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Ian S. McIntosh  
IUPUI, imcintos@iupui.edu

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# Working Paper Part 1 : The Very First Pilgrimage - An Inspired Trajectory Out of Africa

**Ian S. McIntosh**

Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI)  
[imcintos@iupui.edu](mailto:imcintos@iupui.edu)

One hundred thousand years ago, give or take, the forebears of some of Australia's First Nations—by some accounts as few as 150 people—left Africa on an immense journey. After some 2,000 generations, the passage through new and unfamiliar territories of these first modern human beings terminated in a supercontinent that included Australia, Papua, and Tasmania. By some estimates, no more than 150 people—the same number that had originally left Africa—made the final sea crossing that separates Indonesia and Australia. Research on such ancient migrations emphasises population growth, the 'selfish gene,' and the territorial imperative, as key drivers of mobility. This working paper speculates that the numinous was the equal to any other factor in migration, which is why this vast trek is called an inspired journey or the very first pilgrimage.

**Key Words:** first pilgrimage, Indigenous peoples, Australia

## Introduction

One hundred thousand years ago, give or take, the forebears of some of Australia's First Nations—by some accounts as few as 150 people (Wade, 2006)—left Africa on an immense journey. After some 2,000 generations, the passage through new and unfamiliar territories of these first modern human beings terminated in the Sahul, a supercontinent that included Australia, Papua, and Tasmania. By some estimates, no more than 150 people—the same number that had originally left Africa—made the final sea crossing that separates Indonesia and Australia in this first occupation of the land 'Downunder'. Research on such ancient migrations by modern humans, and by archaic humans like *Homo erectus*, emphasises population growth, including the idea of a 'selfish gene', and the territorial imperative of acquiring and defending conquered lands, as key drivers of mobility. In this paper, I argue that because there was also a spiritual or sacred dimension to social organisation in early human communities, this must also have influenced group mobility. Indeed, I believe that the numinous is the equal to any other factor as a driver of migration. This is why I describe this vast trek of the forebears of Australia's Indigenous peoples as an inspired journey or the very first pilgrimage.

Understanding the possible religious or spiritual motivations for early migrations, beyond the evidence provided by skeletal remains and tools, mitochondrial DNA, and historical linguistics is a highly speculative task. Population growth, community dynamics, as well as natural or human-made calamities may have fuelled mobility in the first instance, but this does not explain why a small band of coast-hugging hunter-gatherers—encountering the world for the very first time—kept on moving in an intentional fashion, including across a considerable body of water in the last stage of their journey. Researchers such as Peregrine, Peiros and Feldman (2009) stress the need for an interdisciplinary approach to this question but are silent on the influence of the sacred on the movement of peoples across the world. My contention is that without such a consideration, the seemingly disciplined journey out of Africa—as witnessed by the easterly trajectory—makes little sense. My goal is to explore the mechanics of movement beyond conventional and unproblematised explanations, for example, that population increased when times were good, and people extended their base into new territories to meet their expanding needs.

What might a sacred dimension to travel have looked like back then? The religious practice and oral history of the Yolngu (Aboriginal) peoples of northern Australia guides

my inquiry into the realm of the mythical and structural—outer action with inner meaning. The emerging field of pilgrimage studies, in particular the notions of the ‘hero’s journey’ and the ‘center out there’, allows for speculation on the idea of ‘pilgrim pioneers’ intent of strengthening a community’s core sacred beliefs by bringing home the lessons of encounters on new frontiers.

Finally, I posit that today’s pilgrimages, for the most part, exhibit the same elements central to the never-ending quest for the sacred and represent a faint echo of these original journeys out of Africa at the dawn of history.

### Hypothesis

Culture and religion, by which I mean those sets of beliefs and practices that provide us with a sense of identity and give meaning to our lives, emerged in Africa around 100,000 to 120,000 years ago at the start of the Last Interglacial Cycle (Wade 2009). Interestingly, the emergence of symbolic thinking coincides, in broad measure, with the initial departure of humans on their long journey across the globe. Is it a coincidence that as soon as humans began to contemplate their place in the universe, they sought answers to their questions over the horizon? That while their allegiance was to sacred core beliefs at the centre of their small communities (Durkheim, 1965), they also perceived a greater whole and a ‘centre out there’, which Turner (1973) describes as the pilgrim’s goal.

Religious scholar Mircea Eliade refers to modern humans as ‘Homo religiosus’ because of our propensity for symbolic thinking and ritual action, and for confronting what novelist R.K. Narayan called the ‘only truth’: the profound unmitigated loneliness of life. The presence of graves and grave goods, carved artefacts of ‘impossible creatures’ and cave paintings suggesting an awareness of sympathetic magic, indicates that the first peoples were grappling with the big questions from the very outset. The destiny of human beings appears to be forever bound within a great unknown: who are we, where do we come from, and where are we going. In Ecclesiastes (3:11), for example, it is written that God set eternity in the human heart. English poet William Blake could see a world in a grain of sand and hold infinity in the palm

of his hand. Similarly, when Yashoda, looked into the mouth of the baby Krishna, she saw within it the entire universe. Religious scholar Huston Smith (2001) used the expression ‘a god-shaped hole in the human heart’ to describe the void in our spirit or soul that he said could only be filled with the divine, thus setting up the eternal quest for understanding the purpose of life. In the modern era, this same compulsion has found expression in scientific discovery and has led us into outer space in an ongoing quest for the ultimate answers to our questions.

Textbooks describing the origin of religion provide few clues on the story of human migration. It was not until the dawn of the Common Era that certain faiths would spread like a wildfire across the globe, carrying both preachers and devotees in the wake of missionaries. However, for scholars of prehistory, there is little consideration of possible links between human migration out of Africa and the rise of spiritual practices. Are migration and religion incommensurable or intimately entwined? Did the aforementioned void translate into an innate longing for something outside of oneself, something transcendental and transformative that became the object of an external quest as just described? Did pilgrimage thus precede the emergence of religion? The idea that a longing for value in life—a belief that existence is not accidental or meaningless—was a key to human migration one thousand centuries ago, is the proposition explored in this paper.

Dismissing as nonsensical any theory that downplays migration as something not planned or even comprehended, my task is to move beyond explanations that describe migration as simply being inherent in human nature (King 2007:16) or that we have a wandering gene—a compulsion to travel beyond explanation as Baudelaire explains in his poem ‘The Voyage’. In the academic literature, this proposition is well-established. Marsella and Ring (2003:3), for example, say that *Homo sapiens* has an instinctual and inborn disposition and inclination to wonder and wander in search of new opportunities and horizons. This inclination to go ‘walkabout,’ a now discredited pejorative expression supposedly describing Australian Aboriginal nomadism, is perhaps an apt description for *Homo erectus* who travelled as far as East Asia from Africa two million years ago, but not for *Homo sapiens*. Their wandering

took place within a specific cultural context, a living, breathing culture that would have imbued their travels with deep meaning. Therefore, there is a need to explain this context or predilection within the culture of the first peoples. How did they make sense or rationalise the need for mobility? Specifically, what was the mechanism for travel beyond the comfort zone, the *axis mundi* or sacred centre of their community? Beyond meeting their reciprocal obligations and responsibilities to ensure the survival of their social group, what was driving the first peoples into the great unknown? What were the needs of a group that would endorse the quest of certain of its members to put their own lives at risk in this exploration of the new?

In my hypothesis, I draw upon theological studies, pilgrimage theory, and my own ethnographic work, to shed light on these questions. Specifically, I will share details of Yolngu oral history and culture, including three narratives describing those relatively unusual instances of movement beyond clan or regional boundaries, as well as six related suppositions, to describe the nature of external mobility in small-scale traditional societies. What can contemporary mobility—by which I mean the past hundred years—tell us, if anything, about the mobility of the first migrants? By applying the lessons from Arnhem Land, I will make the case that the numinous was at least as important as any other factor, including population growth, wars, and climate change, in inspiring the trajectory of the ancestors of Australia's Indigenous peoples out of Africa towards the Sahul.

My focus is upon the first migrants to Australia when the global human population was in the thousands and not the millions, and their ecological footprint upon the earth was very light. The picture of human migration becomes infinitely more complex with the second, third and ensuing waves of migration out of Africa that followed in quick succession. Human interactions with other populations, including the Neanderthal-like Denisovans in Asia, contested landscapes, competition for resources, rival ideologies, and personality cults, and so on, are all deserving of their own analyses in relation to human migration. Existing evidence suggests that the ancestors of the first Australian Aboriginal people, described as 'gracile' in the literature, as opposed to the 'robust' later migrants, met no other human beings on

their long journey halfway across the globe. The only possible exception was interactions with archaic humans like *Homo floresiensis* or 'Flores Person', therefore opening the way for speculation upon the mechanics of movement from first principles.

Similarly, my analysis ends when the first peoples arrive in Australia between 50,000 and 65,000 years ago, when the climate was much cooler than it is today. Once there, the people were able to circumnavigate the continent in both directions before finally exploring and settling in the inhospitable desert interior. Researchers have posited no satisfactory reasons for these extraordinary journeys within the continent, or how migration was subsequently replaced by largely sedentary or transhumant lifestyles within a complex maze of 'songlines' associated with the tracks of highly mobile spiritual deities. Subsequent research will consider the numinous, once again, as a critical mobilising factor.

### Field Notes 1987

In his book 'The Faith Instinct', science writer Nicholas Wade (2009) argues that the study of the religion of Australian Aborigines, Andaman Islanders, and the !Kung Bushmen (San), might provide insight into the beliefs and practices of the very first migrants to leave Africa approximately 100,000 years ago. With this challenge in mind, I explored what little is known of the Andaman Islanders, some of whom have been living in absolute seclusion on remote Indian ocean islands for the past several centuries in response to aggressive outside intrusion. The detailed anthropological work completed by Radcliffe-Brown (1922), does not provide any substantial clues on the nature, or causes, of their ancient mobility. Considerably more ethnographic data are available on the !Kung of southern Africa, including in the popular media. Well known, for example, is the fictional account of these desert dwellers from the movie, 'The Gods Must be Crazy,' about how a !Kung elder undertook the unthinkable. He travelled to the end of the world, the only one ever to have done so, to return a problematic glass coke bottle that had been discarded from a passing airplane. The bottle's popularity had led to chaos in the tribe and for peace to be restored it needed to be returned to the Gods. However, it is the work of scientific researchers, rather than social scientists or artists,

that is shedding light upon the deep ancestry and travels of the !Kung. One major study of genomic diversity of these hunter-gatherer populations suggests that modern humans likely originated in southern Africa, as opposed to East Africa as currently believed (Ravindran, 2011). If this is the case, then the study of contemporary San will probably provide few clues on global migration, as immobility seems to be their hallmark of their existence.

In comparison to the Andaman Islanders and !Kung, there is an abundance of ethnographic reports on Australian Aborigines. I completed my doctoral fieldwork in the 1980s in the remote Australian Aboriginal (Yolngu) community of Elcho Island in northeast Arnhem Land. For this current project, I returned to my ethnographic notes in search of clues for ancient mobility. Could Yolngu mythology, oral history, and religious and cultural practice shed light on what inspired the first migrants from Africa to journey all the way to the Sahul (Australia) at the dawn of time?

The sophisticated ‘totemic’ lifestyles of Australian Aboriginal people, like the Andaman Islanders and the !Kung, links them to the natural world through ceremony, song and art. Honed over the millennia, these seemingly timeless bonds to specific tracts of land and water appear foreign to the culture of the highly mobile first peoples. In fact, I found only one potential clue from my copious notes that might be relevant to the ‘Out of Africa’ hypothesis. This was the profound sense of reciprocity between certain Yolngu clans and their ‘land of the dead’. Members of those Yolngu clans whose territories face the open sea to the east in the direction of the rising sun send their spirits of the dead to a fabled land located just over the horizon. The land of the rising sun is a place of opulence. Food is always plentiful, pain non-existent, and the weather pleasing. Time-honored Yolngu ceremonies propel the spirits of the newly deceased eastwards to this place to join their forebears. This is an exchange relationship, because from this place, at the beginning of time, came the Yolngu deities bringing law and order, and meaning and purpose, to the struggling settler pilgrims. The deities united all the groups of the region, providing them with a means of both cooperation and kinship through a method of social organisation based on moieties and clans that is still observed today. The deities also linked the peoples with specific totems like the dolphin

or kangaroo and allowed them to set down roots for the very first time. Marvellous cave paintings on the Wessel Islands show a messenger from the land of the dead—the ‘undying lands’ to use the language of JRR Tolkien. It is Venus, shown as a bright star attached to a long rope, whose role as the Morning Star deity is to follow up on the work of the founding spirits. At daybreak, the deities haul her back to the realm of the sunrise, for she must abide there, despite her desire to live among mortals. To this fabled world, the Yolngu—in spirit form—make their final journey and, from this spiritual homeland, all manner of benefits flow to the living. In their ceremonies, including that of the Morning Star (Venus), the Yolngu honour this timeless relationship of reciprocity.

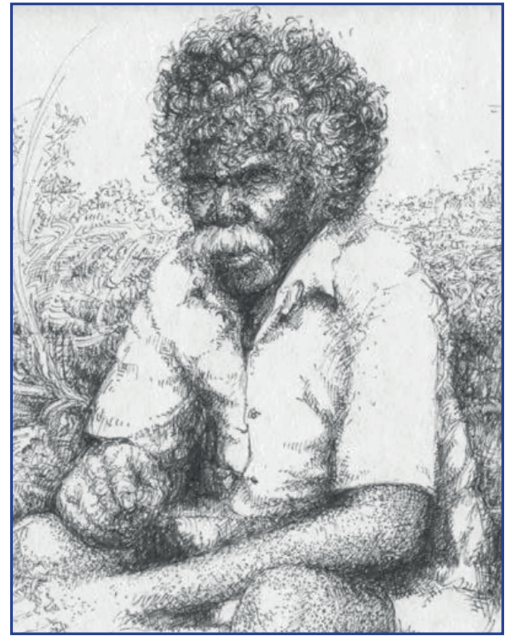
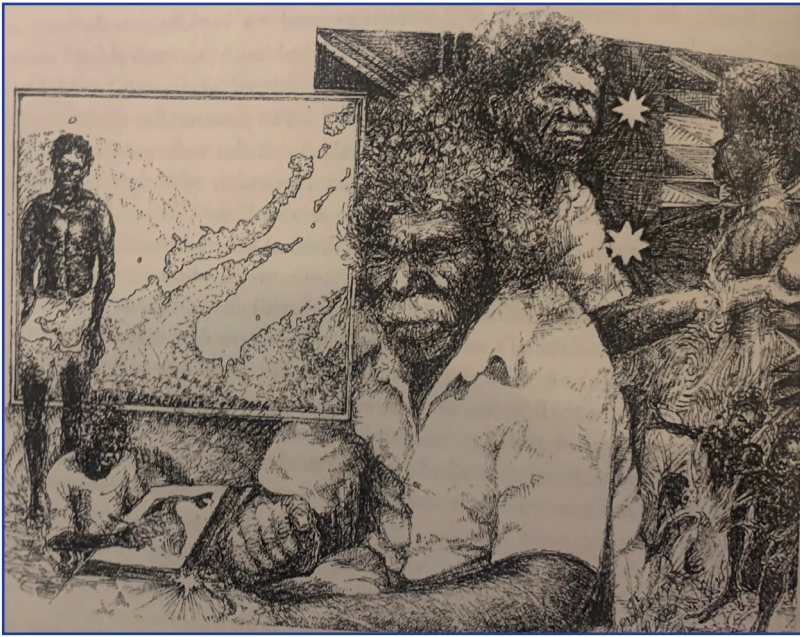
It is this relationship between the living and the dead (who reside in the east), and between the living and their gods (who dwell in that same place), that provides me with an opportunity to speculate on the motivation for early migration beyond purely material explanations like population growth and climate change.

### **An Inspired Trajectory?**

In the mid-1990s, I published a biography of the renowned Yolngu leader David Burrumarra, an individual of towering intellect and known throughout Arnhem Land for his unparalleled knowledge of song, story, and ceremony (McIntosh, 1994). When writing his biography, we would discuss all manner of topics to the point of exhaustion or taboo. However, on the subject of traditional Aboriginal religion, known as totemism—an ancient set of beliefs and practices that linked people to the land and sea in timeless bonds of mutual benefit—there seemed to be no end to our deliberations. In one extraordinary consultation that lasted several months, Burrumarra described the clan affiliation and ritual significance of every bird, fish, animal, reptile, tree, plant, and insect in this part of Arnhem Land. We published this work under the banner of ‘The Totemic Embrace.’ In this report, Burrumarra identified 45 totems for which his clan was the primary custodian, including the whale, octopus, and pearl shell, and a further 47 totems for which his group was secondary or joint custodian with related clans within the moiety or ‘half’ of Yolngu society to which he belonged, including the barramundi, long-neck turtle, and the red flying fox. As Burrumarra looked out



### The late Yolngu elder David Burrumarra M.B.E. of Elcho Island



Picture by artist Julia Blackburn, commissioned by author.

upon the richness of natural world, he saw relationships. All living things were affiliated with his own and related clans, and to those clans into which his group married within the other moiety. The natural world was his extended family, and crucial to his identity. To forcibly remove Indigenous peoples from their totemic environs, as has happened repeatedly in Australian history, was to remove them not just from their comfort zone, but from their life support system.

Nicholas Wade's suggestion of learning about the very first migrants from Aboriginal Australian religion therefore faces a major hurdle. Burrumarra's people, like other Aboriginal Australians, practice a decidedly land- and sea-based religion on territories handed down to them since time immemorial. Place is the key to Aboriginal identity and religion. The first migrants (the ancestors of Aborigines), however, appear to have been constantly on the move. If these early hunter-gatherers had a totemic religion similar to today's Aboriginal people, then mobility is a conundrum. They would have stayed in the one place unless circumstances within or outside their control, forced them to do otherwise.

The vast compendium of totemic narratives that Burrumarra carried around in his head, and that he referred to as his 'backbone', included some that

appeared to reference changes in the land and seascape before and after the last Ice Age, which ended 10,000 years ago. These narratives strongly support the idea that the Yolngu have been in the same region for at least 400 generations, but our search for the motives for mobility goes back 2,000 generations and, as various scholars have shown conclusively, the idea that one foundational narrative driving mobility might have transferred through such a length of time is not tenable. The oral history and mythology of the Yolngu, while tantalising, will probably provide only the faintest glimpse into potential answers to our question. We need to identify alternate avenues of inquiry.

Well entrenched in the Yolngu worldview is the idea that the people are autochthonous or born of the soil or the sea. Burrumarra once said to me that if Aborigines came from somewhere else, like Africa, then 'show me the boats!' The ancestors of Aboriginal people crossed into Australia up to 65,000 years ago, well before the invention of even the most rudimentary forms of sea craft, so how did they get here, Burrumarra asked. In our extended conversations, however, Burrumarra acknowledged that many of his clan's stories speak of places far away across the seas to the north and sometimes he thought they must have come from there. However, he kept this

**The Author, Ian McIntosh, and David Burrumarra, at work on a Treaty Flag, Elcho Island 1988**



opinion to himself. If Aborigines were just another group of migrants to Australia, how could they claim special rights in relation to the colonisers of more recent times?

Another statement from Burrumarra spurred much speculation on the idea of an inspired trajectory out of Africa. He said that while the narratives associated with certain sacred places change over time, there has been continuity in the way that people perceive and react to them. Burrumarra and I held our discussions on Elcho Island's great sand hills, and it was here that we would contemplate the rich tapestry of Yolngu life. As evening approached, we would observe the setting sun and the rising moon and how the stars would cast a beam of light across the still waters directly to us, linking us to all who had come and gone before and had sat in this same place. The sand hills on which we rested had considerable totemic significance. When the deities first came to this island at the 'dawn of the world' from the direction of the rising sun—the ultimate destination of the spirits of the Yolngu dead—they placed something of themselves beneath the sands for the Yolngu to reflect upon so that they might lead long and joyous lives. When missionaries came to Elcho Island in the 1940s, recognising the significance of this place in local tradition, they named

it 'Bible Camp.' The Yolngu deities had given the people laws to follow and rituals to perform. They had named all the natural species and, as I said, had allocated them as totemic markers of the various collectives, teaching them how to relate to one another in peaceful and mutually beneficial ways.

As described in my book *'Pilgrimage: Walking to Peace, Walking for Change'*, you can feel that something special lies buried underneath those sand hills, though it is completely inexplicable (McIntosh, 2020). Burrumarra said to me that this major sacred site, like many others, transcended time. Many clans had come and gone over the millennia, either erased in warfare, or died out from various other factors, or been absorbed into larger collectives. We know little of their existence apart from scant references in clan songs or in personal names, their stories, to varying degrees, having been integrated into the mythology and oral history of those who came after. However, through these many transitions, the inheritors understood and respected the power and significance of sacred sites.

In short, the inference is as follows: When the first peoples came to this place after the last Ice Age and could travel



no further—perhaps bordered to the south and north by other migrant groups—they set down roots. Only after death would their spirit journey continue, in this case in the direction of the rising sun, which was the object of their veneration. From this place, the deities had come to Arnhem Land to enrich the people’s lives. On their newly sanctified homelands, the people grew as a collective by adhering strictly to the laws of those deities who had left, as I said, something of their essence all along the coastline. The trading and ceremonial relations that the first peoples developed with other totemic groups, along with the aforementioned spiritual exchange with the eastern deities, allowed these first peoples to flourish.

North-east Arnhem Land represented journey’s end but given their almost unquenchable desire for knowledge or truth, if the opportunity presented itself, some of the first peoples probably would have continued their physical journey in the direction of the land of their ancestors, and perhaps some did, although they are lost to history. However, in setting down roots, eastward travel was replaced by a form of ritual travel enacted through ceremony, song, and dance.

The first peoples migrating out of Africa may not have been searching for a place and a lifestyle like this in the path of starlight across still waters—they probably did not know what they were looking for—but in time this became the spiritual solution that the ancestors of the Yolngu were seeking. It became the place of their dreams. A place where they could feel that they belonged and could grow.

These first Aboriginal settlers were a driven people—driven by the numinous—and on Elcho Island, the sacred narrative that facilitated mobility—in whatever form it originally took—transformed into one that promoted stability. Was this the motivation of their ancestor’s inspired trajectory out of Africa? What was the nature of their faith? Was it to resolve the cognitive dissonance associated with that profound question that lies at the very core of human existence that we do not live by bread alone (New Testament), or by breathe alone (Upanishads), and would travel to the very ends of the world for a resolution to this puzzle?

The unique solution to the ‘god-shaped hole in the heart’ problem—namely the yearning of the soul that drives us on our spiritual quest—that was discovered by Australia’s

**The Author, Ian McIntosh, and David Burrumarra, with his Clan Treaty Flag, Elcho Island 1988**





Aborigines and called totemism by academics—saw them living in harmony with the natural world for over 65,000 years. Seventeenth century philosopher Blaise Pascal postulated in his book *Pensees* that there was an original Eden in which humans lived in true happiness. Evidence presented here, however, suggests that from the very beginning, human beings went looking for Eden and, in countless settings across the globe and throughout time, found answers to this primal need to fill the hole in their hearts. Since the world dawn, it is this desire that was driving mobility. For the ancestors of Australian Aborigines, apart from all the climatic, demographic and other motives for mobility, they would seek answers to fundamental questions and, at least in the latter portion of their great journey, would find them by moving in the direction of the rising sun by establishing relations with deities associated with this hallowed place.

Parts 2 & 3, now in progress, will provide evidence for the following suppositions:

*Supposition 1. Mobility was essential for survival, but in relocating their populations, first peoples put their beliefs on the line, understanding that the perceived rewards, however defined, far exceeded the risks.*

*Supposition 2: Established theories of mobility should not be viewed in isolation from the cultural and religious disposition of early Homo sapiens.*

*Supposition 3: Those religiously inspired pilgrims departing from Africa anticipated the long journey from within the confines of existing cultural norms and expectations. Travel into unknown realms was the means for affirming the truth and authenticity of the sacred centre.*

*Supposition 4: Religions evolved to bond small-scale communities by helping members to behave in unselfish ways. Travel beyond the axis mundi and the security of home base, in search of validation or authentication, ultimately increased the chances of a community's survival and growth.*

*Supposition 5. If the behaviour of the first migrants from Africa resembled that of the Yolngu, then they were preoccupied with not just bringing new children into the world and having enough food to eat. They were also intent upon expanding their territorial foothold, in cooperation with others, to better study, manage and protect the timeless sacred sites that gave meaning and significance to their lives.*

*Supposition 6. Deep desire drove the first peoples into unknown and unfamiliar lands and there were no doubts. They would succeed or die trying.*

### Interim Conclusion

Today, when the universal pilgrim steps outside of the routines of his or her daily life and steers a course in the direction of some great unknown—whether it be the true meaning of the divine or to find one's place in the sacred order of things—one can almost hear the echo of the voices of those very first pilgrims. Whatever the nature of human religion 100,000 years ago, the reasons for mobility then are just as applicable today in terms of our desire or need for pilgrimage, and for transcending time and space in the quest for understanding and growth. This need to explore, to know and affirm, and to understand, is ever-present and is as essential as ever for building stronger societies in the face of today's many challenges. As Rabindranath Tagore (2013) says, we have been forever grappling with ideas of a tethered but protected life within a structured and settled society and the freedom of the soul to wander endlessly in search of the numinous. I would add to this, a third and most vital step, namely, bringing home the fruits of those exploratory journeys. Apart from the inescapable physical realities to which the pilgrim has always had to respond, this dynamic has fuelled our sacred journeys since the dawn of time and will continue to do so in the future.

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