenous brands profiting off our "aesthetic," the co-opting of our language, folkloric dance groups playing dress up in the name of "representation," and tour companies selling packages to tourists to observe our ceremonies as if we were a spectacle in a zoo. Too often people take on our identity only when it benefits them, cherrypicking and choosing the parts that are convenient and profitable while discarding anything that makes them uncomfortable. They want the traditions without the responsibility, accountability, and the discomfort of confronting ongoing colonial violence.

This grounding is precisely why we must be specific about who we are. We have to define for ourselves what it means to be Kichwa today, especially as we navigate living in the diaspora across "North America". There is a common tendency to treat Indigeneity as a broad label, or to equate it entirely with simply having brown skin and being from a Spanish-speaking country. But our social and political realities are different, shaped by very specific histories of colonization. Indigeneity is not a passive identity or a racial checkbox, and having brown skin or a Latin American background does not automatically make someone Indigenous. For me, it is a lived reality tied directly to community accountability, ancestral responsibility, and the active defense of our practices. It is also the commitment to keeping our traditions alive, carrying forward the knowledge, ceremonies, and ways of being that have shaped our identity across generations.

Celebrating Inti Raymi is being unapologetically Kichwa. No matter where in the world we are, we celebrate in the way we can, to manifest our presence, because the memory that lives within our body doesn't let us ever forget who we are. It is an active inheritance that requires us to show up, breathe life into the melodies, and stomp the ground with intention. We carry it into the future, through our art, our music, making sure the youth sees that our culture is shaped and defined by us. When the younger generation watches us hold the rondin or lead the circle, they see themselves. Every June, as we welcome the sun with our music, our stomps are felt across the world, proving that no distance or border can stop us. In our territory, in the province of Imbabura, north of "Ecuador," we welcome the sun once again, every year, surrounded by *Taita Imbabura* and *Mama Cotacachi*.

About the author

Adina Farinango is an Indigenous Kichwa-Otavalo artist and designer based between Lenapehoking ("New York City") and "Ecuador." Her multidisciplinary practice explores Kichwa identity in the diaspora, the relationship between body and territory, and Indigenous Futurisms through illustration, photography, embroidery, and mixed media. Drawing from ancestral knowledge, memory, and cultural continuity, her work examines the ways Kichwa art and traditions are carried, transformed, and reimagined across generations. She has collaborated with Today at Apple, Design at Instagram, Brown University, Kichwa Hatari, NYC Department of Transportation, and *Cultural Survival*, among others. Learn more about her work at adinafarinango.com and follow her Instagram account @adinasdoodles.

ULLAMALIZTLI: THE HIP BALL GAME

BY JESÚS A. ESCANDÓN

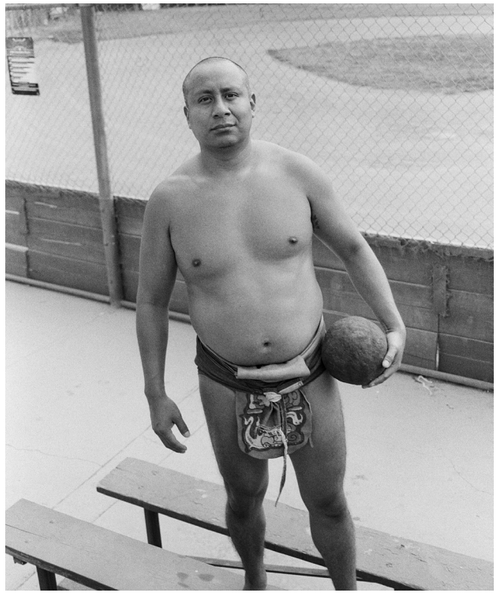
Long before modern sports filled stadiums, Indigenous Peoples across the Americas developed games that carried history, ceremony, and community traditions from one generation to the next. Today, millions celebrate sports such as soccer, basketball, and baseball, often without realizing that many of the games and ball traditions that shaped modern athletics have deep Indigenous roots. Archaeological evidence traces the game back more than 3,500 years to the Olmecs, regarded as the earliest civilization in Mesoamerica, making it one of the world's oldest continuously practiced sports. Despite the widespread belief that colonization erased the tradition, *Ullamaliztli* has survived through generations of Indigenous communities and continues to be played today. I am Jesús Adrián Escandón, an *Ullamaliztli* player living in Huutngna, the ancestral village of the Tongva in present-day "South Los Angeles."

In Nahuatl, *Ullamaliztli* translates to "playing with a rubber ball using the buttocks" and is commonly shortened to *Ulama*. In ancestral times, the sport was a means of replacing political warfare through gameplay—a sight of gambling and banter. In some communities, it was used to help resolve disputes, with the outcome determining the distribution of land or resources. But during the Spanish colonization of "Mexico", the game was referred to as "the work of the devil." As colonial authorities sought to dismantle Indigenous governance, spiritual traditions, and community life, *Ullamaliztli* was forbidden. Yet the tradition endured.

Today, *Ullamaliztli* survives in the Mexican state of Sinaloa, where Indigenous communities have preserved their own regional style of the game for generations. The tradition has been safeguarded by families in the municipalities of Escuinapa and Mazatlán and, in recent decades, has spread to other parts of "Mexico", including among Nahua communities in the central state of Puebla. The game continues to be played on a court known as a tlachtli (or taste in Sinaloa), preserving a practice for more than 3,500 years.

Ullamaliztli is experiencing a resurgence as Indigenous communities across "Mexico" and beyond reclaim the game as a living cultural tradition. I am proud to be one of its culture bearers and have just celebrated my first anniversary of being an *Ulama* ball player. Growing up, my parents constantly encouraged me to try different sports, but I was never enthusiastic about them. It wasn't the lack of interest in a sport; rather, the "right sport" was never introduced. It was not until I witnessed my first-ever *Ulama* game played on my campus that I felt motivated, enthusiastic, and elated to participate and hold space in the traditional court.

Now, I am proud to be part of an international *Ulama* team, named *Wehkah Kiskeh*, meaning "They Come From Far Away" in Nahuatl. We practice every Sunday in the Tongva homeland. Now I know that I play to honor those who came before me, to make my family proud, and to help ensure this tradition continues for future generations. When I play *Ulama*, I tap into an ancestral way of life. The game immerses me in our language and worldview. My mother's family is Nahua from the town of Coatzingo, in the Mexican state of Puebla, and I am just one of many Indigenous people working to keep our Nation's traditions alive.



Ulama player "Nu" is wearing an "atuendo" while standing at Roger's Park, Tajauta, the ancestral village of the Tongva in present-day "Inglewood". Photo Credit: Jesús A. Escandón, July 4, 2026.

Interestingly, like many other Native cultures, the Western construct of gender and its prescribed roles is absent. In *Ullamaliztli*, this absence is expressed by both men and women being key and equal players in a game of reciprocity. This reflects the traditional belief that caring for one another is not a prescribed social role, but a shared responsibility woven into every aspect of life—even traditional sports. In the pueblos of Sinaloa, it is common to find that both spouses excel in *Ullamaliztli*, and this continues to be true through their children and community throughout. In a way, when each family member excels in *Ulama*, they also grow in their responsibility to their community and in living a good life. This sense of duality is central to revitalizing and learning about Indigenous cultures, as it reflects a worldview that transcends patriarchal norms and separates neither individual excellence from collective wellbeing nor sport from everyday life.

A seasoned and skilled player on our team, Stephanie Lozano, who is also a PhD Candidate in Archaeology at the University of California, Riverside, and focuses on Indigenous Mesoamerican worldview within the ancestral past, states, "*Ulama* as an ancestral tradition can bring us knowledge of our ancestral past that has been taken away from us due to the effects of colonization." Stephanie continues to add that, "*Ulama* was not only a sport but was woven with ritual practices, science, astronomy, politics, and governance. The tradition is relevant today, especially in 'Los Angeles, California' because it reflects the ancestral knowledge from the community here. People of the American continents have been migrating for thousands of years and continue to do so through the ever-shifting control of the political borders."

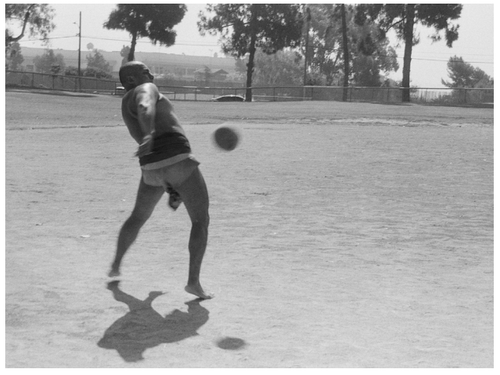
Stephanie notes that "Mesoamerican ancestral knowledge presented through *Ulama* has also migrated to 'Los Angeles,' which holds the largest diaspora of Mesoamerican people." Unfortunately, many Indigenous and immigrant communities in the "United States" are currently living with fear of practicing their traditions amid increased Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids.

However, *Ullamaliztli* endures as it always has in the past. It is still being played and carries the same sense of resilience and community it has for generations. More than a sport, it is a tradition grounded in physical and mental strength, collective identity, and solidarity—values that continue to sustain our communities through periods of uncertainty, discrimination, and injustice.

When we come together to play each Sunday, we do so knowing that our presence carries meaning beyond the game itself. Not only do we assert ourselves as strong and confident Indigenous athletes, but spread that same confidence throughout the park, letting everyone know that everything will be okay. We stand strong together and for one another, knowing that our presence also strengthens the young people and families who play alongside us. Oftentimes, even strangers who have never seen the *Ulama* game will be intrigued and stay long enough to watch us. As viewers witness the power behind each hit, they also become active participants, and together we are engulfed in that collective strength and power in which our ancestors also stood; strong for their families and beliefs, generations ago.

Beyond its physical demands, *Ullamaliztli* is rooted in a philosophy of reciprocity, balance, and collective responsibility. The game teaches that no player succeeds alone—each team's effort sustains the match, reflecting the belief that a community thrives when its members support one another. At the center of this worldview is the *Ule*, the rubber ball, traditionally understood as a living representation of the sun. Keeping it in motion is a symbolic act of sustaining life, requiring skill, trust, and cooperation from every player on the court, as the heaviest ball can weigh up to nine pounds of pure natural rubber made from the sap of the rubber trees.

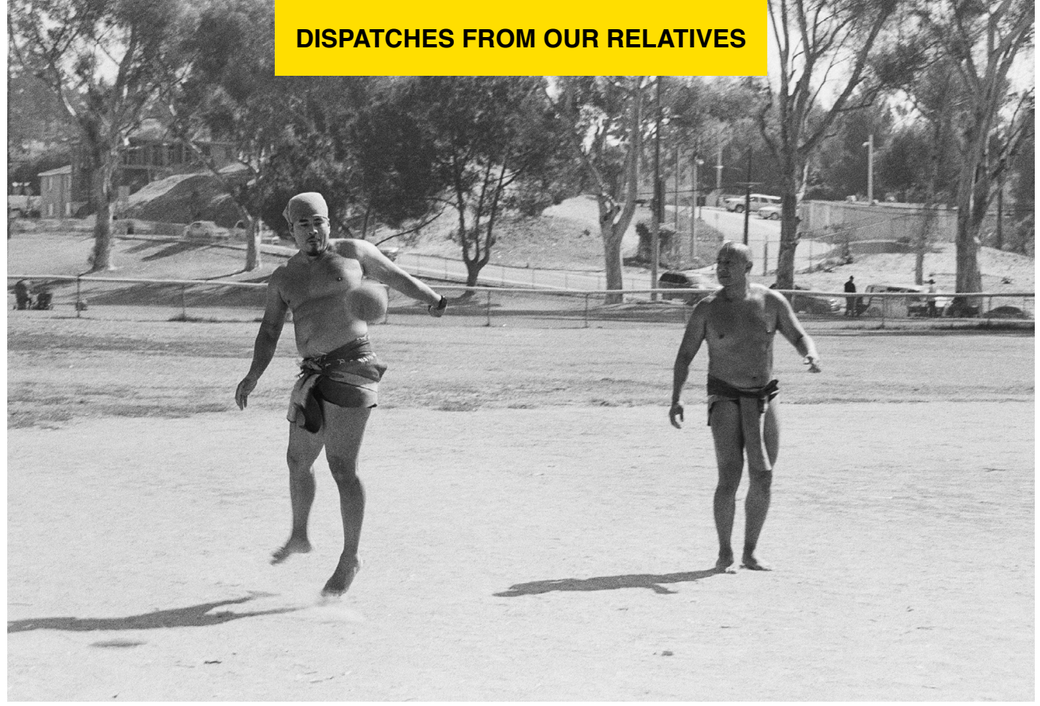
For team captain Marco "Kenwel" Santana, who is Masewal from the Pueblos of Tecalitlán, Jalisco, and Santa Martha Acatitla, "Mexico City", preserving *Ullamaliztli* begins with simply playing it. "The game is preserved through play, or what we call pichoneo," he says. "It has to be something people enjoy. In my opinion, the sport will be best conserved if you start within the family. It may be a challenge to involve everyone in your family, but introduce it to brothers, parents, cousins, and most importantly, your children. That way, it will interest someone, and they will continue it. But don't just teach it as a simple sport; teach it as a tradition to respect; that way it is seen as valuable as it is."



Captain Marco "Kenwel" Santana making a "topadilla" hit in Tongva homelands "City Terrace Park, East Los Angeles". Photo Credit: Jesús A. Escandón, July 5, 2026.

Every Sunday, Kenwel brings his children and relatives to practice, ensuring they experience *Ullamaliztli* not only as a sport, but as a living tradition that strengthens family bonds, reinforces community, and carries Indigenous values from one generation to the next. Aside from leading the team, captain Kenwel and his wife are both full-time students at California State University, "Los Angeles," and are raising their children in the *Ulama* tradition.

DISPATCHES FROM OUR RELATIVES



Ulama player "Nu" making an "aire" hit in Tongva homelands "City Terrace Park, East Los Angeles." Photo Credit: Jesús A. Escandón, July 5, 2026.

For many *Ullamaliztli* players, preserving the game also means creating opportunities for others to reconnect with their culture and identity. As a student archivist at California State University, "Los Angeles," I have advocated for the rematriation of Indigenous ancestral belongings while using my knowledge of the game to connect those pieces to the living traditions they represent. Together with my teammates, we have introduced more than 40 young people to *Ullamaliztli* through community workshops and have shared the game at universities, cultural events, and in a short documentary. Every match, workshop, and conversation is an opportunity to remind the next generation that their heritage is not confined to museums or history books—it is alive, carried forward through community, and strengthened every time the Ule is lifted into play.

There are moments when I strike the ball so high into the sky that I feel deeply connected to my ancestors. As I watch the Ule rise toward the sun, I imagine carrying with it the strength, resilience, and prayers of those who came before us. In those moments, I can almost see my ancestors smiling, proud that we continue to honor them by keeping this tradition alive for our families, our communities, and the generations yet to come. As our team captain Kenwel said, "Putting on our atuendo is like stepping into the past and seeing how a traditional player would have dressed in more ancient times. The fact that we can still see that is resilience. What was once thought to be a dead sport is very much alive."

Ulama is our testament to our ancestors belonging to this continent. We are not birthed from fear, but from a people of immense bravery. As strong and high as the sun's rays, we will continue to exist another 3,500 years and beyond. Our hearts beat the same tempo as the Ule and in rhythm with Mother Earth, and that is infinite. Life is made up of creation and our traditions, and our traditions are the creations that honor our lives. This is a never-ending cycle. As we pass the *Ulama* tradition along to our younger generations, we infuse them with the strength, power, and resiliency of the ancestors before us. By carrying on the tradition of *Ulama*, they will continue to survive and resist anything that the future throws at them.

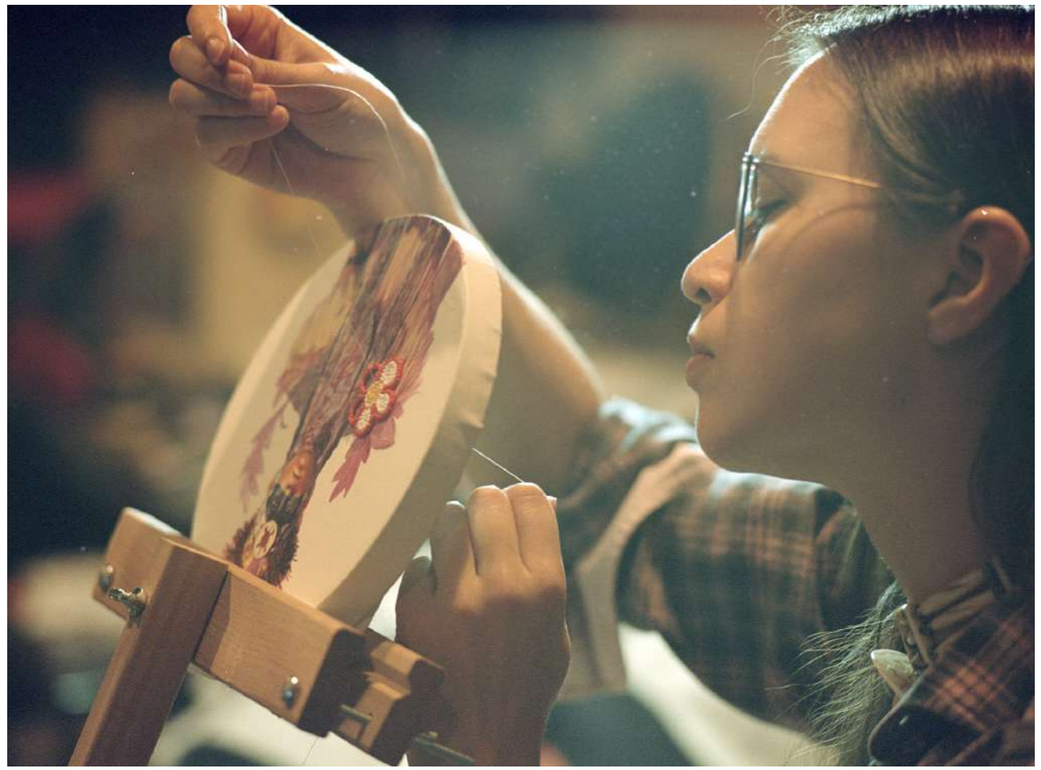
About the author

Living in Huutngna, the ancestral village of the Tongva in present-day "South Los Angeles," Jesús Adrián Escandón is a P'urhèpecha and Nahua artist. His focus lies in both contemporary and traditional art mediums, including but not limited to writing, drawing, painting, beading, sculpting, and textile production, highlighting the beauty of his People and Culture while offering the complex contemporary image that mainstream media fails to recognize. When not partaking in the arts, Jesús finds himself in the educational space spreading traditional knowledge to other institutions and his current workspace: California State University, Los Angeles, Special Collections.

PHOTO ESSAY

BEADING MY WAY HOME

BY WINONA NELSON



Winona sewing beads onto a painting. Photo credit: Anthony Palumbo, February 2019.

Beadwork is a longstanding artistic tradition of the Ojibwe people. Our love of style and flair goes back a long time. Before the Pale People (European colonizers) brought glass beads across the Sour Water (Atlantic Ocean), our people were already known among the Nations of Turtle Island ("North America") for decorating garments and bags with intricate porcupine quillwork.

The Ojibwe people have long shared an alliance with our younger siblings, the Odawa and Potawatomi of the Great Lakes, which was known as the Council of Three Fires. The Potawatomi were trusted mediators who maintained relations with other tribes and had such a reputation for fairness that even tribes warring with the Potawatomi deferred to them to set the terms of their surrenders, truces, and agreements. The Odawa were the traders among the Three Fires, facilitating barter and the exchange of goods with other Indigenous Nations and peoples. We Ojibwe kept the *Midewiwin*—our Medicine Lodge and spiritual tradition—and spent more than six months of the year indoors, sharing stories and decorating our clothing and belongings with care and beauty.

Most Indigenous people learn to bead from their Elder family members, such as grandmothers, aunties, and other relatives. My Ojibwe family connection was broken due to my father growing up in a white foster home, so my path was a little different. I first learned to bead from Elders who taught an after-school program at Spotted Eagle Elementary School in "Duluth, Minnesota," an all-Native school.

DECOLONIZED BEATZ



"THE STAR MAIDEN"

10x18", acrylic paint and glass beads on canvas.

In that program, we learned a lot of traditional lifeways. For instance, I learned to brain-tan a hide. I was sick and missed the day we smoked our hides to bleach and soften them, so my deerskin did not turn out very usable, sadly. I loved the food-related practices like tapping maple trees and boiling down the sap to make syrup—pouring out a little into the snow to make candies—and harvesting, parching, thrashing, and winnowing wild rice.

Of all the traditional activities we did at Spotted Eagle, my favorites were birchbark basket weaving, quillwork, and, above all, beading. Quillwork and beading were winter crafts, practiced indoors during the cold months or on bad-weather days, just as our ancestors had done for centuries. The only difference was that we gathered in a cinderblock building on the school grounds instead of a wigwam.

I didn't stay in all-Native schools. I spent 4th grade there, but I was bullied badly for being a mixed-race "city Indian" and for being a bespectacled tomboy nerd. They called me a "he-she" and a lesbian, and the old classic four-eyes. I returned to public school seeking safety and greater opportunities. I dreamed of traveling the world, and being a nerd and an artist, I wanted to learn how to create art for video games and *Magic: The Gathering*.

As I grew older, I spent several years away from home, working and learning how to make my way in the wider world. Eventually, I found an atelier in the old European masters' tradition to develop a solid foundation in art skills and built a portfolio to begin a career in video game and illustration art. But for years I looked for a way to bring beadwork back into my art. I tried sewing beads through canvas, although that was too labor-intensive and hard on my hands to continue. Finally, a few years ago I realized I could combine a couple of surface preparation techniques: I could mount watercolor paper to cotton fabric using acrylic adhesive, then stretch the still-wet surface over canvas stretcher bars. Once dry, this process created a surface that held paint well and could be pierced easily with a sewing needle, while remaining strong enough to support the countless holes needed for beadwork.

DECOLONIZED BEATZ

Finally, I had a way to combine my multiple art traditions. I had a contract with the publisher Simon & Schuster to illustrate a picture book by Cherokee author Art Coulson, and I pitched the idea of doing the book with watercolor and beads. I sent a test patch as a proof of concept, and they loved the idea and let me take the time needed to illustrate the entire book using this technique. The book, *All The Stars In The Sky*, went on to win the 2026 Minnesota Book Award for Children's Literature.

Native people, and Ojibwe people in particular, were always early adopters of new technologies when it was beneficial and fit into our lifeways. One was glass beads, which we called *manidoominens*—little spirit berries. We adopted rifles and home construction techniques. We were even early adopters of the internet. During the summers as a kid, I attended Computer Science Camp at Fond du Lac Tribal College, where I learned to build websites and write simple computer programs. It reminded me that our traditions have never been about standing still— they are about growing, adapting, and embracing new knowledge.

Sometimes, the old fear returns, and I hear the voices of the kids from Native school telling me I'm not Indigenous enough. But Ojibwe people have always gone bravely out into the world to find ourselves. We've always been flashy dressers and hilarious storytellers and patient teachers. We've always created beautiful regalia and trade goods. We've always had Two Spirit people, who bridge the worlds of gender; of waking life, dreams, and the spirit world. In all those ways, I am firmly, traditionally Ojibwe.



"ALL THE STARS IN THE SKY, SPREAD #5"

Two 11x8.5" pieces, watercolor, colored pencil, and glass beads on watercolor paper mounted over cotton muslin. Image courtesy of Simon & Schuster.

DECOLONIZED BEATZ

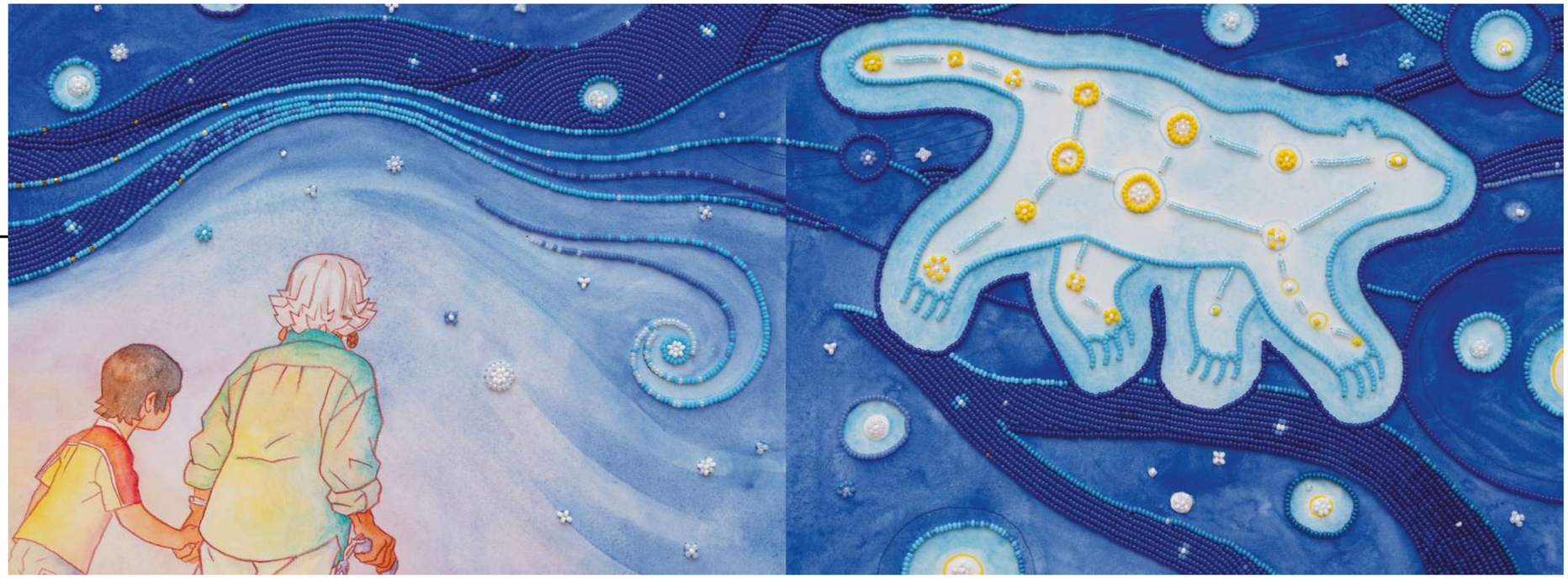


"ALL THE STARS IN THE SKY, SPREAD #8"

Two 11x8.5" pieces, watercolor, colored pencil, and glass beads on watercolor paper mounted over cotton muslin. Image courtesy of Simon & Schuster.

"ALL THE STARS IN THE SKY, SPREAD #9"

Two 11x8.5" pieces, watercolor, colored pencil, and glass beads on watercolor paper mounted over cotton muslin. Image courtesy of Simon & Schuster.





Detail of beads on an acrylic painting on canvas.

About the artist

Winona was born in “Superior, Wisconsin”, in 1983 and grew up in “Duluth”. She is a registered member of the Leech Lake Band of Minnesota Ojibwe. She worked on “Echo” for Marvel Studios and “The Last of Us Part II” for Naughty Dog. She also illustrates book covers and picture books for publishers including Simon and Schuster, Penguin Random House, Tor Books, Scholastic, and others. She has well over 100 Magic: The Gathering card illustrations published so far. She currently resides in “Pennsylvania” and makes it home to Ojibwe country a few times a year.

DECOLONIZED BEATZ

INTERVIEW

JOY TONEPAHHOTE: CARRYING ON THE KIOWA BEADWORK TRADITION

BY CRUSHING COLONIALISM

Award-winning Kiowa bead artist Joy Tonepahhote (Kiowa name Autoimah, "woman with a good heart") has had her work exhibited at the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian and other museums across the “United States.” Joy reflects on continuing the beading tradition after her mother’s passing, honoring and preserving Kiowa culture through her art, and passing her knowledge on to future generations. Follow the artist on FaceBook: Blue Turquoise Rose Trading Post.

Editor's note: This interview has been edited and condensed for length and clarity.

TELL ME A LITTLE BIT ABOUT HOW BEADWORK BECAME PART OF YOUR LIFE. HOW DID YOU GET STARTED?

My mother was a very well-known bead artist. Her name was Rosemarie Nez. And, of course, I would watch her bead, and I would ask, "Can I bead?” And my mother always told me, "No, these are my beads, this is my business, and this is my art. This is not something for you to play around with." So, what she did over the years was create a want in me to do it.

One day, she said to me, “I have a bit of a headache. Why don't you try to finish this little pattern that I have on my loom?” She would have a graph of the design, and you just had to follow the rows. I was so excited because it was the first time I was able to touch anything on her table. Then she gave me simple things to do, like little necklaces. And she allowed me to start working with her. I was doing dreamcatchers and making medicine wheels. And that’s how my beading started. And of course, watching her master her craft was amazing.

My mother always made all her outfits, my outfits, my kids' outfits. She was the person who did everything. And then in 2005, we lost her to pancreatic cancer, and it was sudden. It was just—BOOM. Within a week, she was gone.



This beaded graduation cap and medallion was commissioned for a young man graduating from high school. The eagle feather design was a special request and the bead colors match the school colors. Photo: Joy Tonnepahote, May 2026.

HOW DID YOUR MOM'S SUDDEN PASSING CHANGE YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE CRAFT?

After all the services, I sat down at her bead table. I was looking around. She had a lot of things on her table that she hadn't finished. I thought, "You know, I'm gonna finish those pieces so that her work is complete and she has nothing left behind."

She was in the middle of making an outfit for my daughter. They were making a butterfly buckskin dress together, but I was stuck on the butterfly. No matter what I did, I wasn't catching it. So, one night, I went to bed and had a dream about my mother. I told my daughter, "I was stuck on this, and Grandma came to me. She absolutely showed me how to do this." So every once in a while, I'll wake up from a dream about my mother, and I'll have to sketch whatever she shows me for a new creation.

After she passed, I became the matriarch of the beadwork. And so, when everybody in our family needs stuff, I'm the one who will pump it out and make it.

FOR READERS WHO MAY NOT BE FAMILIAR WITH THE KIOWA TRADITION, COULD YOU EXPLAIN THE SIGNIFICANCE OF BEADWORK WITHIN THAT CULTURE?

Beadwork is extremely personal. There's a lot that goes into creating outfits for people. I need to know their background, what tribe they're from, the colors the tribe uses, whether there are any logos, any colors you can't use, and any special crests, crowns, or anything that needs to go in the beadwork to make it as personal as possible.

To be considered traditional, you have to understand and know what you're wearing. The traditional beadwork that we do tells a story. It tells who you are, where you're from, and who your family is.
The beadwork [color] is what really tells you what tribe or what area your tribe might be from. So the Sioux people use red, white, and yellow; the Iroquois use florals, purples, and strawberries; the Navajo people use browns and earth colors; and we, the Kiowas, have the standard black, blue, red, orange, yellow, and green, especially green or turquoise.

Beadwork also includes elements that represent family. So, within my family, we have what we call a waterbird. That waterbird is [something] I only create for my family. So now, you look at one of my daughters and their outfits; you can tell by the dress that she's from the Southern Plains, right? You can tell by the colors: the black, blue, red, orange, yellow, green. And you can tell, then, by the waterbirds on her that she's a Tonepahhote.

BEYOND THE DESIGNS THEMSELVES, ARE THERE BEADWORK TECHNIQUES OR METHODS THAT ARE UNIQUELY KIOWA?

There are two main styles of beading. One is the loom work. That's what I specialize in. They all have to match, be the same size, and lay flat. The other style is what they call lazy stitch, or appliqué, where it's like 5 beads in a row. Most of the beadwork worn by Kiowa people is loom work.

YOU SHARED THAT YOUR MOTHER CONTINUES TO GUIDE YOUR BEADWORK THROUGH DREAMS. IS DREAMING OF AND RECEIVING GUIDANCE FROM ANCESTORS SOMETHING THAT HOLDS CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE WITHIN THE KIOWA COMMUNITY, OR IS THAT A MORE PERSONAL EXPERIENCE FOR YOU?

That has been my journey. My mother and I were extremely close. I'd never had breakfast or dinner without my mother. And she helped raise my children with me while I went to school. If I didn't have my mom to help me, I wouldn't have been able to go to school because I couldn't afford daycare. She was the foundation of who we are as women in my family.

BEYOND TRADITIONAL AND CEREMONIAL BEADWORK, DO YOU EVER CREATE PIECES SIMPLY BECAUSE YOU'RE INSPIRED BY A PARTICULAR DESIGN OR IDEA?

Oh absolutely. I mean, what I do is I just bead. So whatever comes across my mind today, I make. Because it's not tribe-specific; it's just something that came to me, and I thought, okay, let me fix that, let me make that, let me try that out.
I do a lot of graduation stuff. Graduation, I think, is the most important for Native American students, whether it's high school or college. I make a lot of medallions and necklaces for graduation. It's all Native students; I don't do it for anybody else. These are our people, and they're going to be the people who are going to be stepping into the world to make decisions for us, and hoping that being educated teaches them the skills and the ability to think critically so that they can make conscious choices that are going to be good for our people.

HOW DOES IT FEEL TO KNOW THAT YOU'RE THE ONE CARRYING ON YOUR FAMILY'S BEADWORK TRADITION?

When I was asked to go to the Smithsonian, I thought they were teasing me at first. I didn't realize I was creating a legacy. And then I started really looking at the stuff I was creating and thinking, wow, they can be considered art. Then I got an invitation from Drexel University here in "Philadelphia," and they asked me to be their artist-in-residence. And they did this huge display. And at the end of that, I had to do a lecture on my beadwork. That lecture was standing room only. I had no idea how many people were so interested in my work. And again, that was when I really thought, "Wow, you know? I've kind of made it." It is really cool that so many people appreciate what I do.

The topping on the cake for me, though, was last year when my piece won first place [in the Contemporary Style category at the Kiowa Art Show] with my Kiowa people, meaning that they really...well, I'm gonna get emotional. They really appreciated what I made. Honoring me with that award is the epitome of all my work. It was so special for me because when you're recognized by your own. It's really a wonderful, wonderful feeling.

DECOLONIZED BEATZ



Joy Tonnepahote's beaded belt received First Place in the Contemporary Style category at the Hunting Horse Kiowa Art Show. It was the first piece she had ever entered in a juried exhibition, making the recognition from her own Kiowa community especially meaningful. Photo: Joy Tonnepahote, July 3, 2026.

HAVE YOU SHARED THIS TRADITION WITH YOUR CHILDREN? WILL THEY CARRY ON THE LEGACY?

When my daughters turned 18—I have two daughters—and graduated from high school, I made both of them fully beaded buckskins. And I told them, "That's the last one I'll make for you because now you need to learn how to make it yourself. I'll help you, and I'll guide you, but those are the last two that I'm gonna make for you." I said, "You need to learn how to do this, because it's just you." Now both my daughters are able to bead and create and make for their children as well.

ARE YOU DOING ANYTHING CURRENTLY TO SHARE THE TRADITION WITH THE PUBLIC? ARE YOU LEADING ANY WORKSHOPS OR CLASSES?

I have an exhibit in October at Greater Valley Penn State, and they're gonna be doing a showcase of my beadwork with some other artists as well. Throughout the year, I'm asked to come in, demonstrate, show my beadwork, and then talk to a crowd. When I go to powwows, that's where I display my big pieces, my big artwork, but I also try to educate, no matter where I am and what I'm doing, so that people walk away from my table knowing more than they did when they stopped. And I also let little kids touch the beads. I'll put some in their hand and say, "See how small these are?"

WHEN YOU THINK ABOUT THE FUTURE OF KIOWA BEADWORK, WHAT GIVES YOU HOPE?

The Kiowa people's understanding falls to education. I think educating people, native and non-native, about who we are, how we came about, and how we are resilient and are still here, and that there are those of us who carry on that legacy of our people. I see a lot of educational language within my tribe; they're having classes and doing things amongst themselves to generate a new desire for the younger generation coming along. And I think that's a very positive thing and something that I definitely want to be part of.

PHOTO ESSAY

LOLE O KA LĀ: HAWAIIAN RESILIENCE THROUGH FASHION

BY ELIZABETH NOHEA COLEMAN

"...and this is my *lole o ka lā*!" The refrain echoes throughout Hawai'i's expanding social media presence as more and more young Native Hawaiians take to Instagram and TikTok to show off their #LoleOKaLā (outfit of the day) for the annual Merrie Monarch Festival—a week-long celebration of Hawaiian culture through hana *no'eau* (art), *mele* (music), *oli* (chant), and *hula* (dance) culminating in Hawai'i's most prestigious hula competition. Amid the week's cultural expressions, the newest showstopper is Hawaiian fashion, seen in crowds of *kānaka* (people) gathering in Hilo. From the festival grounds to social media, the visual explosion of Hawaiian fashion underscores a booming revitalization of cultural affirmation and resilience through the simple yet ceremonial act of adorning oneself in *lole aloha* (aloha attire).

One of the most iconic lole aloha drapings throughout past decades has been the *Mu'umu'u*. Born from floor-length, loose-fitting dresses with modest necklines and long sleeves introduced to Hawai'i by Christian missionaries in the early 19th century, the *Holokū* was the original Hawaiian adaptation of this Western garment. As a form of resistance, Hawaiian Christian converts further adapted this silhouette to be more practical for everyday wear and Hawai'i's warm climate: they shortened the sleeves, and the *Holokū* became the *Mu'umu'u*, meaning "cut off." Over time, the *Mu'umu'u* became a symbol of Hawaiian fashion, beloved well beyond Hawai'i's borders. Today, a growing community of younger Hawaiians has returned to adorning themselves in *Mu'umu'u*, alongside the tutus and aunties who have passed this tradition down from generation to generation.

In 2014, the phrase "*Mu'umu'u* Month" was coined on social media by Shannon Hiramoto, a Kaua'i designer, to honor the collection of vintage *Mu'umu'u* her friend's mother handed down to her. January became the runway to showcase *lole o ka lā*, and the many beautiful patterns, silhouettes, and designs found in vintage and modern *Mu'umu'u*. In the eight years since, *Mu'umu'u* Month has gained popularity, revealing day after day beautiful *Mu'umu'u* worn by Hawaiians of all ages across the *pae'āina* (Hawaiian archipelago).

For some, the everyday practice of *lole aloha* adornment does not end in January. O'ahu Kanaka 'Ōiwi Franceska Durkin-Tang has spent the past several years wearing *Mu'umu'u* as her lole o *ka lā*, despite never feeling drawn to *lole aloha* or connected to her Hawaiian culture growing up. Her mindset began to change when Franceska was confronted with the passing of her beloved grandma, who raised her and with whom she had a very close bond. "I remember my grandma dressing up for church; she was always adorned in a beautiful *Mu'umu'u* alongside the other aunties. I always admired their grace, how they moved through a room, and how they treated people."

These memories inspired Franceska to explore wearing a *Mu'umu'u* to honor and connect with her grandma and her cultural identity. "I was in this shift in my life, and I just went out to this random thrift store in Kona [on Hawai'i Island], and I found some *mu'u*, and I just felt so beautiful in it. It was a *Bete*, and my grandma always wore the most beautiful *Betes* [traditionally styled *mu'umu'us* designed by Bete Inc, founded by Betty Manchester in 1959]." A vulnerable moment of yearning for connection with a lost loved one became the start of Franceska's journey to build her own collection of vintage *Mu'umu'u*.

Now, Franceska feels a great sense of cultural pride in her *lole* o *ka lā*. "I am Hawaiian. I'm not just dressing like this just to dress like this; it's who I am. There's something beautiful about being overtly Hawaiian and dressing overtly Hawaiian. I represent who I am as a *kanaka* outwardly. It's a way of honoring our ancestors."

For the designers, pride in the *lole* lies in intentionally weaving *ha'i mo'olelo* (storytelling) into the garments. "There are different ways to include the *mo'olelo* into the garments, and that's always going to have to do with a print, your colors, even a silhouette can tell a story just in itself," says Ka'iukapu Baker, an emerging costume and fashion designer and cultural practitioner. Ka'iu was raised in the *Hana Keaka* (Hawaiian Theater) program and is a proud Native speaker and *kaiapuni* (Hawaiian language immersion) graduate.

DECOLONIZED BEATZ



Franceska Durkin-Tang has curated a collection of Mu'umu'u that now fills her closet in her family's five-generation home, in Kaimukī, on the island of O'ahu. This two-toned turquoise garment was designed at T&L Mu'umu'u Factory, which has designed Mu'umu'u in Hawai'i for nearly 40 years. This look is styled with a gifted Tahitian lei wana (sea urchin necklace) and a complementary pāpale (hat) woven of lauhala (pandanus leaves) and haloed by a brown and blue feathered lei hulu (feather lei). Photo credit: Nohea Coleman, August 2, 2026.

"The most influential thing in my life and my design process is my language, and being someone who can speak the language, read the language, articulate, and orally pass down the knowledge. I utilize a lot of Hawaiian scriptures to understand how our *kūpunas* (Elders, Ancestors) were thinking at the time they were creating, be inspired by the generations that came before me, and be my most authentic self as a Hawaiian." Part of that authenticity also comes from a deep connection to *'āina* (land) and *kūpuna*. When Ka'iu designs garments to represent a specific place, they are intentionally sewn, dyed, and printed with the *mo'olelo* of that *'āina* or of its people.

To begin this process of *ha'i mo'olelo* through her designing, Ka'iu turns to *'ike kūpuna* (ancestral knowledge) found in *mele*, *oli*, *hula*, and recordings of *mānaleo* (native speakers) found on *Kani'āina* (Voices of the Land), an educational resource for Hawaiian language preservation. Researching *'ike kupuna* is critical not only to the design process, but also to the designer's ability to stand out in Hawai'i's rapidly expanding fashion landscape. "There are so many fashion brands in Hawai'i now that it's kind of hard to be unique. And I think the most unique thing you can do is to just do your research super hard and then be super keen to put all the *mana* (divine power) and intention into the garment."

As a cultural practitioner, Ka'iu believes that the most effective way to connect with *'ike kūpuna* is to practice and perpetuate traditional practices. "With traditional textiles, it is a tedious process, but I think everybody should make something traditional in their life, and then try to do a modern take on it to see which one is more valuable to them."



In her family's Kaimukī home, Franceska displays memories of nieces, cousins, parents, aunties, and her sister draped in Mu'umu'u and centered by the matriarch, Franceska's grandma Avis-Ann Tang (Wills). Photo credit: Nohea Coleman, August 2, 2026.

Ka'iu had this experience herself when she endeavored to design a *holokū* made entirely of *kapa*, a traditional fiber made from *wauke* (mulberry) bark that is stripped, soaked for two weeks, and pounded to spread out the fibers and create the sturdy cloth. "That was probably the hardest thing I had to do in my life. It was very ambitious, but we did it, and I'm very proud of it." The process of pounding *kapa* allowed Ka'iu to share an experience with her *kūpuna*. "It was very special to be in a place where *kūpuna* would have been and be in the exact position of sitting, of being with the *kapa*, having your *kua* (base), having your *i'e kuku* (pounding implement), and just jamming like that."

Cultural expression through adornment has influenced more young artists and wearers alike to pursue *'ike kūpuna* as a way to better understand their heritage and to more authentically share the stories of our people. Though fashion in Hawai'i takes many forms, from modern *Mu'umu'u* to *kapa holokū*, the underlying thread behind *lole o ka lā* is a desire to connect with and uplift our Indigenous traditions through the physical demonstration and embodiment of our *kūpuna's* resilience.

DECOLONIZED BEATZ



FRANCESKA STANDS AT THE CORNER of her childhood street, looking out to *Lē'ahi* (Diamond Head), dressed in her Sunday best, like those attending the church down the road, which was founded by her great-great-grandmother, Ka'imi Kaniaupio, from her family's home. Photo credit: Nohea Coleman, August 2, 2026.



ON THE LEFT, Franceska wears one of the first *Mu'umu'u* she thrifted in Kona, designed by T&L Mu'umu'u Factory. This silhouette features puffed sleeves and tiered, two-toned ruffles lining the bottom hem. Woven by Karen Hasegawa of the Kona Weavers Hui, Franceska's *pāpale lauhala* (pandanus leaf hat) features a lei hulu created by Leonetta Mills and a koa hat pin carved by "Uncle Wes". Photo credit: Nohea Coleman, August 2, 2026.

DECOLONIZED BEATZ



ON THE RIGHT, Franceska wears one of her first Betes. Adorned in bracelets, bangles, and cuffs of jade, pearl, gold, and lauhala, Franceska further accents this *Mu'u* with a precious *lei pūpū Ni'ihau* (Ni'ihau shell necklace). Photo credit: Nohea Coleman, August 2, 2026.



DECOLONIZED BEATZ



KAWEHI JOHNSTON LOVINGLY ADORNS the *kapa holokū* designed for her by her fiancé, Ka'iukapu Baker. This gown showcases a delicate *maka 'upena* (eye of the fishnet) watermark and intricate natural detailing. The garment is structured with a collar, yoke, and single-edge ruffles along the sleeves and hem, honoring the historic silhouette of the *holokū*. The neckline, sleeves, and bottom hem of the garment are dyed with natural Hawaiian dyes. *'Uki'uki* is a native lily whose berries produce a rich blue dye that turns vibrant pink when mixed with an acidic solution, such as vinegar. *'Ōlena*, Hawaiian turmeric, creates a potent goldenrod used to dye the boutonniere designed to represent *pua melia* (plumeria flower). Photo credit: Nohea Coleman, August 4, 2026.



KA'IUKAPU BAKER STANDS PROUDLY in the *māla wauke* (mulberry garden), where she harvested the bark used to create the kapa fibers for her *kapa holokū*. In her hair, she wears an *'ohe kāpala* (carved bamboo printing tool), which she carved herself and used to print the *ki'i* (design) adorning the neckline and ruffles of the garment. She carries the *mo'olelo* (story) of the *holokū* through her earrings, crafted from circular pieces of the same stamped *kapa*, each bearing the identical *'ohe kāpala* design. Her dress comes from *Moloka'i* design house Kealopiko and is stamped with a pattern of hexagonal shapes with a dot at the center to represent *'ulu* (breadfruit)—a symbol of growth and resilience worn directly on the body through the lole. Photo credit: Nohea Coleman, August 4, 2026.

KA'IU COMPLETED HER KAPA HOLOKŪ under the guidance of her *kumu* (teacher and mentor), Kaliko Spencer, alongside her professor, Maile Speetjens, as part of the Advanced Hawaiian Fiber Arts program at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. She designed the garment with her then-girlfriend in mind, and since its completion in 2024, the *kapa holokū* has been worn only by her now-fiancé, Kawehi Johnston. Photo credit: Nohea Coleman, August 4, 2026.

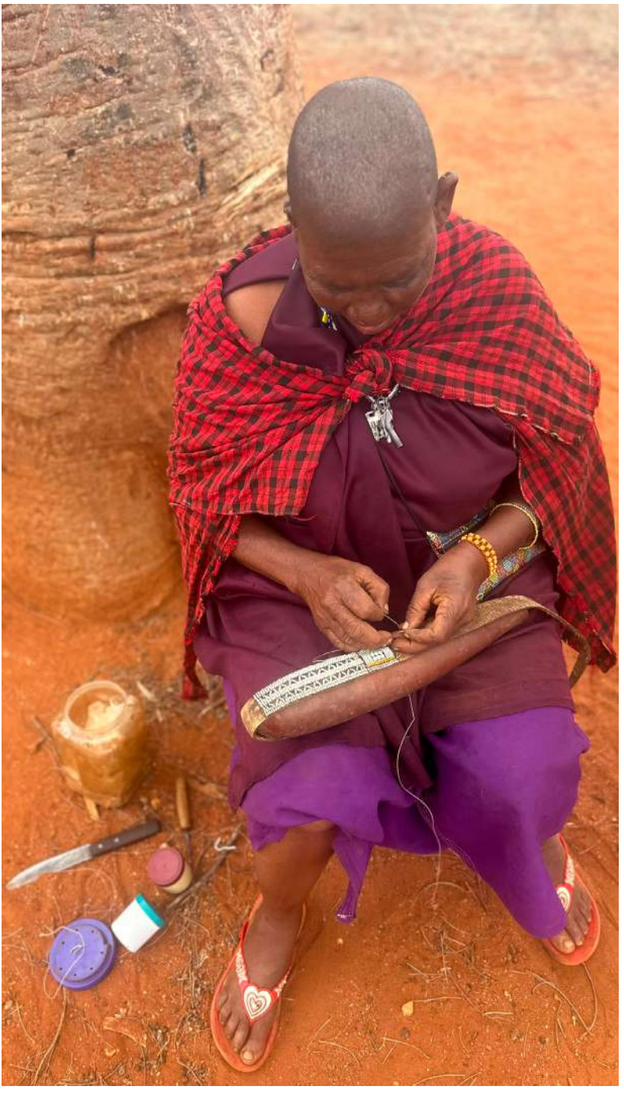


About the artist

Elizabeth Nohea Coleman is a Kanaka Maoli (Native Hawaiian) photographer, multi-passionate teaching artist, entrepreneur, advocate, and storyteller. As a creative, Nohea aims to build community through intentional storytelling rooted in aloha, making art that honors people, identity, land, and kinship. She strives to uplift her kaiāulu (community), especially young 'ōiwi artists, empowering them to cultivate and share their unique creative voice with curiosity and abandon. Beyond the arts, Nohea is a lifelong learner who grounds her creative spirit in hula, aloha 'āina, and the joy of exploration—through meaningful connections, reading, and travel.

GROWING UP MAASAI IN A CHANGING WORLD

BY NAOMI LEMUNGA



An Elder Maasai woman handcrafts Engoti in West Kilimanjaro, Northern Tanzania. Traditional beadwork carries stories of family, identity, and community. Photo credit: Naomi Lemunga, July 2026.

Before I knew the meaning of tradition, I was already living it. Growing up on the plains of Mount Kilimanjaro in Northern Tanzania, I learned through my mother's songs, the voices of my Elders, and the stories that shaped me as a Maasai girl.

WHERE MY STORY BEGINS

When I think about my childhood, I do not remember big events first. I remember voices, songs, and stories. These memories shaped me long before I understood what culture and identity meant.

I was born and raised in Maasai land on the plains beneath Mount Kilimanjaro in Northern Tanzania. There, traditions were not something we practiced only during ceremonies. They were part of our everyday lives. Looking back now, I realize that my first classroom was not a school. It was my home.

One of my happiest memories is watching my mother create *Engoti*, the colorful beadwork proudly made and worn by Maasai women. She usually worked in the morning or afternoon outside our home, where the daylight helped her carefully place every bead. I sat nearby, watching the patterns come together . To me, they were beautiful colors. To her, they carried meaning, identity, and tradition.

As she worked, my mother often sang in Maa. One song has stayed with me all my life: *"Malimana nanu pesho kakaata engipirita."*. Later, she told me it meant, "I am not struggling for nothing. I have goals." As a child, I simply loved hearing her sing. Today, I understand that her song taught me perseverance, hope, and purpose. Today, whenever I remember that song, I also remember her strength, patience, and love.

My father taught me that being Maasai is about more than traditional clothing or language. It is about respecting our community, caring for the land and livestock, listening to Elders, and protecting the values passed down through generations. Those ordinary moments became the foundation of who I am. Before I learned from books, I learned from my family. Before I understood history, I was already living my culture.

EVENINGS THAT TAUGHT ME TO LISTEN

When the day ended and the air became cooler, our community gathered. Evenings brought people of all ages together to share knowledge. One of the most important traditions I grew up with was *Oloongukuuni*, ancient folktales about cattle, heroes, and legends. Whoever was the oldest person present would begin the story. As soon as the elder started speaking, every child became quiet.

We listened carefully as the stories were told. These stories taught us courage, kindness, honesty, and our responsibilities to one another. After the stories came one of my favorite moments of the evening: *Oloyete*, our traditional riddles. The elder would call out: "Oloyeeeteeee!" And all the children would answer: "Eewo!"

Then the riddles would begin. We laughed, guessed, and learned to think carefully. At the end of the evening, my grandmother often gave us a blessing:

"Mekitoripo Enkai."
"May God protect you."

Even today, those words still live in my heart. They remind me of the warmth of my family and the power of spoken traditions.



Elders and young people gather outdoors in Northern Tanzania to share Oloongukuuni, traditional Maasai folktales about cattle, heroes, and legends. These storytelling gatherings help pass knowledge, history, and values from one generation to the next. Photo by Naomi Lemunga, July 2026.

WHAT THE BEADS REMEMBER

As I grew older, I began to understand that our traditions are carried not only through stories and language but also through the work of our hands. The things I saw every day as a child became some of my most meaningful memories as an adult.

One of those memories is watching Maasai women create Engoti, our traditional beadwork. As a child, I was fascinated by the patience and skill required to create beadwork. I admired the women who carefully arranged colorful beads into meaningful patterns, carrying stories, identity, and tradition through their hands. Today, I understand that Engoti is more than decoration it expresses identity and preserves tradition.

Just like the beadwork itself, our culture is built one piece at a time. Every song my mother sang, every story shared during *Oloongukuuni*, every riddle in Oloyete, and every blessing from my grandmother added another piece to the person I was becoming.

At home, we spoke Maa every day. Through it, we shared our values, history, prayers, songs, and blessings. Every time I speak Maa, I feel connected to my family and community.

As I have grown older, I have realizsed that traditions do not stop us from moving forward. Instead, they give us strong roots as we grow. Education and meeting people from different cultures have helped me grow, but they have also made me appreciate my Maasai identity even more.

WOMEN CARRY OUR FUTURE

As I grew older, I realized Maasai women are teachers, caregivers, and the first guides in a child 's life. From mothers and grandmothers to respected older women in the community, they help shape the future long before children are old enough to understand the importance of their work.

One tradition that shows this is *Enkipukonoto Eaji*, a ceremony that welcomes a new baby into the community. During this ceremony, an Elder woman guides the mother and chooses a respected name that connects the child to their family and community. The ceremony welcomes the child with love, responsibility, and belonging.

Watching the women in my community taught me that culture is preserved through everyday actions, conversations, and examples.

Today, Maasai women continue to balance tradition with education, family, and community life while keeping our culture alive. Their strength reminds me that traditions do not disappear when the world changes. They continue through the people who value them and choose to pass them on.

GROWING UP MAASAI IN A CHANGING WORLD

The world around my community has changed in many ways. More children are going to school. Technology connects us with people across the world. Climate change has affected the land that many Maasai families depend on, and modern life continues to bring new opportunities and new challenges.

As a young Maasai woman, I believe education and tradition can grow together. We can embrace new opportunities while continuing to speak Maa and honour our customs. Our culture is not something that belongs only in the past. It grows with every generation that chooses to carry it forward.

As I grow older, I have come to understand that culture is not something we inherit once and keep forever. It is something we choose to carry every day. Every time I speak Maa, remember a story told during *Oloongukuuni*, smile at the call of *"Oloyeeeteeee!"*,



Maasai women gather during Enkipukonoto Eaji, a traditional naming ceremony for a newborn child in Northern Tanzania. During this ceremony, an Elder woman guides the mother by helping her choose a respected name that connects the child to family, community, and future generations. Photo by Naomi Lemunga, May 2026.

or think of my mother's quiet determination as she worked and sang, I am choosing to keep those traditions alive...

For me, the beads my mother made are more than beautiful objects. They remind me that every generation has a responsibility to add its own thread to the story without breaking the ones that came before. I hope is that future Maasai children will grow up hearing Maa spoken with pride, listening to the wisdom of their Elders, and knowing that our traditions are not only memories of the past—they are part of the future we are creating together.

About the author

Naomi Lemunga is a Maasai writer and storyteller from the Mount Kilimanjaro plains in Northern Tanzania. She writes about Indigenous knowledge, oral traditions, women, and cultural heritage through the experiences of her own community. "What the Beads Remember" is inspired by her childhood and the teachings of her family and Elders.

WHAT SURVIVAL LOOKS LIKE NOW

BY ISRAEL TEMMIE

There is a particular kind of violence that comes with being spoken of only in the past tense. For generations, Indigenous cultures across the "United States" and beyond have been described by outsiders as "vanishing," deemed as artifacts to be salvaged before they disappear entirely. Museums have built entire wings based on that premise. Textbooks still frame Native nations as a chapter that has closed. But walk onto a seed farm in the Midwest of the "U.S.," sit in a language nest in Hawaii, or watch a bison herd move across restored grassland in "Montana," and a different story unfolds, one where tradition is not a relic preserved behind glass but a practice still evolving, adapting, and being debated.

This is the story that matters now: not whether Indigenous cultures survived colonization but how they continue to exist in ways that refuse the framework that views Indigeneity as extinct.

KEEPING TRADITIONS ALIVE THROUGH LANGUAGE

Language is often treated as the clearest marker of cultural death or survival, and the numbers explain why. A 2016 joint analysis by the "U.S." Departments of Education, Interior, and Health and Human Services found that dozens of Indigenous languages are critically endangered, including Eyak in "Alaska," which has no first-language speakers, and many others with only a handful of fluent Elders remaining. The report warned that, without sustained revitalization efforts, fewer than 20 Native languages may still be in active use in the country by 2050.

That trajectory did not happen by accident. Between 1819 and the late twentieth century, the U.S. government operated a nationwide system of Indigenous boarding schools designed to assimilate Native children into Euro-American society. The "U.S." Department of the Interior identified more than 18,000 Indian children who attended Federal Indian boarding schools, where they were forcibly separated from their families and communities and often forbidden from speaking their languages, practicing their traditions, or maintaining cultural ties. The lasting effects include interrupted language transmission, intergenerational trauma, and the loss of cultural knowledge that many Indigenous communities are now working to restore. In October 2024, the "U.S." government, under then-Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland, the first Native American cabinet secretary in the "U.S.", formally acknowledged this history through the final volume of the Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative Investigative Report, Volume II.

But the response to that history is not archival. It is instructional, communal, and ongoing. The Wôpanâak Language Reclamation Project, a collaboration among the Assonet, Mashpee, Aquinnah, and Herring Pond Wampanoag communities, whose ancestral homelands span southeastern "Massachusetts" and the islands of "Martha's Vineyard" and "Nantucket," has spent decades rebuilding fluency in the Wôpanâak language, which had no fluent native speakers by the late nineteenth century. Using historical documents to reconstruct its grammar and vocabulary, the project now teaches the language through community classes, educational programs, and immersion initiatives, helping children and adults learn and use Wôpanâak in everyday life. Similar efforts are taking place in other Indigenous communities. The Northern Cheyenne Language Consortium, which serves the Northern Cheyenne Nation in southeastern Montana, develops textbooks, dictionaries, digital resources, and teacher training materials to strengthen the use of the Cheyenne language in schools, homes, and community life. Likewise, the Apache Language Consortium, which supports several Apache Nations across Arizona and New Mexico, develops language learning materials, curriculum resources, and educator training to revitalize Apache languages for new generations rather than preserve them solely as historical records.

While the "U.S." federal government took an important symbolic step with the release of its 10 Year National Plan on Native Language Revitalization, released in December 2024, many of its recommendations remain aspirational rather than fully implemented. The plan proposed expanding language nests for children under seven, establishing 100 new Native language immersion schools, training 10,000 Native language teachers, and increasing direct support for community-led revitalization efforts in partnership with Tribal Nations. It also acknowledged that existing federal investment was insufficient: Native language revitalization programs administered through the Departments of the Interior, Education, and Health and Human Services received approximately $41.5 million in fiscal year 2024,

while the plan estimates that achieving its goals will require a $16.7 billion investment over the following decade. Although existing grant programs, including the Esther Martinez Native American Languages Program, continue to receive federal funding, Congress has not appropriated funding at the scale envisioned by the plan. As a result, Indigenous communities continue to carry much of the work of language revitalization themselves, defining fluency and cultural renewal according to their own priorities rather than external benchmarks.

FOODWAYS AS AN ACT OF RETURN

Just as communities are revitalizing their languages to preserve their cultures, food sovereignty movements are reclaiming traditional food systems to protect Indigenous knowledge, identity, and ways of life. For many Indigenous Nations, seed keeping is about more than preserving crops. Seeds carry generations of ecological knowledge, planting and harvesting practices, ceremonies, and relationships to the land. Saving and replanting ancestral seeds helps ensure that these traditions continue to be practiced, while strengthening Indigenous food sovereignty and reducing dependence on commercial seed systems.

The Indigenous Seed Keepers Network', a program of the Native American Food Sovereignty Alliance', supports Tribal communities across North America through regional networks, including an Upper Midwest network serving Indigenous communities in “Minnesota,” “Wisconsin,” “Michigan,” “Iowa,” “North Dakota,” and “South Dakota.” Through a partnership with the “U.S.” Department of Agriculture, the network has helped establish six regional Indigenous seed-saving hubs and distributed seed-cleaning fanning mills that allow communities to preserve and replant traditional varieties of corn, beans, squash, sunflowers, and other culturally significant crops while expanding local seed access and seed stewardship.

Writing in the Indiana Daily Student', columnist Odessa Lyon argues that seed sovereignty is inseparable from resisting industrial monoculture because Indigenous seeds preserve more than biodiversity; they also sustain foodways, seasonal growing practices, creation stories, community knowledge, and reciprocal relationships with the land that have shaped Indigenous life for generations.

Chefs are another part of this continuum, transforming many of the traditional ingredients safeguarded through Indigenous seed stewardship and food sovereignty efforts into everyday meals that reconnect communities with their culinary heritage. Sean Sherman, an Oglala Lakota chef from the Pine Ridge Reservation in “South Dakota,” and Crystal Wahpepah, a citizen of the Kickapoo Tribe of “Oklahoma,” have partnered with the “U.S.” Department of Agriculture’s Indigenous Food Sovereignty Initiative to develop recipes and educational videos featuring Indigenous ingredients such as wild rice, corn, squash, beans, berries, and bison. Designed for home kitchens and community use, these resources encourage Native families to cook with traditional foods as part of everyday life. The Traditional Eastern Woodlands Foodways Alliance has extended this work by advocating for Indigenous foods to be recognized as reimbursable items in school meal programs, helping bring culturally significant foods into school cafeterias and reconnecting Native students with culinary traditions that have sustained their communities for generations.

LAND AS RELATIONSHIP, NOT BACKDROP

Perhaps nowhere is the living, evolving nature of tradition clearer than in the return of bison to Tribal lands. For many Plains Nations, including the Blackfeet Nation in “Montana,” the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes of “Oklahoma,” the Rosebud Sioux Tribe in “South Dakota,” and the Assiniboine and Sioux Tribes of the Fort Peck Reservation in “Montana,” bison have long been central to cultural, spiritual, and economic life. They feature in creation stories, ceremonies, seasonal gatherings, and traditional ecological knowledge, while providing food, clothing, tools, and shelter. By the late 1880s, the bison population had plummeted from an estimated 30 to 60 million at the beginning of the nineteenth century to fewer than 1,000 animals. The decline was driven by commercial hide hunting, widespread sport shooting by westward settlers and railroad travelers, and “U.S.” military-backed policies that promoted the destruction of bison to undermine the lifeways and resistance of Plains Indigenous Nations.

Today, the InterTribal Buffalo Council works with more than 80 Tribal Nations to return live bison from public and conservation herds to Tribal lands, where they are managed by Indigenous communities for cultural revitalization, ecological restoration, and food sovereignty. The council carries out this work in partnership with organizations including The Nature Conservancy and the National Wildlife Federation. In 2025 alone, more than 20 tribal nations welcomed over 1,500 bison back to their lands, part of a total exceeding 25,000 now under Tribal stewardship across the “United States.”

What makes this a living practice rather than a preservation project is the language participants use to describe it. For many Plains Indigenous Nations, bison are not viewed simply as wildlife but as relatives whose presence sustains cultural, spiritual, and ecological relationships. Their return makes it possible to revive ceremonies, seasonal harvest traditions, hide tanning, meat preparation, storytelling, and the transmission of traditional ecological knowledge that depend on bison remaining part of everyday community life. Tribal leaders and conservation partners alike describe this process as rematriation, an Indigenous framework for restoring relationships and balance rather than simply restocking animals. At the Fort Peck Reservation in northeastern “Montana,” the Assiniboine and Sioux Tribes have paired herd expansion with youth programs that teach winter counts, traditional ecological knowledge, and range science, treating bison restoration as inseparable from teaching younger generations how to care for the land and understand their cultural responsibilities. Jason Baldes, an Eastern Shoshone bison program manager, has described the work as reconnecting communities with relationships that federal policies deliberately disrupted, framing restoration not as nostalgia but as cultural renewal and healing.

CONTINUITY AS RESISTANCE

None of these traditions, whether expressed through language revitalization, seed stewardship, or bison restoration, reflect a culture in decline. Instead, they reveal Indigenous communities actively negotiating what it means to carry knowledge forward under conditions colonialism never intended them to survive. Every seed hub, language immersion classroom, and bison herd is also an argument: that Indigenous Nations are not curators of their own history but authors of its next chapter. The distinction matters because the archive frame allows outside institutions to decide when a culture is over. The living practice frame does not ask permission.

What survival looks like now is not simply the preservation of traditions, but the assertion of Indigenous self-determination. Across the “United States,” Native Nations are rebuilding languages once pushed to the brink of extinction, restoring traditional food systems through community-led seed stewardship, and returning more than 25,000 bison to Tribal care. Together, these efforts challenge the long-standing narrative that Indigenous cultures belong to the past. They show that tradition is not measured by how faithfully it reproduces history, but by its ability to adapt, sustain communities, and shape the future on Indigenous terms. What is being preserved is not only language, food, or bison, but the relationships, knowledge systems, and responsibilities that have connected Indigenous peoples to their lands for generations. In that sense, survival is no longer simply about enduring—it is about defining what comes next.

About the author

Israel Temmie is a freelance writer and researcher exploring power, land, and cultural memory. His work centers on Indigenous and frontline communities’ responses to climate, extraction, and social change. You can view his portfolio at *https://temmie022.github.io/Israel-Temmie-portfolio/.*

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INTERVIEW WITH REBECCA NAGLE



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Photo credit: Brittany Bendabout.



Photo credit: Nohea Coleman, August 4, 2026.

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