Stillness that Steals the Future

300 years of breathing and I have never taken a single step.

That's the first thing you should know about me—and perhaps, the first paradox of culture itself. For culture and I, life does not move in the way you expect. Our roots entrenched in the ground, breeze whistling through our leaves—yet, we transform everything around us.

What looks like stillness is in fact, accumulation; silence is archive; and immobility is a form of endurance of its own. My branches can sway. My feet? They're trapped. And not in a poetic way. Later, through grapevines, I learned that culture is a "web of significance" we ourselves spin and are simultaneously suspended in (Geertz 5). I have never spun, yet I caught quite a few threads since all I could do was listen. Over the centuries, I heard shouts in Dutch, songs in Creole, commands in French, sermons in English and whispers in Urdu.

The first voices I ever heard were Dutch. They landed in Mauritius with maps that did not include us. That is always how it begins—before innovation, there is exclusion. Before systems, there is reclassification. Michel Foucault would later call this the power of "episteme": the ability to decide what counts as knowledge, and therefore what counts as existence (Preface XXIII). I didn't know this name then, but I witnessed the theory in real time. The forest was not a forest anymore. It became "timber." Even people—voices I could hear but never see clearly—became "labour."

And yet, within this stifling exploitation, something unexpected happened: adaptation.

I remember being just a thin little sapling back then—hardly taller than an ankle. I was planted near a slave's camp. It might've been a Dutch settler, or more likely, a slave who sowed me. I was too young to remember.

They weren't here to stay—only to take away from my island. Yet, I am extremely grateful for my existence as a "normal" tree. My beautiful Ebony tree cousins were chopped and hauled onto ships. The rats and monkeys that they brought devoured the native life. My dear Dodo friends vanished into the books of history. Once, a boy—barely twelve with perspiration glinting on his ebony skin—collapsed under my small branches, his arms shaking from loading timber for hours. His sweat soaked my roots. He used to tell me bedtime stories in a language I was still learning—stories his grandmother had once told him in Madagascar, and how he longed to see her just one more time. Then one day, he disappeared. I never saw him again. The stories were left incomplete, and not knowing how they ended itched my bark for years.

That was my first lesson in innovation: survival is translation.

Isaac was also a regular visitor. Every time, he'd drop to the ground like his legs just gave out. He laughed - once. Low and bitter. "This land eats men," he said. He rubbed his shoulder and whispered a prayer. "Keep me alive, Marie. Just one more day." I don't know if he made it. (Another itch added to my body.)

Then the Dutch left, and the French settled.

They didn't dig out the roots the Dutch left behind; they built over them. They renamed the island, built roads and houses, and then brought in more slaves from Africa. They introduced order, but with it came hierarchy. An inhumane one. As Stephen Corry argues, colonial systems rarely destroy cultures outright—they reorganise them until they appear to be their own invention (Corry).

Under the French, culture became performance. Identity had to be performed correctly to be recognised.

Yet, life kept unfolding under my arms. One day, in 1772, a woman leaned against my trunk with a sewing kit in her hands. Her name was Niama. She tied a red string around her wrist – for luck. She needed some for she was about to escape a plantation nearby. The day of the escapade, out of breath and bleeding from her feet after a long run, she took off the string and tied it around my trunk instead. "Keep me safe," she whispered. And I did. She slept under my arms for two nights before a fisherman took her in. I never saw her again. But the red string is still here.

Many years later, a schoolgirl saw it and tied her own red thread beside it. Then another child. And another. It developed into a habit, later a tradition. Now, every year during Maha Shivratri or Chinese New Year, children come and wrap new red threads around my bark. Some say I bring luck. Others say I grant wishes. And few say that if you touch my trunk and close your eyes, your secret gets carried into the sky. I don't know who started that rumour. But I like it.

Yet, none of them know where it started. None of them know except for Niama.

This is where I began to understand what Victor Turner meant by "liminality": the space between identities, where structure loosens and new meaning surfaces (Turner 95).

The French were here for almost a hundred years. On some days they were kind. On most days, anything but. One woman, Denise, used to peruse her book of poems every Thursday under my gentle shade. She was in love with a man who didn't return her feelings. I think she read out loud to forget him. Her voice always cracked on the words *toujours* and *amour*. I still hear those cracks - harsher than the cracking of my branches.

Then came the British.

They gave new names to old places, new meanings to old words. The footsteps changed. And so did the accents. I watched as the lucky trees around me were marked with beautiful red Xs on their trunks. I envied them. If only I looked so ethereal out in the sun. One day, they were all gone. Of course, they are the ones who got feet, right? Even the slave camp vanished. I was the only one left behind. The land around me was instead carved into rows. Soon, rose a sea of sugarcane, one I had never seen before – sharp-edged and whispering.

Pickaxes worked from sunrise to sunset. The people who wielded them were not like the haughty overseers with their wide hats and shiny leather boots. They moved differently. Slower, steadier, like their feet had learnt patience. At sunrise, one of them always paused beneath my branches. His gaunt brown-skinned face shimmered like the earth after rain, and he draped a white flowing cloth around his waist. He folded his hands in earnest prayer and whispered under his breath before running to the field. I never knew his name. I wondered what the white cloth was called. I still remember how it was always folded the same way, moving along the rhythm of my leaves in the wind.

Under their rule, I began to notice something new beneath my branches—not just survival, but *fusion*. Workers who arrived from India brought with them rituals that did not disappear under colonial order. The white cloth worn during prayers persisted, carving its place in the rigid system. Culture is not simply what is allowed, but what refuses to disappear.

Years later, little Krishnan started visiting me every morning with a slate tucked under his arm and a water bottle dangling at his waist. He sat cross-legged at my roots and traced neat English letters into the surface. *A for Apple. B for Ball.* Sometimes, he would break his focus to sing a Bhojpuri song. Softly. Like it was a forbidden sin. He always stopped as soon as he spotted his mother on the horizon.

How do cultures that conflict coexist without collapsing into erasure?

I shared a deep connection with Krishnan. He was the only one to quench my thirst. In return, I kept him safe. I gave him a haven to be himself. Until one day, his mother came from behind, told him to stop his ludicrous singing and pulled him by the ear towards the house. The next morning, Krishnan came back. But he didn't sing. Instead, he scratched one word into my bark: *Ghar. Home.* I will keep it safe, Krishnan.

Krishnan never chose one identity over another. He carried them all, one over the next, until they began to blur into something new. It wasn't about fitting in or leaving something behind—it was about becoming something in between. As cultural theorist Stuart Hall reminds us, "cultural identity is not fixed, it's always hybrid" (504). It is a kind of positioning, shaped and reshaped by history, power, and the way we are seen.

I began to understand that negotiation is where new things are born. Because innovation rarely comes from nothing. It comes from working with what you have, bending it, mixing it, and finding a way to make it speak differently.

Then one day, I woke up and the Union Jack was gone. The Mauritian flag soared high instead. Four colours: Red, Blue, Yellow and Green. People danced in the streets. They shouted, sang, and hugged. I sang too; it didn't take me long to memorise the National Anthem.

However, freedom is a process, not a simple slogan. I watched as the country tried to find itself in a new world filled with fresh hope. New leaders, new laws in Parliament, new holidays. Old problems remained. Still, something shifted.

This is a crucial misunderstanding in how societies view progress. Political independence is often mistaken for cultural transformation. But culture does not obey political timelines. Under the new flag, people no longer defined belonging through the old colonial labels—they began to find it in what they had lived through together, in memories that quietly tied them to one another.

The boy who used to sell ‘dholl puri’ near the temple started talking about college. A girl—a regular visitor—joined the police force. I define these not as personal trajectories, but cultural recalibrations. Because culture, as Geertz would insist, is not what people are but what they do with meaning when circumstances change (5).

How do traditions stay meaningful in a world that keeps accelerating?

It is now the 21st century and I am still here. Culture has migrated again, not through ships or empires this time, but through screens. Teenagers used to sit under me and complain about homework. Now they come and film ‘TikToks’. They carve their initials into my trunk. They laugh. They fall in love. They cry when no one’s looking.

And yes, I still hate that I can’t move my feet. You can stretch when you’re angry. You can stomp your feet when you’re fed up. You can leave. I can’t. When the sugarcane burns, I have to stay. I inhale this toxic air. Just because you don’t hear me cough, does not mean I am immune to it. When the floods swallow the street, I have to stay. My roots are drowned in the heavy flow of water. Sometimes, I think if I shake my arms hard enough, maybe the roots will loosen. But they never do.

The red threads tied to my bark are now photographed, posted, shared. Some would say this dilutes their authenticity. But authenticity is not a static characteristic—it is a negotiation between origin and use. To insist that these threads must remain untouched by modern life is, as Teju Cole suggests, to “settle on a notion of authenticity that edits out the present day,” is “not simply to present an alternative truth: It is to indulge in fantasy” (18). I choose to believe that what matters is not whether a tradition remains unchanged, but whether it remains meaningful as it changes.

If I were to define culture now, after three centuries of listening, I would not define it as tradition. I would define it as the never-ending conversation between memory, constraint, and reinvention.

As Peter F. Drucker suggests, an organization’s internal structure or “spirit” determines how work is done (12). But I would extend this further: culture determines what work is considered possible in the first place. This is why some organisations innovate and others stagnate. It is not resources that differentiate them—it is whether their culture allows contradiction to exist without collapsing it.

Yet, I love that I remember everything: the stories, the songs, the laughter, the island breeze, the confession and the heartbreaks. Maybe that's the trade. And if culture has taught me anything, it is this:

You do not need to move to change the world.

You only need to remember it well enough to transform what it becomes next.

If I ever get another life, I hope someone invents a way for trees to move. Maybe with wheels. Or better, legs. Long roots that walk. Human geniuses will probably call it "Genetically Engineered Greenery" or something fancy. In my dictionary, that will be freedom and equality.

Maybe then, I wouldn't hate my feet.

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