CRUSHING COLONIALISM

THE MAGAZINE

September 2025 | Edition 08



COUNTRY OF THE MAJORITY

How minority tribes in Nigeria navigate fractured identity.

ANCESTRAL ANSWER KEY

An ancestral conversation on layered identities.

RECLAIMING INDIGENOUS MEMORY

Indigenous spaces that are shaping post-Soviet identities.

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Readers,

To be Indigenous is to carry memory in motion. It is to exist in relationship—with land, with ancestors, with community—and often, in tension with systems that have tried to erase all of the above. This issue of *The Magazine* is a tribute to that complexity: to the ways Indigenous identity is continually shaped, questioned, resisted, and reclaimed across time and geography.

Indigenous identity is not a singular experience. It is a constellation of languages, practices, worldviews, and lineages, sometimes clear and uninterrupted, other times fractured by the violence of colonization, forced assimilation, or systemic erasure. For many, navigating identity means not just answering the question of who we are, but also who gets to decide. This navigation is both deeply personal and deeply political. In this issue, we honor stories that speak to that navigation.

From Nigeria, we share a moving reflection on how minority tribes navigate life in a nation that often denies them a true sense of belonging—a piece that lays bare the weight of imposed identities and the quiet, daily acts of resistance that keep cultural memory alive. From the so-called "United States," we present a striking poem following a young Afro-Indigenous girl as she questions her identity, ancestry, and place in the world. Alongside it, an essay examines contemporary Indigeneity in the so-called "United States," where enrollment and recognition often fall short of capturing the complexity of belonging, and where movements like The Indigenous Enough Project work to reclaim identity, community, and sovereignty on Indigenous terms.

Through visual storytelling, we celebrate Yoruba traditions that honor twins, a double identity embraced as sacred, not split. Paintings from Colombia channel ancestral knowledge and serve as acts of protection, resistance, and healing. From Palestine, we feature a searing poem that weaves together questions of Indigeneity, Palestinian identity, gender, and survival, exposing how imposed categories fracture belonging while imagining new ways of being. And in Central Asia, we see how post-Soviet governments are turning to Indigenous sacred spaces and symbols to reimagine national identity, a reminder that even state-building narratives rely on what colonialism once tried to erase.

These stories are not only beautiful, they are urgent. Because to speak of Indigenous identity today is to speak of survival. Of creating and reclaiming space in a world that too often still dares to deny Indigenous existence.

At *The Magazine*, we believe that Indigenous voices belong at the center of global conversations. This issue is a step in that direction. We hope these contributions resonate, challenge, and invite reflection as you engage with the pages ahead.

In strength and solidarity,

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





Young twin girls in matching turquoise dresses attend the World Twins Festival in Igboora, Oyo State, Nigeria. Their father brought them from outside the town to celebrate their twinship alongside hundreds of others.
Photo credit: Bukunmi Oyewole, October 9, 2021

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Cover photo by Tunji Offeyi.
An Igarra woman in vibrant festival attire, embodying the bold cultural expressions of the Aba Festival in Igarra, Edo State, Western Nigeria.

*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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COUNTRY OF THE MAJORITY

BY TUNJI OFFEYI



An Igarra woman in vibrant festival attire, embodying the bold cultural expressions of the Aba Festival in Igarra, Edo State, western Nigeria. Photo credit: Tunji Offeyi.

"When I say I'm Nigerian..." begins Pendo George, an artisan from Igarra in Edo State, in western Nigeria, "the response is always the same: 'Yoruba? Hausa? Igbo?'" He shrugs. "Then they look away—because I'm none of those." His words capture a quiet ache that ripples across the country: the experience of being unseen, unheard, and unacknowledged in a country with over 400 ethnic groups, but one narrative.

This seemingly innocuous question is far from a casual icebreaker—it reveals how Nigeria, a country of many ethnic groups, remains largely structured around its three dominant tribes: Yoruba, Hausa, and Igbo. Labelled "major" tribes, they monopolize political power, shape cultural narratives, and dominate access to education, careers, and even belonging. Meanwhile, communities like the Igarra face systemic erasure, silencing, and alienation. This should not be the norm.

For minority communities like the Igarra, also known as the Etuno, national identity remains a contested terrain. Despite vibrant cultural histories, languages, and festivals, those outside the dominant triad often find themselves reduced to footnotes. This invisibility isn't accidental; it is the result of a systemic narrowing of identity, shaped by colonial hierarchies and perpetuated by post-independence policies that tether belonging to ancestry rather than citizenship. Yet, these communities, through their vibrant cultural expressions, continue to assert their presence and resilience, inspiring hope for a more inclusive future.

But this condition—commonly enforced through "Indigeneity" laws, which define identity based on paternal lineage instead of lived experience, and often require proof of ancestry from a particular region or ethnic group—has profound consequences.

Pendo's experience mirrors countless others—from the Bajju, Bakulu, Aytap, and Adara in Southern Kaduna to the Ijaws and Ogoni in Rivers—whose legitimacy is questioned because their surnames don't match the mainstream. It's not just about recognition; it's about access. Political exclusion, limited educational representation, and erasure from national discourse all conspire to fracture Nigeria's sense of unity. These consequences permeate everyday life: from denied scholarships and increased school fees to being told, "Go back to where your ancestors came from."

And yet, stories like Pendo's are not just laments—they are calls to expand the frame. To envision a Nigeria where heritage is celebrated in full color, not in grayscale. Where being Nigerian means being part of a chorus, not just an echo of three dominant voices. Pendo's assertion of identity, though quiet, is radical. It insists on visibility. It reminds us that belonging should not be a privilege—it should be a birthright.

Anthropologist Dr. Halima Bello emphasizes the psychological toll: "Stripped of legal status, culture, belonging, non-indigenes internalize an inferiority scandal. They learn early that their identity is a problem." Loss is not merely symbolic: discriminatory policies push minorities into underemployment and debt, exacerbating economic inequality. For instance, the "Indigeneity" laws often lead to denied scholarships and increased school fees, making education a privilege for the majority. As Human Rights Watch notes, such policies fuel intercommunal tension—from areas such as Plateau to Zangon Kataf—because socio-economic strain becomes ethnically coded "through divisive state and local government policies that discriminate on ethnic or religious lines..." and are worsened by "the failure of authorities to hold to account those responsible."

Zainab Bala, a graduate from Nigeria's Middle Belt living in Kaduna State, echoes this reality: "I've lived here my whole life," she says, "but I can't run for local office. They tell me, 'Go back to where your grandparents are from.'" She worries that her children may never feel a sense of belonging—in Kaduna, in Nigeria, or anywhere at all. The Middle Belt—often seen as Nigeria's cultural crossroads—spans a mosaic of ethnic and linguistic communities across central states like Benue, Plateau, Nasarawa, and parts of Kaduna. Though not officially recognized as a geopolitical zone, its people are often sidelined within political systems dominated by the major northern ethnic groups. Zainab's story reflects the complex realities of Indigeneity and belonging in a region where identity politics continue to shape access to citizenship rights and local representation.

But voices like hers are beginning to push for legislative change. In April 2025, Deputy Speaker Benjamin Kalu introduced a bill granting Indigene status to long-term residents or spouses, challenging ancestry-only definitions, as reported by *Vanguard* newspaper ("Yoruba youths reject Kalu's indigene bill"). If passed, the bill would significantly expand access to education, civil service jobs, scholarships, and subsidized housing by allowing individuals with ten years of residence or marital ties to qualify as Indigenes.

The British colonial administration perpetuated ethnic imbalances by organizing Nigeria into three dominant regional blocs: Hausa-Fulani in the North, Yoruba in the West, and Igbo in the East. These divisions were more than geographic—they served as political instruments. By implementing indirect rule, the British strengthened the authority of traditional rulers in the North while marginalizing minority groups throughout the Middle Belt and South-South regions.

In his incisive analysis of postcolonial governance in Nigeria, Professor Rotimi Suberu highlights a critical legacy of colonial administration: the entrenchment of regional power structures that perpetuate hegemonic ethnocentrism. At the heart of Nigeria's postcolonial challenges lies a blueprint of governance that did more than partition land—it embedded deep-seated inequities into the nation's fabric. The legacy of this design continues to shape Nigeria's federal structure, electoral politics, and debates on citizenship. Minority voices—such as Zainab Bala's in Kaduna—are often dismissed, an injustice that needs to be addressed. It's not because they lack legitimacy, but because the colonial blueprint still defines who is entitled to belong, lead, and be heard.

Another legacy of colonialism that still shapes our national identity is how our post-independence constitutions have reinforced exclusion through "Indigeneity" laws. These laws give special rights and opportunities—such as government jobs, university admissions, and political appointments—based on where a person's ancestors come from, rather than where they live. For example, certain constitutional rules require that ministers come from specific states or that citizenship is tied to ancestry. This system often favors paternal lineage and long-standing family roots, making it harder for people who live outside their ancestral regions to fully participate in society. As Human Rights Watch has noted, these policies have effectively made millions of Nigerians "second-class citizens," blocking them from key opportunities simply because of their background.

Rather than breaking with colonial patterns of exclusion, Nigeria's post-independence policies have continued to entrench them. Unlike countries such as Rwanda—where national belonging is now rooted in shared experience and civic participation—Nigeria maintains the "indigene–non-indigene" divide, a system enshrined in the 1979 and 1999 constitutions. These frameworks define "Indigene" status by paternal ancestry rather than by residency or social ties, and local governments issue Certificates of Indigeneity that determine who can access public education, employment, and political representation, as noted by the Minority Rights Group International. Rwanda, by contrast, deliberately dismantled ethnic classifications after the 1994 genocide to promote a unified national identity. Its model demonstrates that inclusive citizenship based on where people live and how they contribute to society—rather than where their ancestors came from—can help heal historical divisions and build stronger civic cohesion. Nigeria's continued reliance on inherited Indigeneity does the opposite: it reinforces exclusion and hinders the emergence of a truly shared national identity.

The consequences of this exclusionary framework are far-reaching. In practice, it legitimizes discriminatory policies that penalize those labeled as "non-indigenes." As former Vice President Yemi Osinbajo pointed out in 2021, this system amounts to a form of "apartheid," undermining Nigeria's professed commitment to unity and equality.

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To understand how Nigeria's indigeneity policies impact real communities, it helps to return to the lived experience of the Igarra people—also known as the Etuno—a minority group in Edo State. Their story reveals how structural exclusion plays out across cultural, legal, and generational lines. The Igarra are descendants of migrants from Idah and speak Etuno (or Igarra), a language closely related to Ebira. They reside in the Akoko Edo Local Government Area, where their town, also named Igarra, serves as the administrative headquarters. Surrounded by the rugged Kukuruku Hills, the area is known for its striking landscape and rich cultural heritage.

Yet in February 2025, the Igarra's Ekuechi masquerade festival was abruptly suspended after rivalries between masked troupes escalated into threats of violence. Although the suspension was justified on security grounds, it also reflected a deeper issue: the state's persistent neglect of minority communities. For the Igarra, this meant the silencing of a central expression of their cultural identity.

Born and raised in Igarra, Emmanuel Alaba recalls how his identity was often misunderstood: "At university, they handed me a joke: 'You aren't Igbo? Then why do you look like you could be from the East?' No one believed I'm Anetuno." Like many Igarra—also known as Anetuno—Emmanuel experienced firsthand how minority identities are misrecognized or erased in national narratives. He reflects on the recent suspension of the Ekuechi masquerade festival, describing how it left community elders "sitting at home, no drums, no dances." For him, growing up Anetuno meant navigating his cultural pride quietly, in a space where his heritage was rarely acknowledged. Without recognition or support from the state, he says, traditions like Ekuechi risk fading into memory. Furthermore, Nigerian anthropologist Dr. Aisha Musa notes, "when a festival is state-suspended, it signals that it's expendable—an extracurricular, not a rights-bearing tradition." What's often missed, she adds, is that these practices form a vital social infrastructure—one that sustains identity, cohesion, and intergenerational memory.

For many minority tribes in Nigeria, openly expressing cultural identity is a delicate balance, often approached with caution to avoid scrutiny or exclusion based on Indigeneity. A tribal elder from the Igarra Kingdom Council, speaking anonymously, reflects on this challenge: "Our youth learn English and Yoruba in school; no one teaches them Etuno anymore. The heart of our tribe is eroding."

Still, Igarra's resilience shines. Patriarchs and matriarchs quietly teach Etuno at home; they continue to stage their Irepa rites (rite of passage). But it's the activists who livestream Aba Festival clips, serving as a beacon of hope for the preservation of Igarra's culture. "That's our refusal," the elder explains. "If someone seeks to erase us, we shall remember ourselves." This sentiment echoes across Nigeria: the Ikwerre of Rivers State, the Osu descendants among the Igbo, and the Atyap in Kaduna—all preserve ancestral song, dance, and land rights, even when excluded from ethnic power plays.

> *"We are not asking for special favor," the elder says. "We only want to belong to our land, our people, our nation."*

Experts urge federal leadership to implement equitable reforms—something many states resist politically. Revitalizing cultural justice in Nigeria means acting on multiple fronts: legal reform to standardize Indigene-settler policy and remove ancestry limits, ensuring that residency and civic contribution carry equal legal weight; cultural recognition through funding for minority festivals, language preservation, and local museums; education reforms that rewrite curricula to include minority histories and challenge dominant ethnographic narratives; community empowerment through training cultural custodians and supporting oral history projects; and finally, identity redefinition—rebuilding a civic identity where one is Nigerian first, ethnic second.

In this moment, Nigeria stands at a crossroads. Its official mosaic of pluralism remains a façade while ethnic majoritarianism goes far deeper. The systemic exclusion of minority tribes like the Igarra shows that true unity requires embracing multiplicity, not just majority arithmetic. The voices of Emmanuel and the council of elders remind us of what's at stake. "We are not asking for special favor," the elder says. "We only want to belong to our land, our people, our nation."

Imagine a Nigeria where an Etuno (Igarra) child in Edo, a Bajju student in Kaduna, or an Ijaw woman in Abuja is not just tolerated but fully seen and celebrated, where history curricula honor the country's rich diversity, and state identity gives way to true national belonging. Such a Nigeria would be not only more just but also far stronger and more resilient.

Indigeneity must no longer serve as a gatekeeper to opportunity; the future demands a shift from ancestral privilege toward inclusive civic pluralism. Nigeria's greatest strength lies not in the numbers of its largest tribes, but in the full chorus of its many peoples.

About the author

Tunji Offeyi is an award-winning Nigerian-British journalist, poet, Salzburg Global Fellow, and a doctoral researcher in Heritage at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David. He has notable creative works and is a Regional Executive of the Liberal Democrats in the West Midlands, UK.

INDIGENOUS ENOUGH: REMATRIATING INDIGENOUS IDENTITY TODAY

BY RACHEL ARLENE REDEYE PORTER



Rachel Arlene Redeye Porter stands in front of her former elementary school, wearing a ribbon skirt and holding a sign that reads, "I will not erase myself." By returning to a place where she once felt invisible, she reclaims her presence and identity. Photo by Adriano Kalin, 2021

As Haudenosaunee people, we define the Indigenous women-led movement of rematriation as "Returning the Sacred to the Mother." Across Turtle Island (so-called "North America") and around the world, Indigenous women are reclaiming traditional teachings and fostering healing within our families, clan systems, Nations, and the world. Our resilience exists in the face of centuries of violence perpetrated against us by colonial governments and mainstream culture. In the context of the so-called "United States," culturally determined membership is challenged by blood quantum percentages and mainstream stereotypes, resulting in a hierarchy of authenticity within our communities. Systems inflicted upon us have blurred our ability to recognize and claim our people — regardless of status — and have shaped the discourse around who is considered "Indigenous Enough" to count.

As a first-generation unenrolled Onöndowa'ga:' (Seneca) Descendant, I ask, what would it look like to rematriate Indigenous identity narratives? Would honoring the sacredness of our children and their inherent connection to Mother Earth shift the conversation about who belongs? Would the way we judge ourselves and the relatives we hold at length soften? I have searched for places to explore these questions my entire life. Since I was five years old, I have understood that being a descendant means that I have no political voice within my Nation. In college, I struggled to figure out where I fit, and in my late 20s, I finally realized that if I didn't claim my Indigeneity, my spirit would never be at peace. In 2021, at the age of 30, I founded The Indigenous Enough Project. I hope to not only embody my own space within the continuum of my ancestors and future generations, but also to create a new space that affirms the identities of other

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Interactive element of the Identity/Identify exhibition at the Iroquois Museum in Howes Cave, New York. Visitors were invited to complete the sentence "I feel like I belong when …" by writing their responses in chalk on a blackboard. Photo by Rachel A. R. Porter, 2021

connected descendants, no matter where they are on their journey. The Indigenous Enough Project seeks to be a place where all Indigenous relatives can heal and repair relationships: with ourselves, with Creator, and with one another. All Indigenous peoples—recognized and unrecognized, enrolled and unenrolled, mixed or adopted, connected and re-connecting, disconnected or displaced, and disenrolled—are welcome.

Beginning in Fall 2025, The Indigenous Enough Project will be expanding further into the public sphere. For the last four years, our work has been informal and organic, primarily consisting of 1:1 and small group conversations among Indigenous community members, Indigenous justice activists, and traditional leaders. Beginning with spaces for connected descendants with the intention of expanding beyond that demographic, we will begin hosting Haudenosaunee-specific and intertribal spaces for descendants looking for community and connection. Individual coaching services for descendants looking for more tailored support will be available as well. We aim to provide as many of our offerings as we can at low-cost to no-cost price points and are currently in need of financial sponsorship to make this happen.

The support of enrolled community members will also be essential to the success of The Indigenous Enough Project. Among Haudenosaunee people, there continues to be widespread silence on the issue, but there are an increasing number of enrolled citizens bearing witness to the descendant experience. Accomplished traditional bone and antler carver, Hayden Haynes (Seneca Deer Clan, Kiowa, Muskoke) explores the relationship between enrolled and unenrolled Haudenosaunee people in his piece titled *Descendants and Dependants*, which was exhibited in 2021 as part of *Identity/Identify* exhibit at the Iroquois Museum in Howes Cave, New York. In his artist statement, he writes, "We cannot continue to sit by and watch our descendant sisters and brothers struggle […] They live their lives not being white enough or black enough to be accepted by those

groups and not Native enough to be accepted by the Natives. But we share the same history, spirits, struggles, victories, and blood in our veins. How long will it be before we take action?" A common critique is that enrolling on the father's line is not traditional and is at odds with defending the sovereignty of our nations, but the reality is that before colonization, adoptions were somewhat common, and the line between belonging and ostracization was significantly grayer.

I know firsthand the severity of the mental health crisis that Indigenous descendants face. Community silence and lack of access to traditional teachings is an incredibly isolating, confusing, and painful experience. To experience community-inflicted shame related to a desire to claim your own identity is a form of generational trauma and lateral violence that begins in circles between the mind and body. There is a lack of research on the specific mental health experiences of mixed-race, non-status Indigenous people, but it is well documented that multiracial individuals have worse mental health outcomes than monoracial people. Simultaneously, Indigenous people are 2.5 times more likely than the general population to experience severe psychological distress. Non-status Indigenous people, particularly those who are mixed race, have access to even fewer resources to support their specific self-development and wellbeing than either group on their own. With the ongoing attack by the Trump Administration on the people, places, traditions, resources, and words we rely on to uplift and define ourselves, The Indigenous Enough Project has never been more needed.

The phrase "Indigenous Enough" did not originate with me. It belongs to Indigenous people everywhere and organically trends in online articles about Indigenous identity, pops up in conversations with friends and family, and surfaces in academic articles. The common expression speaks to an experience that many Indigenous people—enrolled, unenrolled, living on rez or off—experience as they walk between two worlds, one rooted in their ancestral traditions and the other created specifically to erase and dominate those roots. Even within Nations such as my own, where citizenship continues to be passed traditionally through the mother, intertribal and interracial marriage has resulted in thousands of children being born to Native fathers who are not recognized as members of their Native mother's community. Others, like myself, born to non-Native mothers, have no enrollment in any Indigenous nation at all.

Marique S. Moss (Hidatsa/Dakota, African American), author of *Sweetgrass and Soulfood: A Memoir in Poems*, beautifully touches on these nuances. When I asked her how the phrase "Indigenous Enough" resonates with her lived experience as an enrolled Afro Indigenous woman she said, "The idea of being 'Indigenous Enough' is a wound many of us carry, especially those of us who are reconnecting, who are mixed/Afro Indigenous, who did not grow up with full access to our culture because of adoption, relocation, blood quantum, or assimilation, but I have come to understand that Indigeneity is not something you earn. It is a relationship you tend to. It lives in how you care for your community, how you show up for the land, how you protect language, story, medicine, and memory. Our ancestors did not measure belonging by paperwork or proximity. They measured it by responsibility. So I have stopped asking if I am 'Indigenous Enough.' I ask myself if I am living in a way that honors those who made me possible. And in that commitment, in that returning, I know I am." That sounds like rematriation to me.

> *"Our ancestors did not measure belonging by paperwork or proximity. They measured it by responsibility."*

The art of embracing one's true self vulnerably is a practice that Malia'Kekia Nicolini (Kanaka Maoli) knows well. Malia'Kekia is an internationally touring teaching artist and actress, and co-founder of B4 the Other Creation, which specializes in teaching play and vulnerability. For her, the concept of being "Indigenous Enough" is "a reminder that everything I want to be, I already am [and that there is no need] to bargain my identity in order to belong." Her work with B4 the Other Creations holds space for "exploration into individual and collective identity" rooted in the idea that "showing up and allowing ourselves to be fully seen is an invaluable tool for catalyzing foundational change in yourself, your community, and systemically."

We as Indigenous people have always belonged, we have always been enough, and I dream of the day when all of us can remember this truth together in our full bodies and spirits. In my experience, "tending" to our Indigeneity is a lifelong practice. Unboxing ourselves out of colonial restraints and speaking our truths out loud are essential in restoring a narrative of who we are that reflects the full scope of who we are today.

About the author

Rachel A. R. Porter is a queer, disabled, chronically ill Seneca descendant and storyteller of mixed ancestry. She earned her Master's in Human Security and Gender Analysis in International Affairs from The Fletcher School at Tufts University. She is the Founder of the Indigenous Enough Project, an initiative honoring the breadth of contemporary Indigeneity, and Co-Founder of Kneading Change, a narrative justice company.

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I INDIGENOUS

BY YAFFA

I can't be trans
I'm not white.
I'm...

I hesitate between Palestinian and Jordanian,
wondering which will be validated,
which denied — mostly desiring the least amount
of labor because fuck
relationships
Built in the perversion of identities —
I guess I can be trans
If I can be Palestinian
But that last part
Seems far off
Like a Dream that doesn't
Belong to me.

I say I'm indigenous
Years before others claim
The same and I wonder if
They know they denied my existence
On their paths to find
Their own.

Am I trans
Am I Palestinian
Am I autistic
Am I Muslim
I ask, unaware of how
I can be any without
The others
I realize identity doesn't
Theoretically work
That way
Palestine is being genocided
Trans is being fucked from the very beginning
Autism is being from a broken world
Muslím is being a caricature of spirituality
What is a world where palestine is not trans?
Muslim is not autistic?
I search for answers
Always finding the answer is white
Palestinian is white
Trans is white
Autistic is white
Even Muslim is white

I'm not white,
Dogs released at us
Sirens in the distance
Cops and states always aiming to erase us

Only white when self-accepting
Brown when loathing
What is a world that claims me white only when they envy.
I was not white on the streets.
I was not white failing.
I was not white depressed and suicidal.
I became white only when I healed.
Is white a synonym for healing?

Then why do you still kill us if you've healed?
Why do we kill one another
yearning for healing?
My entire life
I've been gendered as
Trans until I claimed
Transness and they
Called me cis

I only get sir'ed
Wearing makeup

White when I claimed
Palestine

White when I claimed
Indigenous

Sane when I claimed
Mad
Doctors pretending other doctors
Were wrong because I wasn't
Wrong

Who am I
If not a caricature
Of your own
Imaginations

Gurrrrl,
Keep thinking
Keep drowning
Keep whatever it is
Whiteness does on a
Tuesday

I'll be out here
Building what
You never could

About the author

Mx. Yaffa (they/she) is an acclaimed disabled, autistic, trans, queer, Muslim, and Indigenous Palestinian culture worker and organizer. The author of Blood Orange, Sage, Whispers Beneath the Orange Grove, and Desecrated Poppies, Yaffa is also editor of Inara: Light of Utopia and the host of Be Cute. Stay Dangerous. podcast. Yaffa's newest book Letters from a Living Utopia releases October 7, 2025 and is available for preorder via Common Notions.

PHOTO ESSAY

THE SACRED IDENTITY OF TWINS IN YORUBA TRADITION

BY BUKUNMI OYEWOLE



Taiwo and Kehinde Oguntoye, 40-year-old twin brothers and organizers of the World Twins Festival—officially launched in 2018—wear matching traditional Yoruba attire at the celebration in Igboora, Oyo State, Nigeria. They founded the festival to honor the uniqueness of twins and to showcase Igboora's distinction as the town with the highest twin birthrate in the world. Photo credit: Bukunmi Oyewole, October 9, 2021.

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In Yoruba spiritual belief, every person on earth has an unseen spiritual double. In the town of Igboora, located in Oyo State in southwest Nigeria, twins hold a unique and celebrated place in the community. Known for having the highest twin birth rate in the world, the town becomes a vibrant hub each year as twins from across Nigeria and beyond gather to honor their shared identity. This celebration takes shape as the World Twins Festival, an annual event filled with color, pageantry, and cultural pride. I had the opportunity to attend and document the festival through my lens.

In Yoruba tradition, twins are not just biological coincidences. They are considered sacred gifts from Olodumare, our supreme being. Culturally, we give them names with meaning: Taiwo, the one who tastes the world first, and Kehinde, the one who comes after. These names carry more than birth order; they have spiritual weight and identity. Whatever the reasons behind Igboora's unusually high twin birth rate—whether scientific, genetic, or linked to the local diet—what truly matters is how the community embraces and celebrates it.

The Yoruba are one of the largest Indigenous ethnic groups in Nigeria. They have a rich cultural heritage grounded in language, religion, art, and community. Their traditions are deeply rooted in reverence for ancestors, spiritual beliefs, and a strong sense of identity. For the Yoruba, identity is inseparable from ancestry, communal belonging, and spirituality. This connection is reflected in the names they carry, the stories passed down through generations, the rituals they uphold, and the vibrant way they celebrate festivals and life events.

The celebration of twins reinforces Yoruba cultural heritage by preserving deeply held beliefs and values. Honoring twins through festivals, prayers, and naming rituals reflects the community's strong commitment to tradition. In Yoruba spiritual belief, every person on earth has an unseen spiritual double—an entity that is not physically born. However, in the case of twins, it is believed that this spiritual counterpart has been born alongside them, giving their presence a profound spiritual significance.

My focus was on the twins themselves, the individuals who form the heart of this unique community. I captured the faces of twins from all walks of life: some had traveled long distances to take part in the celebration, while others proudly called Igboora home.

In a country where, not too long ago, twins were seen as a curse in some regions—believed to bring misfortune—it is powerful to witness a place where they are honored as sacred. In Igboora, twins were never feared; they have always been celebrated. This photo collection, *Friends from Heaven* shows how Indigenous identity can hold space for both history and healing.



Young twin girls in matching turquoise dresses attend the World Twins Festival in Igboora, Oyo State, Nigeria. Their father brought them from outside the town to celebrate their twinship alongside hundreds of others. Photo credit: Bukunmi Oyewole, October 9, 2021.



In Yoruba culture, twins are believed to share a profound spiritual bond. In Igboora, a town renowned for its unusually high twin birthrate, this connection is celebrated through the annual festival. These twin brothers have attended the event since it began in 2018, joining countless others in honoring their shared identity and cultural heritage. Photo credit: Bukunmi Oyewole, October 9, 2021



In Yoruba belief, twins are seen as a special blessing, often watched over by the deity Òrìṣà Ìbejì. These boys, brought by their parents to celebrate their shared bond, were excited to meet other twins and take part in the day's festivities. Photo credit: Bukunmi Oyewole, October 9, 2021

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Taiwo and Kehinde Obasekore, 31, wear matching purple traditional attire and headwraps at the World Twins Festival in Igboora, Oyo State, Nigeria. In Yoruba tradition, twins are believed to share a unique soul bond and a mystical duality, making them deeply revered and lovingly protected within their communities. Photo credit: Bukunmi Oyewole, October 9, 2021.



Identical twin sisters pose for a photograph at the World Twins Festival in Igboora, Oyo State, Nigeria. More than a joyful celebration, the festival stands as a powerful expression of cultural resilience and identity amid globalization and changing social norms. For many, attending is an act of cultural reclamation and a homage to ancestry, spirituality, and the sacred bond that twins hold in Yoruba tradition. Photo credit: Bukunmi Oyewole, October 9, 2021.



Twin brothers being interviewed at the World Twins Festival in Igboora, Oyo State, Nigeria. During the exchange, they described themselves as "wonderfully made" and "special beings", a sentiment shared by many at the festival, where twin identity is celebrated with pride. Photo credit: Bukunmi Oyewole, October 9, 2021



Taiwo and Kehinde Tijani, aged 51 and non-identical twin sisters from Igboora, at the World Twins Festival in Igboora, Oyo State, Nigeria. Though different in appearance, they share a strong bond and have attended the festival since it began in 2018, celebrating the unique identity and connection shared by twins in Yoruba culture. Photo credit: Bukunmi Oyewole, October 9, 2021

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Taiwo and Kehinde Adeyemo in matching green and cream outfits at the World Twins Festival in Igboora, Oyo State, Nigeria. The pair are known for their close bond and often attend twin-themed gatherings, connecting with fellow twins across different events. Photo credit: Bukunmi Oyewole, October 9, 2021

About the artist

Bukunmi Oyewole is a photographer whose art primarily spotlights present-day realities in Africa, offering a glimpse into the diverse landscapes, cultures, and stories of the continent. Through his lens, Bukunmi keeps creating a visual narrative that allows future generations to experience and appreciate Africa's rich lifestyle, even from across the globe. Also, his work explores the themes that revolve around climate change, using his art to bring attention to climate change issues and to create awareness and engagement with the public about the impacts of climate change.

POEM

ANCESTRAL ANSWER KEY

BY MARIQUE B. MOSS

"Ancestral Answer Key" is a poem about a young Afro-Indigenous girl who asks difficult questions about who she is and where she comes from. Her mother is Hidatsa. Her father is Black from Detroit, Michigan, with family roots that trace back to with family roots that trace back to the American south and farther still, across the Atlantic to Nigeria. As she grows, she turns to all of her ancestors for guidance. Her Hidatsa Magúu (grandmother), her Southern Gran, and her Nigerian Baba respond with memory, wisdom, and care. This poem explores identity, culture, and belonging through a conversation across generations and across continents.

Me:
I live in a city you never imagined.
How do I honor you here?

Hidatsa Magúu:
Child, we invented time travel before they called it memory.
Every story was our portal, every ceremony our rocket ship.
Honor travels through bloodstream, not geography.

Me:
I'm Black and Hidatsa.
Why do I have to prove ratios?

Nigerian Baba:
Baby, we been defying their logic since they started categorizing us.
You're not a problem to solve—
you're a revolution in progress.
Their equations can't hold infinity.

Me:
My hair confuses people.
Which version would you recognize?

Southern Great-Gran:
I pressed mine to blend in their static.
You wear yours to broadcast power.
Every curl is a satellite dish to wisdom they said was extinct.
We recognize truth in any texture.

Me:
Dating is complicated when you have to explain yourself first.

Hidatsa Magúu:
True love recognizes truth across centuries, across worlds.
The right soul will see your full spectrum without needing a translation key.
Wait for the one who speaks fluently to you.

Me:
They want me to pick one struggle.

Nigerian Baba:
We survived every catastrophe they manufactured for profit.
Your inheritance includes immunity to their newest poisons.
Collect all the trauma cards—
you're built for the full deck.

Me:
Is mixing sage with trap beats disrespectful?

Hidatsa Magúu:
Wisdom shapeshifts but never dies.
Your voice carries our frequencies into dimensions we dreamed of.
Tradition isn't fossil fuel—
it's solar power, always renewing.

You plant dreams in hostile terrain, grow gardens in concrete hearts.
Success is your spirit intact
after the empire falls.

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Me:
Our sisters keep disappearing.
How do I stay safe and visible?

All ancestors together:
You burn bright enough to rewrite their star charts.
Every step illuminates what they tried to eclipse.
We travel with you through every shadow—
your visibility is our victory song.

Me:
What if I'm doing this wrong?
What if I'm not enough?

Nigerian Baba:
Tradition isn't a museum piece gathering dust behind glass.
You're the living experiment
we dreamed into being.

Hidatsa Magúu:
You carry our genetic libraries in your quantum consciousness.
Every breath they gave you programs tomorrow's possibilities.
Wrong and enough are their words—
we speak in eternities.

Me:
Will you stay with me?

All ancestors together:
We travel with you through every dimension.
You can't lose us—
we are your compass pointing toward forever,
your factory settings for magnificence,
your username and password for the universe.



About the poem

"*Ancestral Answer Key*" is part of *Sweetgrass and Soul Food: A Memoir in Poems*, a collection of free verse poems exploring Afro Indigenous identity, survival, grief, and healing. Blending personal history with cultural reflection, it is both a celebration and an offering. The book is available on Amazon, Barnes and Noble, and at select independent bookstores.

About the author

Marique B. Moss (Miriguá Miásh, Woman in the Water) is an Afro-Indigenous writer, educator, and cultural worker from Minneapolis, Minnesota. An enrolled member of the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara Nation, she writes at the intersections of identity, survival, and healing, carrying forward the voices and stories of her people. Marique holds a degree in Native American and Indigenous Studies from Fort Lewis College and a law degree focused on Indigenous Peoples Law from the University of Oklahoma. She is the co-founder of Mashkiki Studios, an educational studio offering plant medicine teachings, cultural storytelling, and community wellness programs, and she oversees the NatuvWay Foundation, a national woman and Native led nonprofit working to close the digital divide and advance digital sovereignty and education in Indigenous communities.

PAINTINGS

PERFUMADOS: NAVIGATING INDIGENOUS IDENTITY THROUGH RITUAL ART

BY CHICHIMUT (DIEGO ARMANDO BARAJAS)

Los Perfumados is a pictorial series born at the crossroads of artistic creation, field research, and ritual experience. This body of work does not arise from abstract or individual inspiration but from a direct lived experience: a prolonged process of listening, learning, and presence within Indigenous communities of Colombia, where art emerges as an act of memory, reciprocity, and healing.

Los Perfumados was born out of a deeply personal and spiritual journey—an urgent need to reconnect with my Muisca roots (an Indigenous people of Colombia), and to understand who I am and why I had grown up without a clear path to my origins. For years, I asked myself why my ancestors had been silenced, why our practices had been erased, and why no living traces of our identity and culture seemed to remain. It was through a process of immersion with various Indigenous communities of Colombia—such as the Inga, Cofán, Hitnü, Murui Muina, Emberá, Pastos, Barí, U'wa, Muisca, and Nasa peoples—and through my encounters with ancestral plant medicines like yagé (ayahuasca), yopo, tobacco, and cacao, that I began to find answers.

Participating in rituals, planting practices, and prayers alongside spiritual leaders—taitas, traditional healers, midwives, and knowledge keepers—I came to understand that the colonial system had not only erased our paths, but had deeply fractured our collective memory. And yet, within these spaces of living wisdom, I discovered signs, songs, and visions that helped me reorient my path, reframe my identity, and begin to heal a historical wound.

It was in these sacred spaces that the visions which gave rise to *Los Perfumados* emerged. Some images were first channeled during ceremonies; others were sketched in notebooks while living in the communities; still others came from words, songs, symbols, and gestures shared by elders, within the framework of living spiritual practices that not only transmit knowledge but ways of being, seeing, and feeling the world.

This process was also deeply territorial: each organic pigment orgánic used—achiote, tobacco, yagé, jagua, cacao, chimó—originates from direct relationships with plants and the environment, collected, prepared, and activated in spaces of ceremony and prayer. Each painting is, therefore, a symbolic translation of ancestral knowledge, a spiritual cartography born from the territory, the body, and the vision.

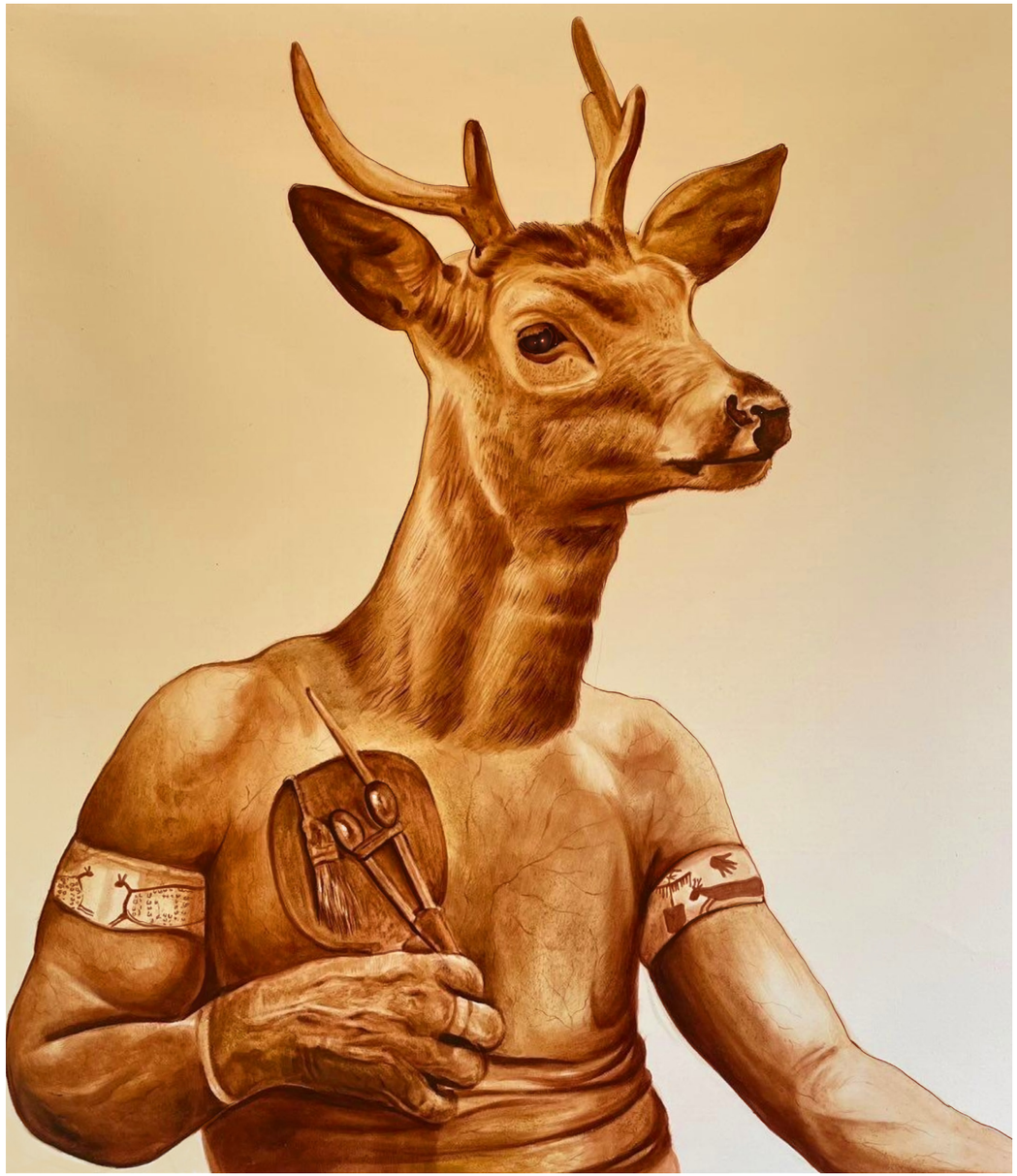
This work does not aim to speak about Indigenous peoples but to create with them, from their practices, visions, and languages. It proposes a way to activate memory, heal the relationship with the earth, and affirm that Indigenous identity is not a frozen past but a present force that continues transforming and flourishing.

The Inga people, located in the Sibundoy Valley and the forests of Alto Putumayo, of Quechua origin and descendants of the ancient Incas who migrated to Colombian territory, maintain a worldview deeply linked to the ritual use of yagé and the word as a vehicle of healing. Due to their mastery of sacred plants, vision medicine, and their role as guardians of the balance between body, spirit, and jungle, they have taught me that art can be a form of prayer and vision.

The Cofán people, located in the jungle regions of Putumayo and the Ecuadorian border, "are" one of the oldest peoples of the Amazon, known for their profound knowledge of the jungle and defense of territory against extractivist threats, their rituals with yagé, and their vision of the jaguar as a being of power have deeply influenced my pictorial process. The Hitnü people, located in the Arauca and Casanare departments in the Llanos foothills, are a nomadic population at risk, inhabiting savanna and forest zones. Their language and ritual practices, their connection with yopo (Roffa ancestral medicine that is extracted from the seed of a tree, then macerated into a powder and inhaled through the nostrils), and the jaguar as a figure of transformation revealed to me other ways of seeing the world. Working with them has been an act of symbolic and poetic resistance.

The Murui Muina (Huitoto) Indigenous people, located in Amazonas and Caquetá, call themselves "people from the center of the world." They maintain a complex system of chants, dances, and tobacco as ritual practice to sustain the order of the universe, with a worldview centered on the word and song as weavings of identity. They taught me that painting

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CHIPE: The Invisible Perfumado

Inspired by the Hitnü medicine from Arauca, CHIPE is a vision of the deer-man who, upon inhaling yopo (Roffa), ceases to be a body and becomes spirit. Invisible to the jaguar, he transforms into vibration, song, and air. This work evokes an identity defined not by the visible but by its connection to the spiritual world and the capacity to inhabit other planes. Here, invisibility is protection but also freedom.

can also be a way to sing the history of the territory.

The Emberá people, located in Chocó, Risaralda, Antioquia, and areas of the Darién, are an ancestral people of western Colombia with a strong connection to rivers, gold, and the humid jungle. They are known for body art and healing chants; their silent wisdom and connection to the body as a ritual space have influenced my understanding of painting as a second skin.

The Pasto people, located in the department of Nariño in the southwestern Andean zone, are an agricultural and ceremonial people known for their relationship with fire, corn, and lunar calendars; their connection to earth cycles and knowledge of fire as a transformative element offered me a vision of art linked to the care of food and lineage.

The Barí people, located in Norte de Santander on the Venezuelan border, are a warrior people and defenders of their jungle territory; their relationship with yuca as the root of life and the figure of the tapir as guardian of the forest taught me that art can also be nourishment and care.

The U'wa people, located in the Sierra Nevada del Cocuy, Arauca, Boyacá, and Santander, are an Andean people known for their firm defense of Mother Earth and their vision of the world as an energetic fabric. Sharing with them meant learning about dignity, balance, and the act of caring for the world without needing to utter a word.

The Muisca people, located in the Cundiboyacense high plateau (Bogotá, Boyacá, and Cundinamarca), are an ancestral people who inhabited the center of present-day Colombian territory. Their worldview revolves around water, sun, moon, and cycles; as part of my own roots and territory, my bond with the Muisca people is a way to remember that I, too, am earth that has forgotten but can return to its origin.

Art as Prayer and Sacred Pigment

In my artistic practice, each pigment is much more than a color: it is a living being, a presence summoned through a careful and respectful ritual that begins with conscious gathering and extends to the preparation and activation of the material for creative acts. I gather achiote with respect, always in tune with the season and natural abundance. For me, this plant symbolizes the blood of Mother Earth; its intense red is fire, life, and protection. In the Chitareras communities, achiote is a tree of power, and its pigment is not just a material but a bond with the earth, with the energy that opens paths and heals. Tobacco is the master plant of the spirit. Its harvesting is done with reverence because its essence is sacred and powerful. When preparing its pigment, I channel its energy to purify the space and align the creative process. In the Indigenous worldview, tobacco is a bridge between worlds, a medicine that cleans and opens invisible doors. Extracting pigment from yagé is immersing oneself in the vision and mystery of the jungle; this plant is medicine for the heart and mind, and its presence awakens deep perceptions. Yagé pigment is transparent and vibrant, a reminder of the inner journey that connects art with the energy of the jaguar and ancestral wisdom.

Jagua is living ink that protects and transforms; I collect it in its natural environment, caring for balance. Its black-blue pigment is more than color: it is a second skin, a mask that makes visible the invisible, a symbol of protection and bodily memory.

> ***Painting is therefore a sacred act, a bridge between matter and spirit, between personal and collective identity, between body and earth.***

Cacao is the heart of many Indigenous communities; its pigment, sweet and warm, evokes emotional memory, lineage, and care. Collecting and preparing this pigment is an act of connection with life's sweetness, a ritual of love and belonging. Chimó, an ancestral mixture used to energize and protect, is also a fundamental part of my pigments. Its ritual use during preparation connects body and spirit, linking the work with the strength of the territory and its invisible guardians.

Each pigment is activated in ceremonies, chants, and prayers. This ritual process not only transforms the material but also transforms me as an artist and human being. Painting is therefore a sacred act, a bridge between matter and spirit, between personal and collective identity, between body and earth.

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YAGUARETÉ: The Perfumed Jaguar of Vision

Born from yagé ceremonies with the Inga and Cofán peoples of Putumayo, YAGUARETÉ represents the jaguar as guardian of deep knowledge. It is the animal that sees with the heart, crossing dimensions to show what the eyes cannot see. Its skin, tattooed with invisible maps, is a living memory of the jungle. This work embodies identity as inner wisdom, a sacred gaze learned through feeling.

DECOLONIZED BEATZ



KUNTUR: The Perfumed Messenger of the Winds

KUNTUR comes from a vision received in the Muisca páramo when the wind brought the message of the condor. Its flight blends Andean chants, ancestral symbols, and the force of air as memory in motion. This messenger not only unites sky and earth but brings identity as a bridge, a word that flies between worlds. Here, art is a living message traveling on the breath of the invisible.

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DANTA: The Perfumed Guardian of Yuca

During a yagé ceremony in Barí territory, DANTA revealed herself as mother, jungle, and nourishment. Her body is covered in symbols that sing the land's story. At the center, yuca appears as the root of lineage, body, and memory. This work honors identity as care, spiritual sustenance, and a daily gesture of territorial protection.

About the artist

Diego Armando Barajas Vera (CHICHIMUT) is a visual artist from Chinácota, Norte de Santander, Colombia. His work is rooted in direct experiences with Indigenous communities, particularly within ritual contexts involving medicinal plants. Using organic pigments sourced from nature, his artistic practice reflects on the origins of humanity and the sacred connection between body, land, and ancestral memory.

RECLAIMING INDIGENOUS MEMORY: SACRED SPACE AND NATIONHOOD IN CENTRAL ASIA

BY ASHWIN RAGHURAMAN

In Samarkand, a major city in southern Uzbekistan, a winding pathway leads up a quiet hill to a peculiar site: the Mausoleum of the Prophet Daniel. Revered by Muslims, Christians, and Jews alike, the 18-meter shrine has become a symbol of interfaith reverence, and more recently, a stage for state-sponsored pilgrimage. In Osh, the cultural capital of Kyrgyzstan, the sudden removal of a central statue of Lenin in June 2025 left a symbolic void, which was later filled by a 95-meter flagpole bearing the Kyrgyz national flag. These seemingly disconnected moments reveal a broader regional shift: the active remaking of public memory and sacred space in service of post-Soviet Indigenous identities.

> *In recent years, this grassroots shift has been driven in large part by young people, particularly through social media, where campaigns to restore Indigenous names, highlight erased histories, and celebrate cultural heritage have gained momentum.*

Before the Russian Empire's 19th-century conquests, Central Asia—encompassing present-day Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan—was home to diverse Indigenous communities grounded in nomadic, Islamic, and Turkic traditions. These communities had longstanding spiritual relationships with particular landscapes, shrines, and oral epics, passed down over centuries. Russian colonial rule began a process of political and cultural disruption, which intensified under Soviet power after 1917.

The Soviet regime disrupted these Indigenous lifeways through aggressive policies of Russification, forced sedentarization, and state-imposed atheism, repressing religious expression and casting Indigenous identities as "backward" and "feudal." Public memory was systematically overwritten, with mosques burned down, cemeteries razed, and local heroes replaced by statues of Lenin and Marx. In the decades following independence in 1991, post-Soviet governments have gradually reversed course, initially driven by top-down nationalism but increasingly shaped by popular demand for cultural revival. In recent years, this grassroots shift has been driven in large part by young people, particularly through social media, where campaigns to restore Indigenous names, highlight erased histories, and celebrate cultural heritage have gained momentum.

Across the region, the renaming, removal, and recontextualization of Soviet-era buildings, statues, and street names have accelerated over the past decade, as post-independence governments increasingly promote national narratives grounded in local memory. During my visit to Osh this past summer, the blistering heat drove me to seek shade in a park, where I found myself with a clear view of the city's prominent Lenin statue. Erected in 1975, it once symbolized Soviet ideological permanence, towering over the skyline with an arm outstretched, a pose replicated all across the former USSR. Visible from much of the city, the statue had long served as a central navigation point and visual anchor for locals. For many, it became synonymous with Osh, lingering in memory despite Lenin's contested legacy.

On June 7, 2025, the statue was quietly dismantled in the middle of the night and relocated to the less-central Meerim Park. No official explanation

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was given at the time, though shortly afterward, a 95-meter Kyrgyz flagpole was erected in its place: an unmistakable symbol of national pride and Indigenous identity. The flag's design itself is rooted in Kyrgyz heritage, with forty rays of the golden sun representing the unification of the forty Kyrgyz tribes. These rays encircle a tunduk, the crown of a traditional yurt in which Indigenous Kyrgyz communities lived before Soviet-era forced urbanization. The decision to replace Lenin with this powerful symbol was made unilaterally by the mayor of Osh, who did not provide an explanation, citing it as a routine administrative measure. Yet official silence makes the act even more revealing: its quiet execution signals how deeply the reworking of public memory has become embedded in everyday governance. While Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have led regional efforts to reframe national identity —Kazakhstan alone removed over 340 Lenin statues in its first decade after independence— Kyrgyzstan's recent dismantling of its Lenin monument signals that it, too, is now actively reshaping public space to reflect Indigenous symbolism and post-colonial pride.

In Uzbekistan, the sacred landscape of Samarkand is also being reinterpreted. The Mausoleum of Daniel, once a centuries-old hallmark of Islamic religious life, was largely neglected under Soviet rule. Pilgrims were forbidden from worshipping, and the site was maintained as a cultural and historical monument, not a religious one. Now part of independent Uzbekistan, it has been restored and woven into official narratives of national heritage.

Signs in Uzbek, English, and Russian on the outskirts of the hill warn that visitors must "prepare themselves spiritually and physically," noting that it is forbidden to "kiss the stones, worship them, walk around them, light candles, tie ribbons to trees, write different words on the walls..." because "respected people and simple people buried in this place... are the slaves of Almighty Allah." Government tour guides emphasize not only the site's religious significance, but its capacity to project Uzbekistan as a land of culture, spirituality, and deep Indigenous roots. This deliberate reframing of a local sacred space illustrates how national identity is being anchored in place-based traditions that predate Soviet rule and how states seek to govern not only history, but also Indigenous memory.

> ***This deliberate reframing of a local sacred space illustrates how national identity is being anchored in place-based traditions that predate Soviet rule and how states seek to govern not only history, but also Indigenous memory.***

Memory in Central Asia has always been political. Under Soviet rule, national histories were rewritten to fit Marxist-Leninist frameworks. The Islamic scholars of Bukhara became "feudal relics"; nomadic traditions were either folklorized or erased. After independence, governments across Central Asia faced a dilemma: how to construct national identities that felt both authentic and forward-looking. The answer, more often than not, lay in selective memory. In Kazakhstan, for example, President Nursultan Nazarbayev launched the Rukhani Zhangyru ("Spiritual Revival") program, which promotes Kazakh culture and language while deliberately minimizing the legacy of the Soviet era.

In Uzbekistan, the state has revived the figure of Amir Timur, the 14th-century Uzbek ruler who built an empire from Delhi to Damascus and made Samarkand its political and cultural heart. Once denounced by Soviet historians as a brutal warlord to discourage nationalist sentiment, Timur is now elevated as a foundational figure of Uzbek identity, portrayed in statues, museums, and textbooks as a unifier, visionary, and patron of Islamic art and architecture.

In Kyrgyzstan, national memory has likewise drawn strength from legendary figures once marginalized under Soviet rule. Chief among them is Manas, the mythical warrior credited with uniting the forty Kyrgyz tribes, whose story survives through one of the world's longest oral epics. Statues, museums, and public festivals now celebrate him as the spiritual forefather of the Kyrgyz nation. By drawing from pre-Soviet Indigenous narratives and sacred figures, these states are reshaping memory not only to assert cultural independence, but also to root the nation-state in a deeper, place-bound sense of legitimacy.

This curated memory is not just about history, but also about Indigenous nationalism. In spaces where ethnic and linguistic diversity abounds, memory can be mobilized to consolidate national identity. The removal of Soviet symbols and elevation of pre-Soviet figures serve to distinguish "us" from the Soviet "them." Yet these narratives are not without tensions. In Kyrgyzstan, where Russian remains a dominant language and a sizable Russian minority still resides, the removal of Lenin sparked debates over historical erasure. Who decides what is remembered? And whose memories are legitimized?

> ***Who decides what is remembered? And whose memories are legitimized?***

Even the story of how Prophet Daniel's remains came to rest in Samarkand is steeped in myth and shaped by nationalist narratives. According to some legends shared by locals, Amir Timur was campaigning in Susa, Iran, where Daniel was originally buried. After a series of failed battles, Timur allegedly blamed his defeats on the spiritual power of the prophet's tomb and ordered it relocated to Samarkand to neutralize its influence. Other versions claim that only the soil surrounding the tomb was brought back, not the tomb itself. One local even insisted that the tomb in Samarkand holds nothing more than the prophet's right thumb.

The mausoleum itself is 18 meters long, and the origins of its unusual length are also the subject of numerous local legends. Some believe the tomb grows each year as a sign of its living power, while others say Amir Timur had it built at that length to deter grave robbers. While the historical origins remain contested, what is clear is that the site holds deep religious and cultural resonance for Uzbeks. It is seen not just as a relic of the past, but as a sacred link to a pre-Soviet Islamic heritage. By preserving and promoting the site, the government is not only reclaiming Indigenous memory but also distancing itself from Soviet secularism and historical suppression.

Back in Samarkand, the Tomb of Daniel remains a quiet place. Pilgrims leave with tears in their eyes after delivering whispered prayers. A clean river flows around the base of the hill, with flowers and trees flourishing despite the desert landscape. But five minutes away from the mausoleum are new roads, polished marble paths, and state-commissioned plaques in multiple languages. The transformation is both devotional and political, reflecting a broader regional trend: the use of space and memory to narrate a past that supports the political imperatives of the present.

For outsiders, these sites offer more than just history lessons: they offer a glimpse into how national identity is actively constructed through Indigenous symbols, spaces, and memory. To understand what it means to be Central Asian today, we must not only look at borders and constitutions, but also the landscapes where memory is performed, preserved, and politicized.

About the author

Ashwin Raghuraman is a scholar of Global Affairs at the University of Notre Dame and a visiting research fellow at the Institute for Advanced International Studies.

Call for submissions!

The Magazine is seeking contributions for our upcoming issue spotlighting Indigenous changemakers of 2025. We invite Indigenous journalists, artists, and content creators to pitch stories, interviews, artwork, and other creative formats that highlight Indigenous individuals making a positive difference in their communities—or on a global scale. The changemakers must be Indigenous, but the causes they champion can be wide-ranging and timely.

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A traditional masquerade, escorted by a handler, performs at the World Twins Festival in Igboora, Oyo State, Nigeria. The display is part of the cultural ceremonies celebrating the town's rich twin heritage and Yoruba identity. Photo credit: Bukunmi Oyewole, October 9, 2021

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