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Half of All Languages Endangered

An interview with Professor Wade Davis
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How can ancient cultures be preserved?

The thing that really turns me on is the wonder of culture and that we're living in an era where all that's good and all that's bad is happening. On the one hand we're living through a time where half of humanity's languages have been lost in the generation, which means that we're losing potentially half of humanity's intellectual, social, spiritual legacy. But we're also living through a time where genetics has finally proven to be true something that philosophers have always dreamt to be true – and that is the fact that we are brothers and sisters. I don't mean that in the spirit of hippy ethnography. I mean quite literally, studies of the human genome have left no doubt whatsoever that genetic endowment of humanity is a continuum; race has finally been proved to be an utter fiction. We're all in fact descendants of a handful of people who walked out of Africa 60,000 years ago and then embarked on this incredible Higerá, a diaspora 2,500 generations in duration, 40,000 years to carry us to every corner of the habitable world. That old Victorian idea that there was this sort of evolutionary ladder to success that went from the savage to the barbarian, into the civilized, to the Strand of London has been absolutely debunked by modern science.

How can we undo the damage that's been done?

Even the language we use still reinforces a 19th century idea. The issue isn't the traditional versus the modern, it's about the rights of free people to choose the components of their lives and it's also about asking ourselves what kind of world do we want to move into, in the future. You know the curse of humanity is cultural myopia. It has haunted us since the dawn of consciousness. The idea that, you know, I'm the real world, and you're a crude facsimile of me. So we're at this literal cusp of history where we can be losing half of our legacy, but that does not have to happen. These cultures aren't destined to fade away, as if by natural law. In every case they've been driven out of existence by identifiable forces. And that's actually not the mystic observation because if human beings are the agents of cultural destruction, we can be the facilitators of cultural survival.