

A Path Home

A Graphic Novel on Naga Repatriation



By Arkotong Longkumer
Illustrated by Meren Imchen

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Available to download free: [www. https://rradnagaland.org/](https://rradnagaland.org/)

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Longkumer, Arkotong & Meren Imchen. 2023. *A Path Home. A Graphic Novel on Naga Repatriation*. RRaD, Dimapur & North Eastern Social Research Centre, Guwahati.

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Published by:

Recover Restore and Decolonise (RRaD)

Dimapur, Nagaland

Website: <https://rradnagaland.org/>

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ISBN: 978-81-960850-0-1



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Acknowledgements

This graphic novel is for the Naga people. We hope that this will inspire and empower you to imagine another world is possible!

We would like to thank the Economic and Social Research Council Impact Acceleration Grants (ESRC IAA), and the University of Edinburgh for their support and for believing in this endeavour. We would like to thank the RRaD (Recover, Restore and Decolonise) team for their guidance and for helping us make sense of the graphic novel, and to the Pitt Rivers Museum, particularly the Director of the Museum, Laura Van Broekhoven, and Curator and Joint Head of Collections, Marina de Alarcón for their support and friendship from the very beginning.

Much of the content is based on an earlier piece co-written with Dolly Kikon, *The Unfinished Business of Colonialism: Naga Ancestral Remains and the Healing of the Land* that helped furnish the context. Along the way, we've experienced plenty of goodwill from Return, Reconcile, Renew (RRR), Revd. Dr. Garry Deverell, and Edward Halealoha Ayau and have learnt from their work with Indigenous ancestral remains in Australia and Hawai'i respectively. Sanjoy Barbo-
ra connected us to Walter Fernandes and the team at North Eastern Social Research Centre, who provided us with an ISBN and agreed to co-publish this book. To all we are immensely grateful.

Many people have read and commented on the graphic novel. In particular we'd like to thank the RRaD team, Laura Van Broekhoven, Lindsay Graham, and Sentiylula for their very helpful comments. We would like to thank Jenny Tracey for discussing the storyline with us, her wonderful edits and making the storytelling crisper and better. Many thanks.

The story is what we call 'ethnographic fiction'. This means that although the characters and setting are fictional, the content is largely drawn from people that we have interacted with and the historical events that have shaped much of our thinking on repatriation. We are left with more questions than answers, but at least we hope that this is a step in the right direction.

All the characters are named after natural features of the landscape (thanks to Sentiylula for suggesting this!). We wanted to play with various features of the land that surpass human biology and biographies, while grounding the story into the songlines of our ancestors. The names are taken from different tribes such as Ali (Ao – earth); Yonglang (Konyak – old stone); Bo-ve (Chokri – good tree); Teikhrie (Tenyidie – air); Akuvu (Sumi – light); Chitebu (Mao – old pear tree); Kimiro (Lotha – embers of the house); Kung (Rongmei – orchid); Sirala (Tangkhul – star); Tesho (Rengma – oak tree); Ayung (Ao – river). By doing this, we wanted our story to be more earthly and hopefully more sublime in its tone and texture.

Arkotong Longkumer & Meren Imchen
Edinburgh and Dimapur, January 2023



GRANDMOTHER



ALI



YONGLANG



AKUVU



BO-VE



TEIKHRIE



CHITEBU



KIMIRO



KUNG



SIRALA



TESHO



AYUNG

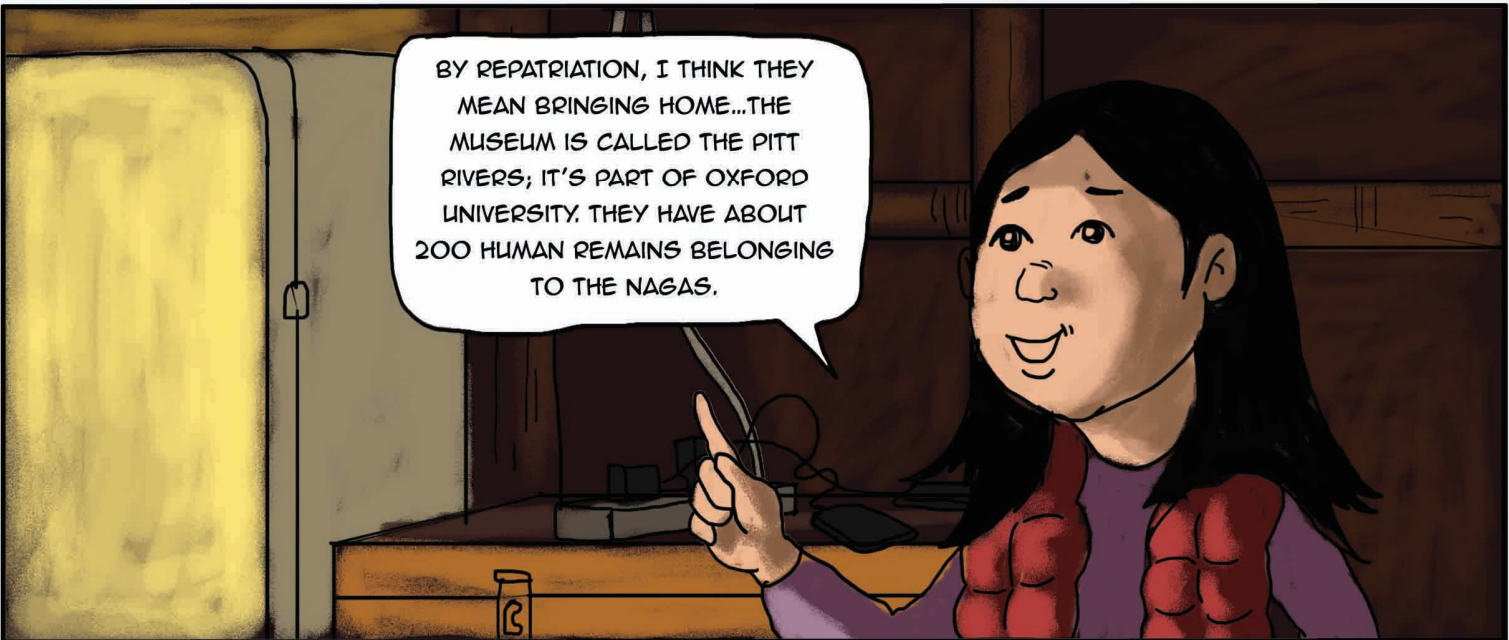




GRANDMOTHER, HAVE YOU SEEN THE NEWS IN THE MORNING EXPRESS? THERE'S A STORY ABOUT NAGA HUMAN REMAINS BEING RETURNED FROM A MUSEUM IN ENGLAND - REPATRIATION...



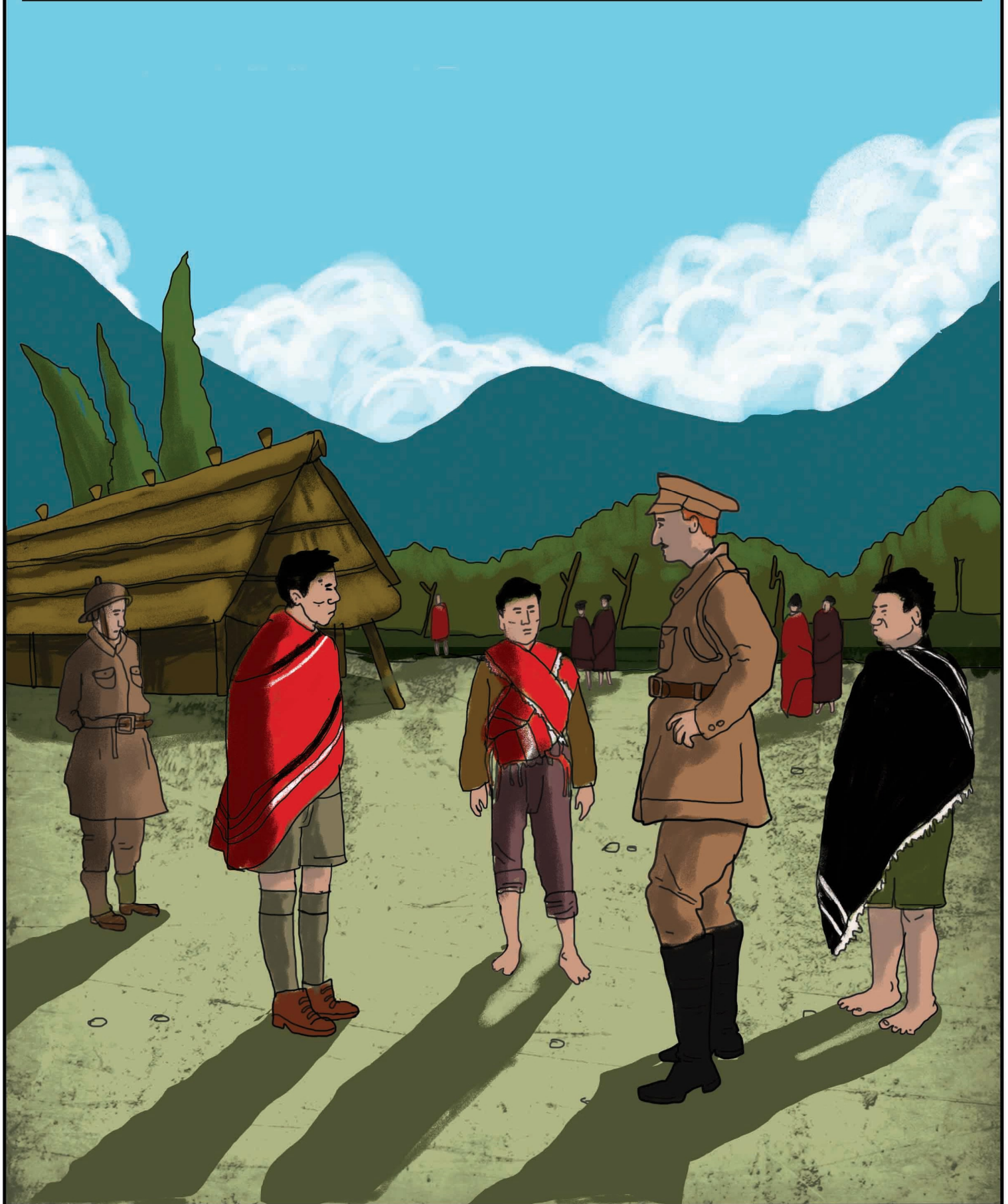
REPATRIATION...WHAT?



BY REPATRIATION, I THINK THEY MEAN BRINGING HOME...THE MUSEUM IS CALLED THE PITT RIVERS; IT'S PART OF OXFORD UNIVERSITY. THEY HAVE ABOUT 200 HUMAN REMAINS BELONGING TO THE NAGAS.



WHEN I WAS LITTLE, I REMEMBER SEEING A FEW WHITE MEN, BUT THAT WAS A LONG, LONG TIME AGO. THEY DRESSED IN STRANGE CLOTHES - BIG BOOTS, A HAT, AND THEY ALWAYS HAD NAGA DOBASHI WITH THEM, WEARING THEIR BRIGHT RED SHAWLS.





THESE CANNONS WERE SCARY AND PEOPLE OFTEN CALLED THEM FIREBOMBS. MANY VILLAGES FOUGHT THE BRITISH BECAUSE THEY WANTED TO BE LEFT ALONE, BUT THE SOLDIERS FINALLY MANAGED TO COLONISE LARGE PARTS OF THE NAGA LANDS AND BEGAN RULING OVER US.



IF ANY VILLAGE DEFIED OR DISOBEYED THEIR ORDERS, THEY WOULD BURN THE WHOLE VILLAGE DOWN AS A FORM OF COLLECTIVE PUNISHMENT. IT WAS MAYBE THEN THAT THE BRITISH LOOTED OUR POSSESSIONS, REMOVED HUMAN SKULLS, AND TOOK THEM AWAY...I DON'T KNOW WHAT THEY DID WITH THEM. WE DIDN'T TALK ABOUT IT.





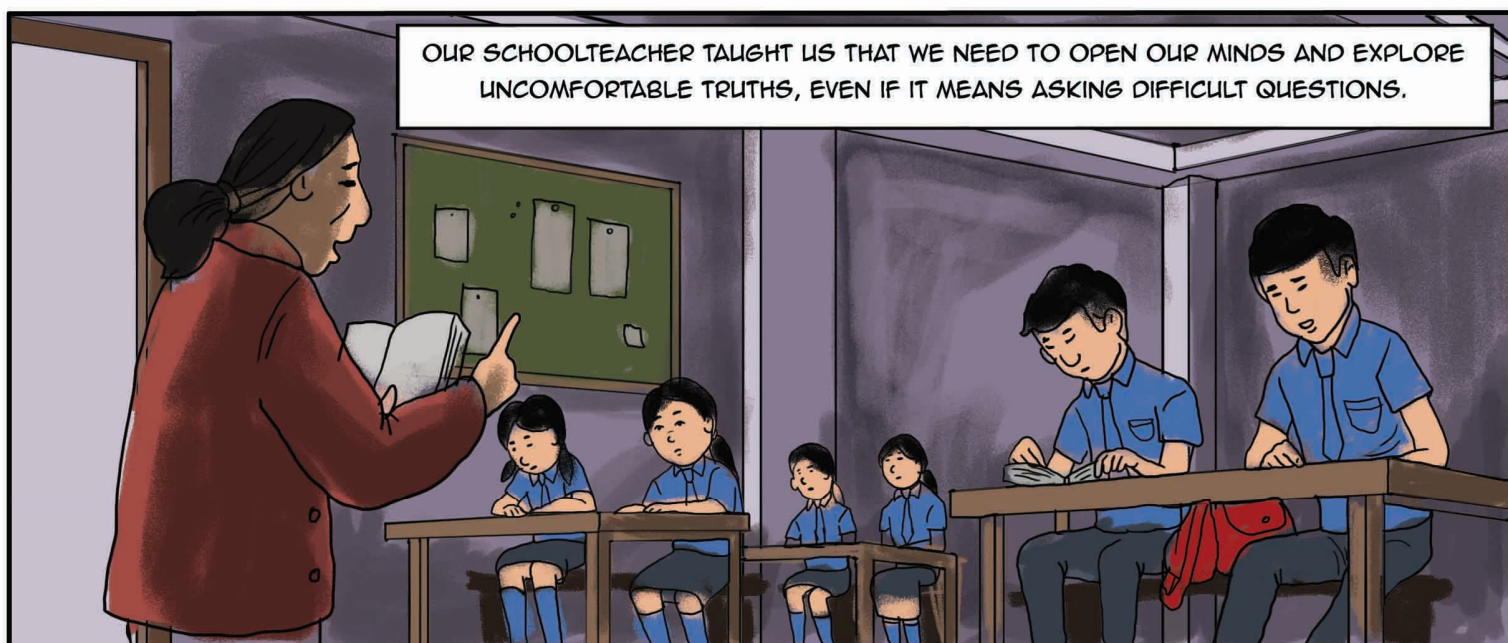


WHY ALL THIS TALK, HO.
THIS IS ALL MISA-MISHI!

THEY SHOULD JUST LEAVE THEM
THERE IN THE MUSEUM. WE DON'T
KNOW WHO THESE REMAINS BELONG
TO, OR WHO ACTUALLY OWNS THEM?
THESE THINGS WERE TAKEN WELL
BEFORE YOU OR I WERE BORN AND
WE HAVE NO MEMORY OF THEM. WHY
DIG THIS UP NOW? BETTER TO JUST
LET THINGS BE.



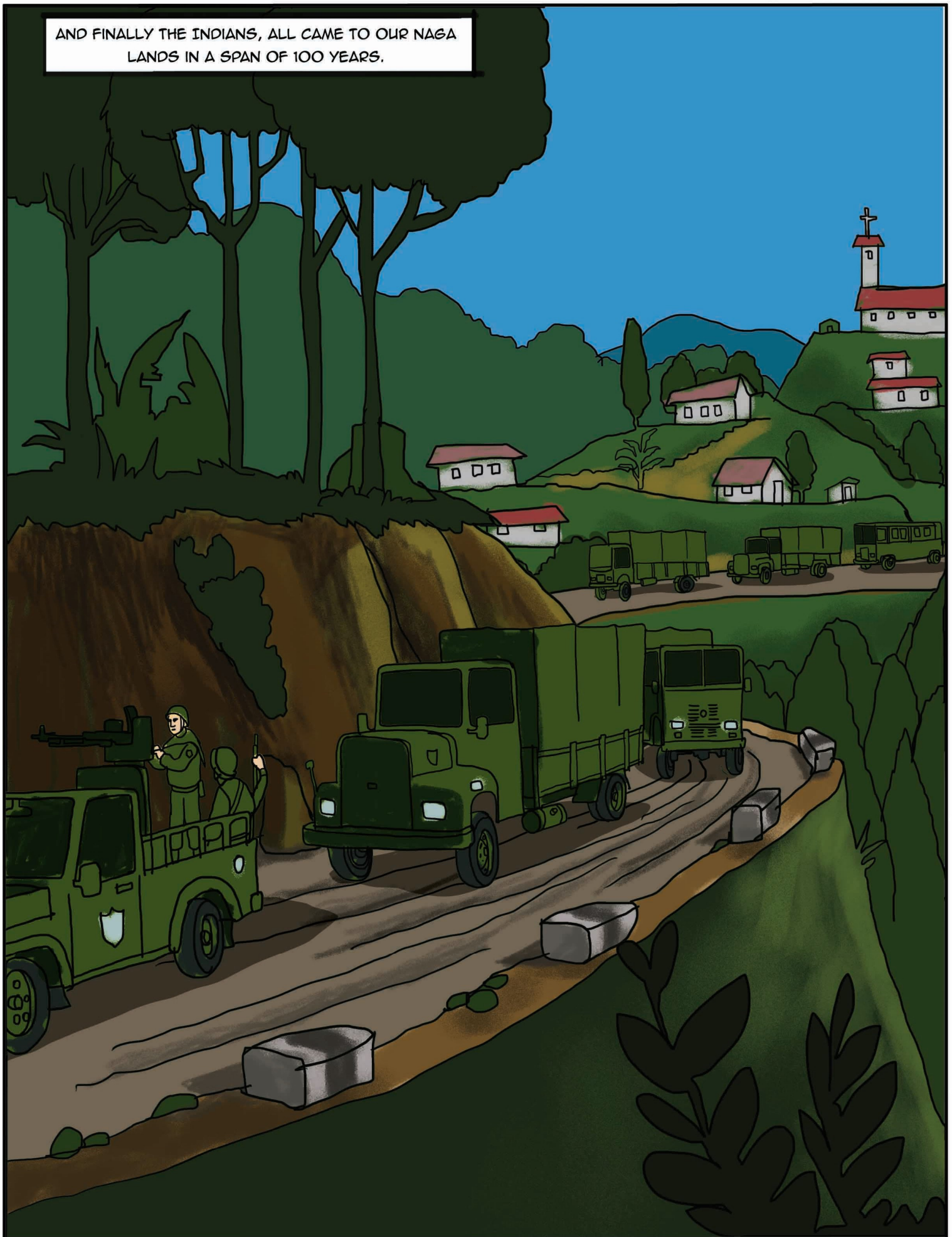
BUT, WHAT ABOUT THE HISTORY THAT WAS HIDDEN
FROM US? THERE ARE HARDLY ANY BOOKS OR
TEACHING MATERIAL THAT TALK ABOUT OUR PERSPEC-
TIVE OF THE BRITISH AND WHAT THEY DID. ALL WE HEAR
ARE THOSE FROM BRITISH ADMINISTRATORS AND
AMERICAN BAPTIST MISSIONARIES - THAT THEIR
CULTURE WAS BETTER AND THEREFORE WE SHOULD
BECOME LIKE THEM.

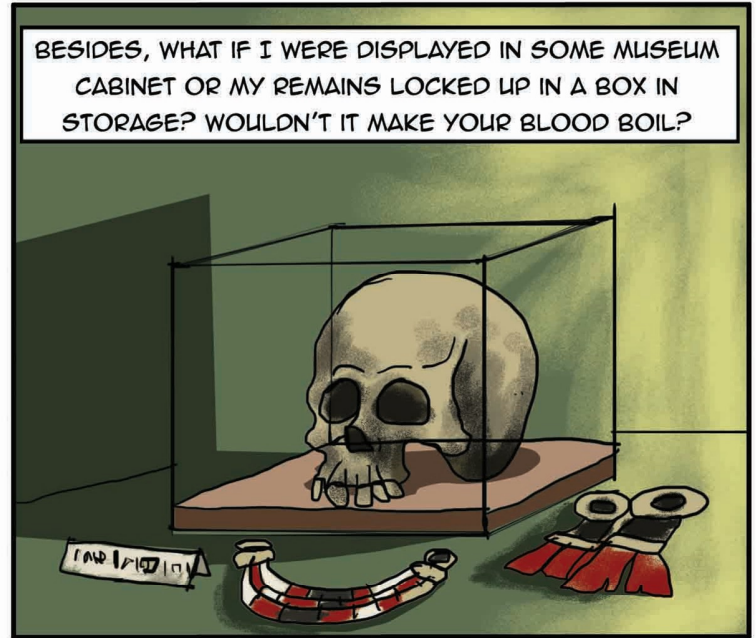


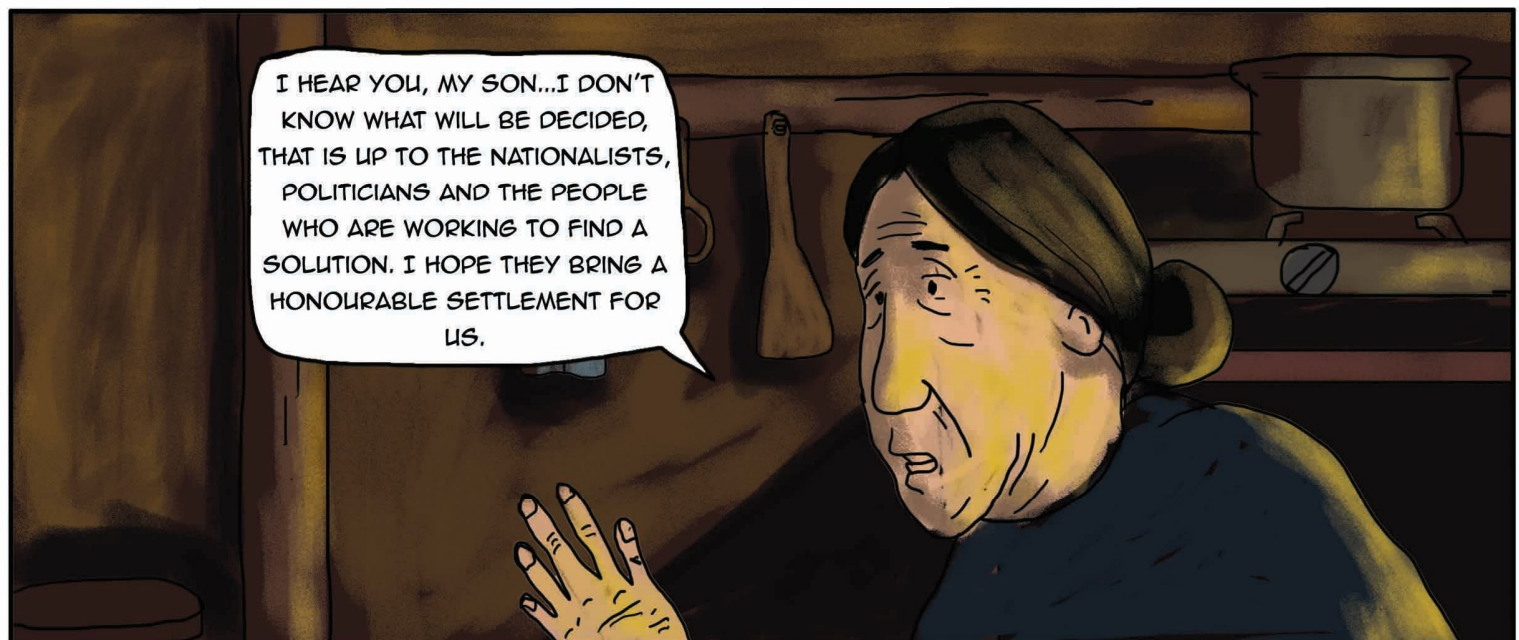
OUR SCHOOLTEACHER TAUGHT US THAT WE NEED TO OPEN OUR MINDS AND EXPLORE
UNCOMFORTABLE TRUTHS, EVEN IF IT MEANS ASKING DIFFICULT QUESTIONS.



AND FINALLY THE INDIANS, ALL CAME TO OUR NAGA
LANDS IN A SPAN OF 100 YEARS.



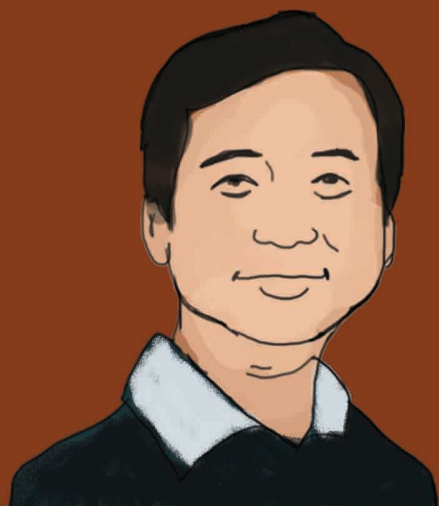






PITT RIVERS MUSEUM IS IN OXFORD, ENGLAND, AND IS AN ETHNOGRAPHIC AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM, WHICH HAS OVER 6000 NAGA CULTURAL OBJECTS AND ABOUT 200 NAGA HUMAN REMAINS. IT WAS ESTABLISHED IN 1884 AND IS NOW PART OF THE UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD.





ARKOTONG LONGKUMER AND DOLLY KIKON ARE NAGA RESEARCHERS BASED IN EDINBURGH AND MELBOURNE.

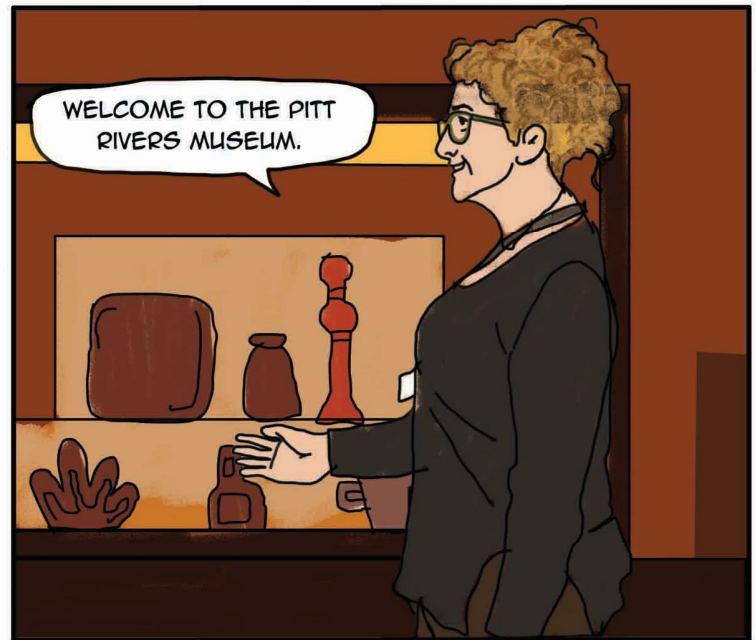
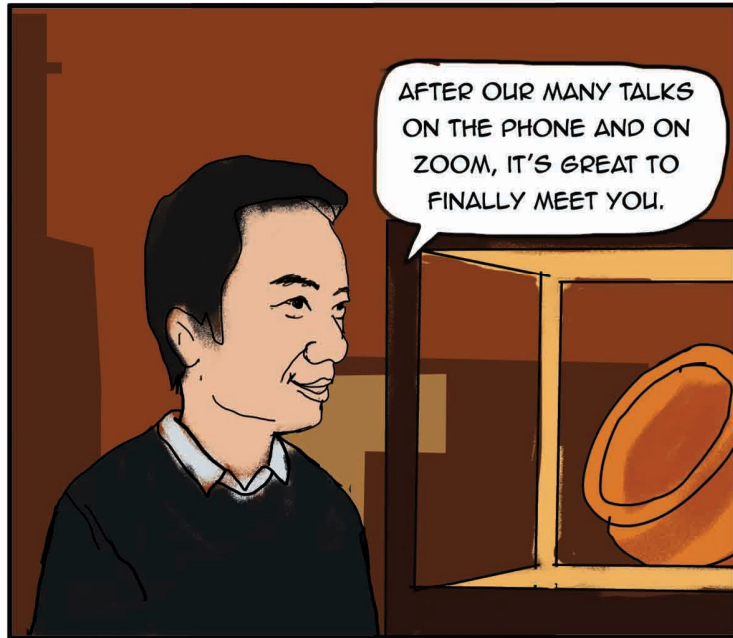


LAURA VAN BROEKHOVEN IS THE DIRECTOR OF THE PITT RIVERS MUSEUM.



AND MARINA DE ALARCÓN IS CURATOR AND JOINT HEAD OF COLLECTIONS IN THE MUSEUM.





WE TOOK THE DECISION IN 2020 TO REMOVE DISPLAYS OF ANCESTRAL REMAINS THAT WERE INSENSITIVE OR CAUSED OFFENCE TO COMMUNITIES FROM WHOM THESE WERE TAKEN (SUCH AS THE SHUAR IN ECUADOR AND NAGAS FROM INDIA AND MYANMAR).



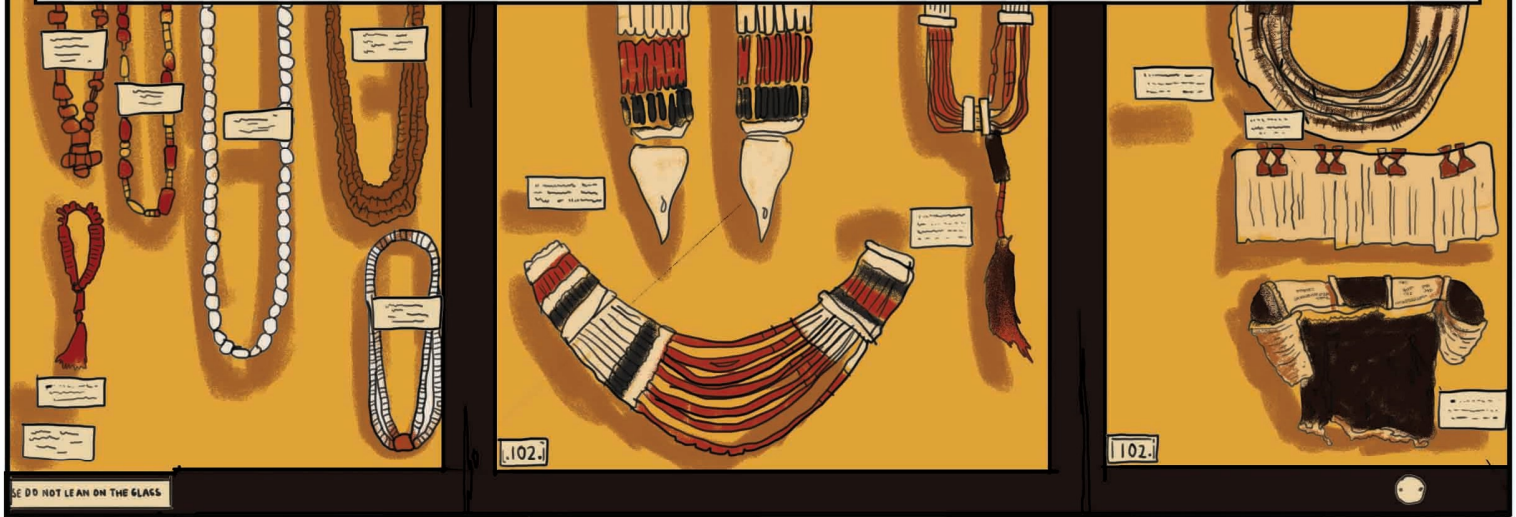
WE DEVELOPED A PROCEDURE AROUND THE RETURN OF CULTURAL OBJECTS AND ALSO WROTE A COMMITMENT TO CHANGE STATEMENT.



WE USE THIS TO HELP CONNECT WITH COMMUNITIES WHO EXPERIENCED THE HURT AND TRAUMA OF BRITISH COLONIALISM AND WHO CONTINUE TO BE MARGINALISED.



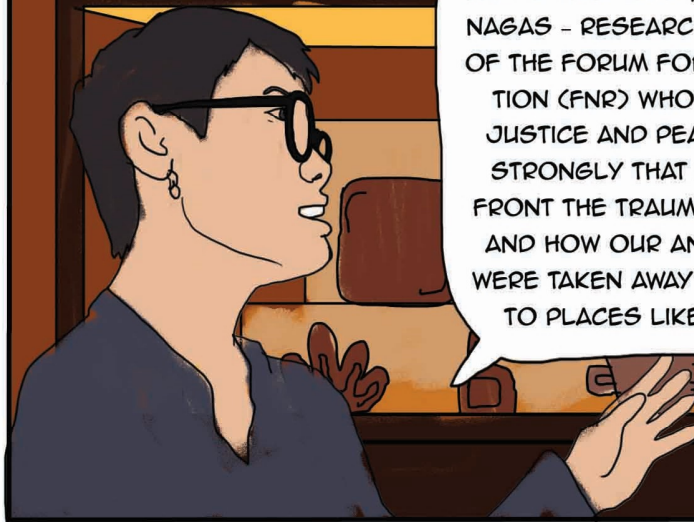
THE PITT RIVERS HAS THE LARGEST COLLECTION OF NAGA OBJECTS AND ANCESTRAL REMAINS IN THE WORLD. WE HAVE LOTS OF HISTORICAL CONNECTIONS THROUGH DIFFERENT BRITISH COLLECTORS AND ADMINISTRATORS OVER THE YEARS.



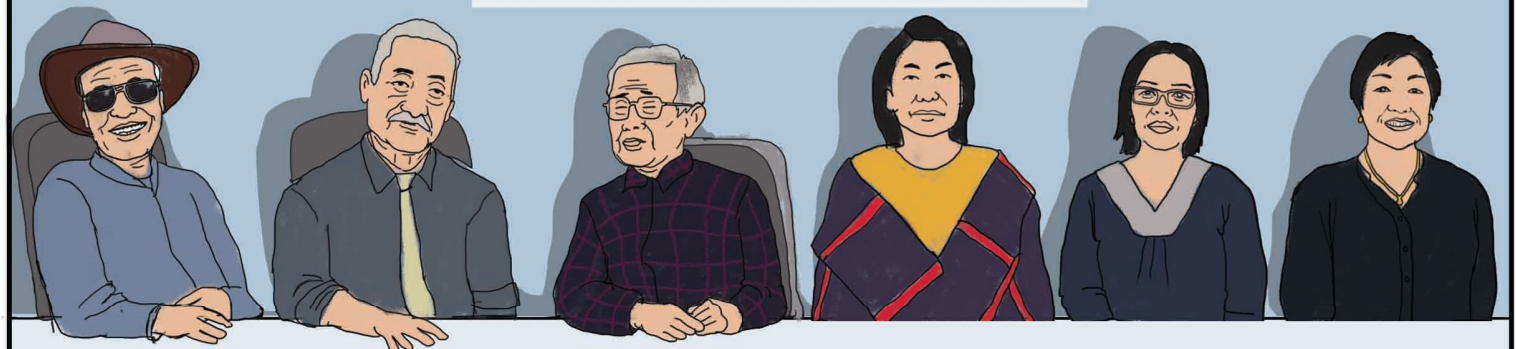
CAN YOU TELL US A LITTLE ABOUT THE NAGA RESEARCH TEAM?



YES, YES. AFTER WE MADE CONTACT WITH YOU IN 2020, A SMALL GROUP OF NAGAS - RESEARCHERS AND MEMBERS OF THE FORUM FOR NAGA RECONCILIATION (FNR) WHO WORK ON SOCIAL JUSTICE AND PEACEBUILDING - FELT STRONGLY THAT WE NEED TO CONFRONT THE TRAUMA OF COLONIALISM, AND HOW OUR ANCESTRAL REMAINS WERE TAKEN AWAY TO FOREIGN LANDS TO PLACES LIKE THE PITT RIVERS.



 **FNR**
THE FORUM FOR NAGA RECONCILIATION

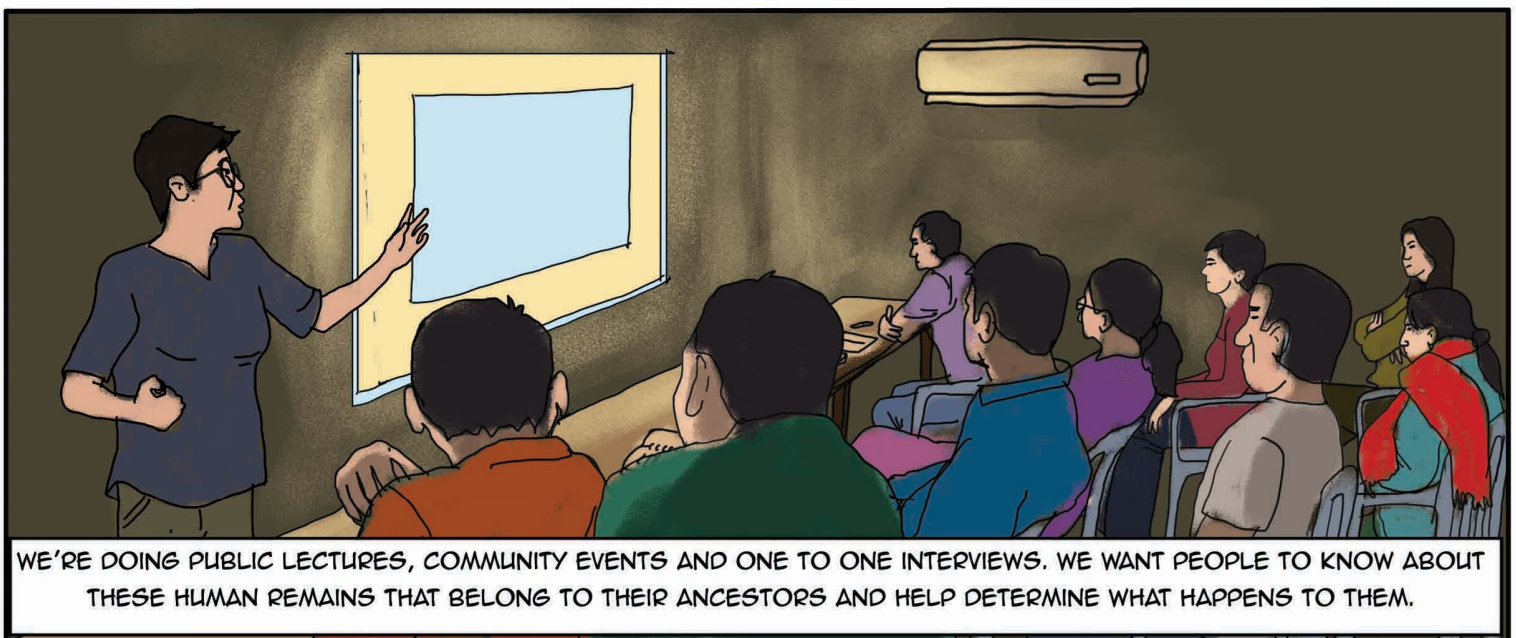


WE NEED TO CREATE SAFE SPACES TO EXPRESS OUR ANGER, AND RECOGNISE THE SILENCE FROM COLONIAL INSTITUTIONS THAT FOR TOO LONG WENT UNACKNOWLEDGED.

THE FNR HELPED FORM THE NAGA RESEARCH TEAM - WE'RE CALLED RECOVER, RESTORE AND DECOLONISE (RRAD).



RECOVER RESTORE AND DECOLONISE



THAT'S GREAT. WE NEED MORE CONTEXT AND KNOWLEDGE AND IT'S BRILLIANT THAT RRAD ARE TAKING THIS ON. FOR TOO LONG, THESE ANCESTRAL REMAINS WERE DISPLAYED WITHOUT THINKING ABOUT HOW AND WHY THEY CAME INTO OUR POSSESSION. SOMETIMES THEY WERE DISPLAYED AND LABELLED AS SCIENTIFIC SPECIMENS, WITH ONLY A BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF WHERE THEY CAME FROM.

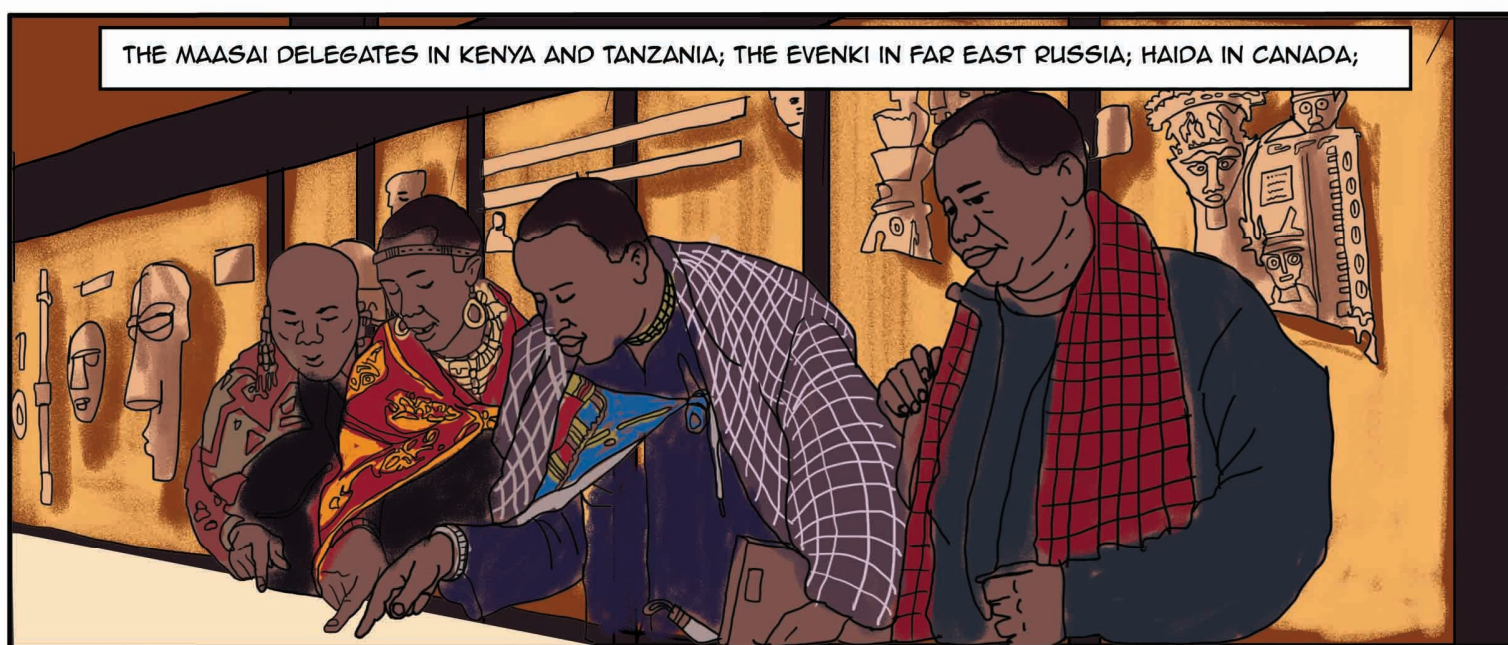


WE ARE EAGER TO WORK WITH COMMUNITIES AND UNDERSTAND THE SENSITIVITIES AROUND THESE ISSUES ON AN EQUAL FOOTING. MOST OF THE NAGA COLLECTION WAS GATHERED BY THE BRITISH OFFICERS WHO SERVED IN NAGA REGIONS.



THE MOST WELL KNOWN ARE J.H. HUTTON, J.P. MILLS, AND J.C. HIGGINS. WE WANT TO WORK WITH THE NAGA RESEARCH TEAM TO UNDERSTAND THE COLLECTION AND HOW THESE ANCESTRAL REMAINS MADE IT TO THE MUSEUM.









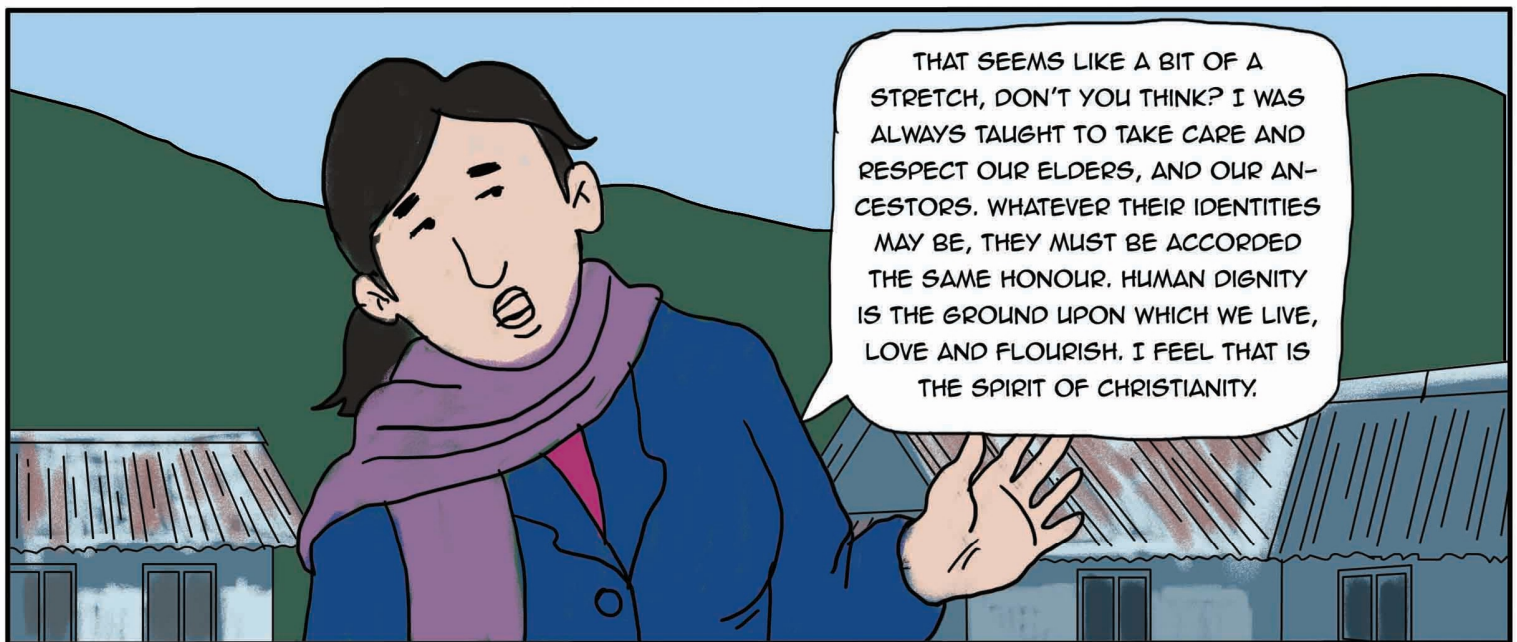
YEAH...ONCE THE RRAD TEAM HAS SPOKEN WITH THE COMMUNITIES AND HAVE AS MUCH INFORMATION AS POSSIBLE ABOUT THESE ANCESTRAL REMAINS, THE MUSEUM WILL THEN WORK WITH THE NAGA PEOPLE TO PRESENT THE FINDINGS TO THE OXFORD UNIVERSITY COUNCIL.

THEY'LL MAKE A DECISION ABOUT WHAT GETS RETURNED AND WHEN. IT IS HARD TO KNOW EXACTLY HOW LONG THIS WILL TAKE. IT MIGHT BE ANOTHER FEW YEARS BEFORE THE ACTUAL REPATRIATION HAPPENS TO THE NAGA HOMELANDS.

WE HOPE THE MUSEUM CAN PARTICIPATE AND WORK WITH YOU, THE NAGA PEOPLE. WE ARE HUMBLLED TO BE PART OF YOUR STORY.



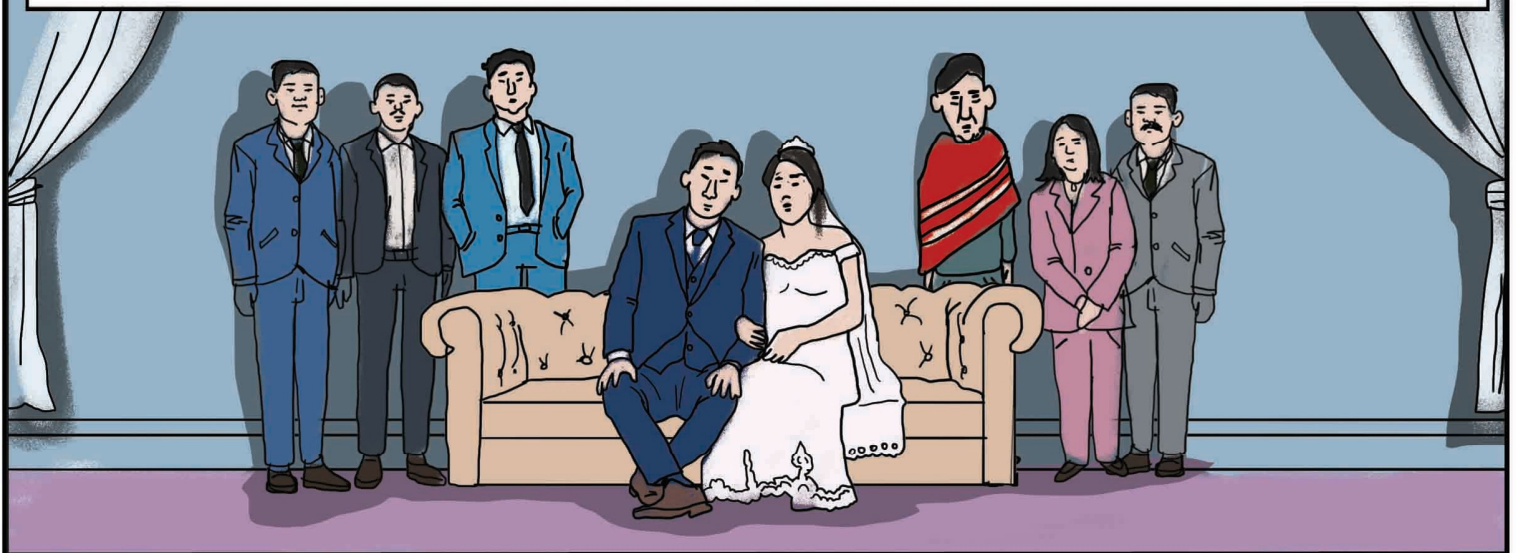




IN BIRTH, IT IS THE PARENTS AND FAMILY WHO TAKE CARE OF YOU - GIVE YOU A NAME AND WELCOME YOU INTO THIS WORLD.



IN MARRIAGE, THE CELEBRATION IS NOT JUST ABOUT THE COUPLE BUT NEW RELATIONSHIPS ARE MADE THAT EXPAND FAMILIES, VILLAGES, AND EVEN TRIBES.

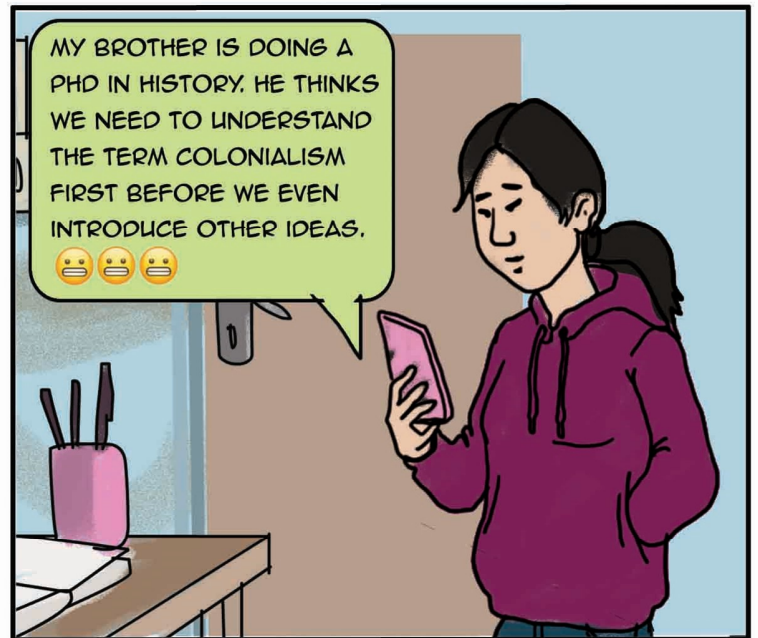
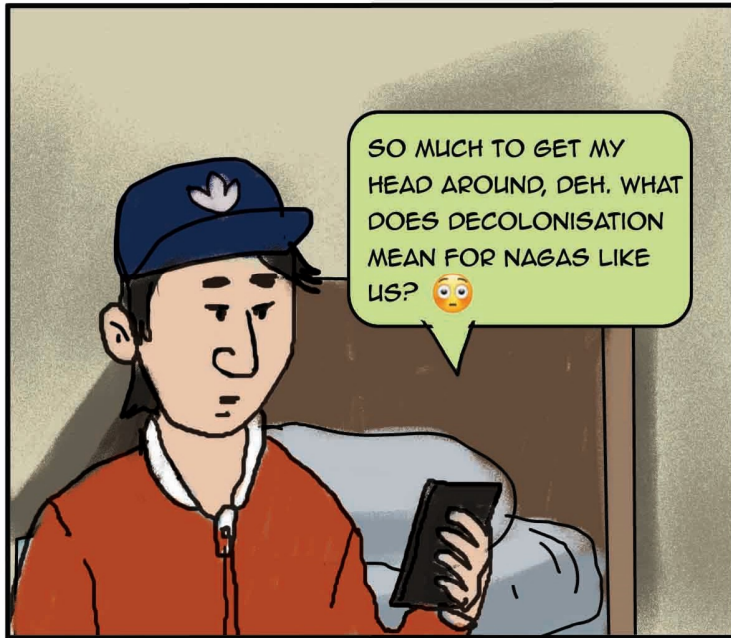


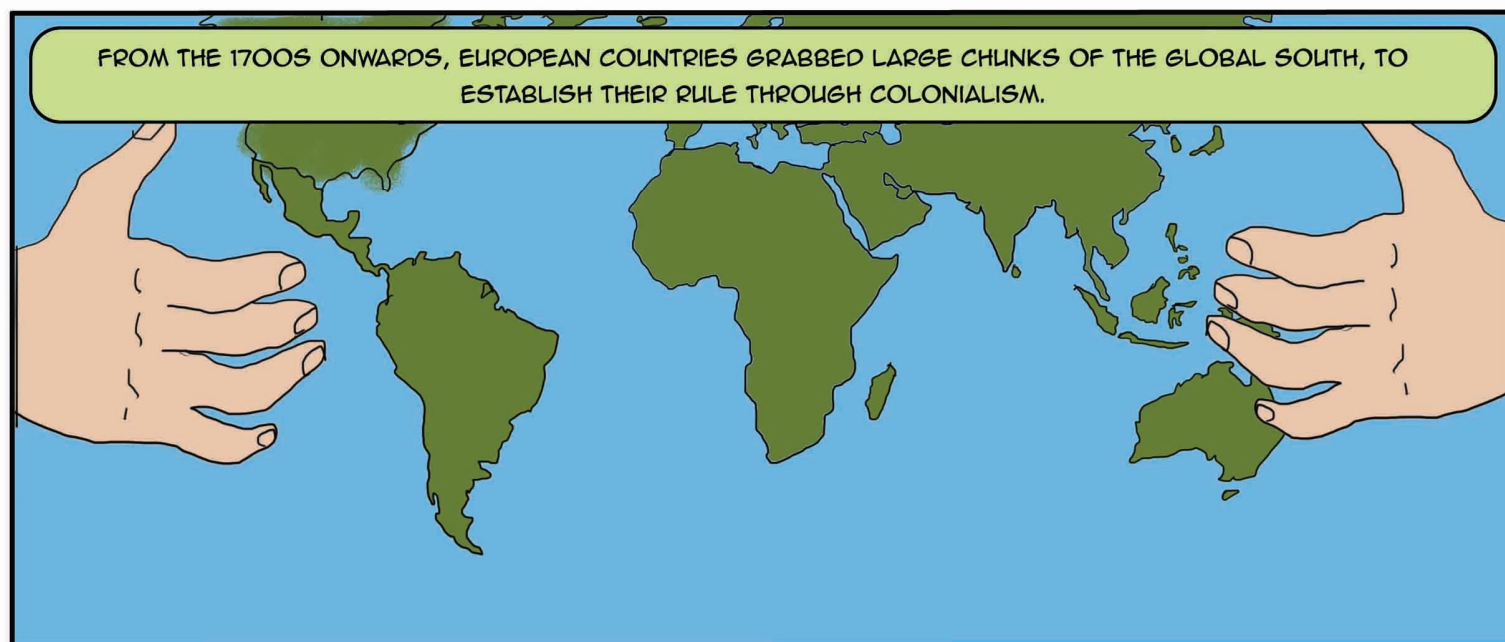
IN DEATH, THE FAMILY AND KIN TAKE CARE OF THE PERSON SO THAT THEY CAN REST IN PEACE TO BE RECEIVED IN THE AFTER-LIFE, WHETHER IT IS IN HEAVEN REUNITED WITH GOD, OR WITH ANCESTORS.





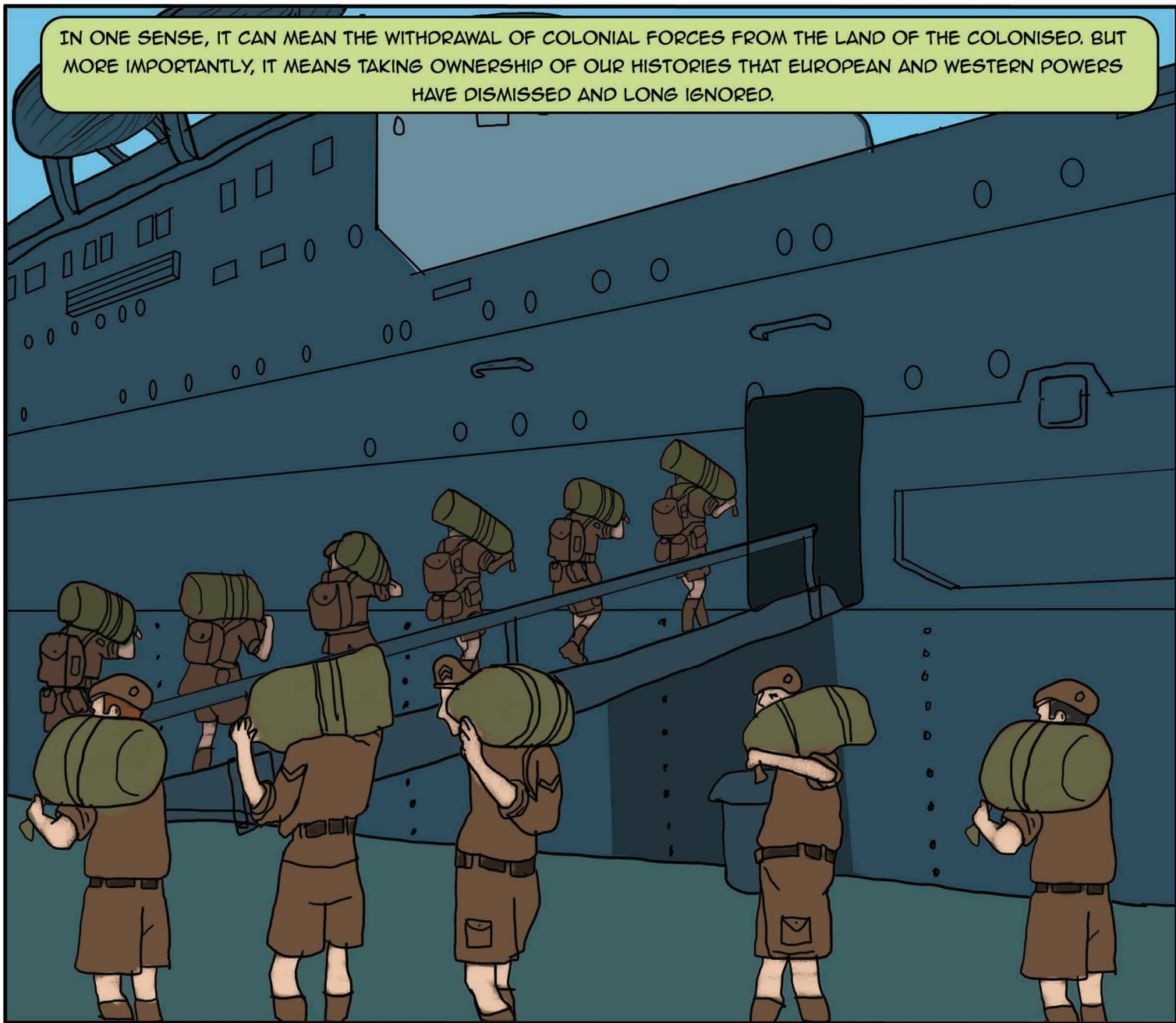




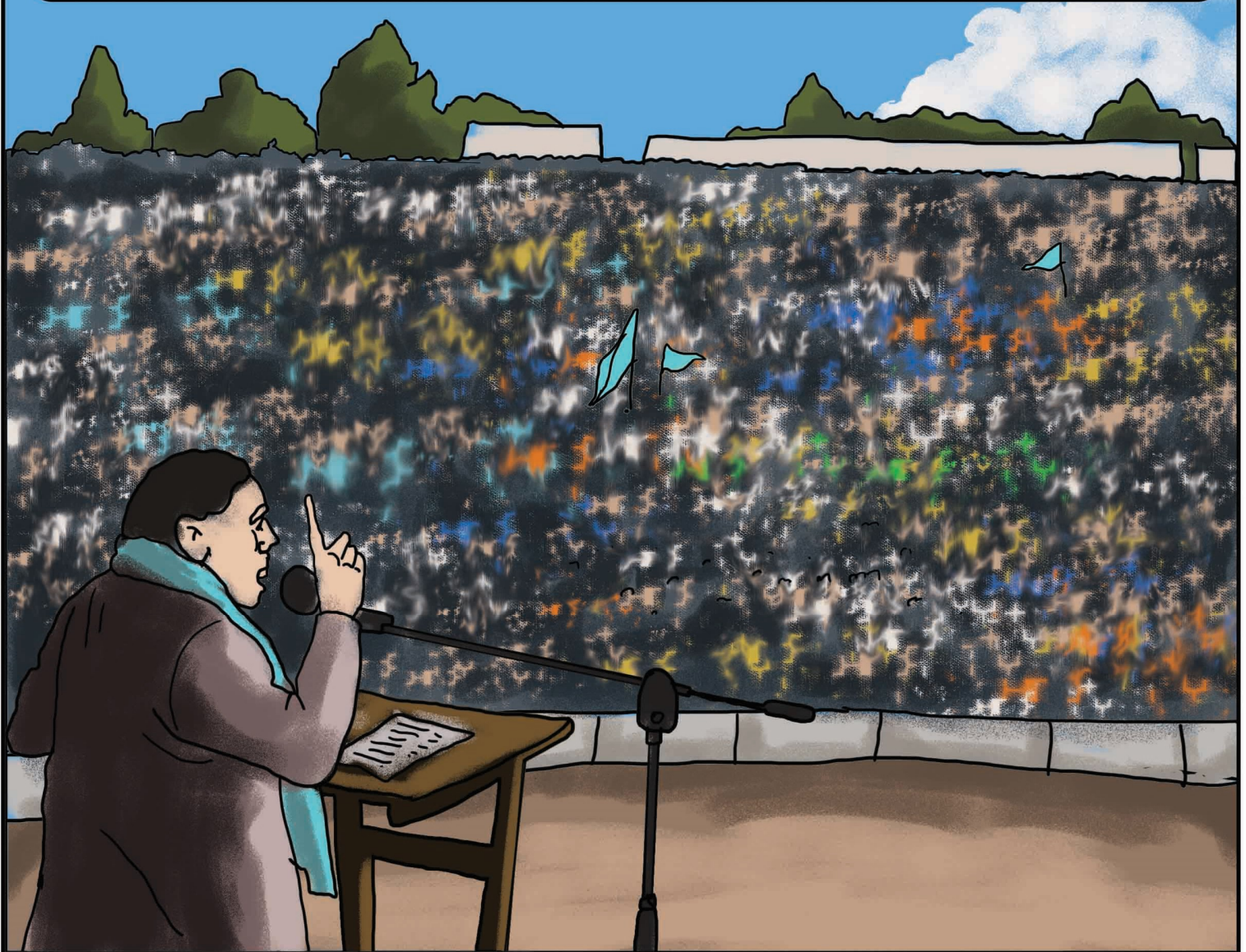


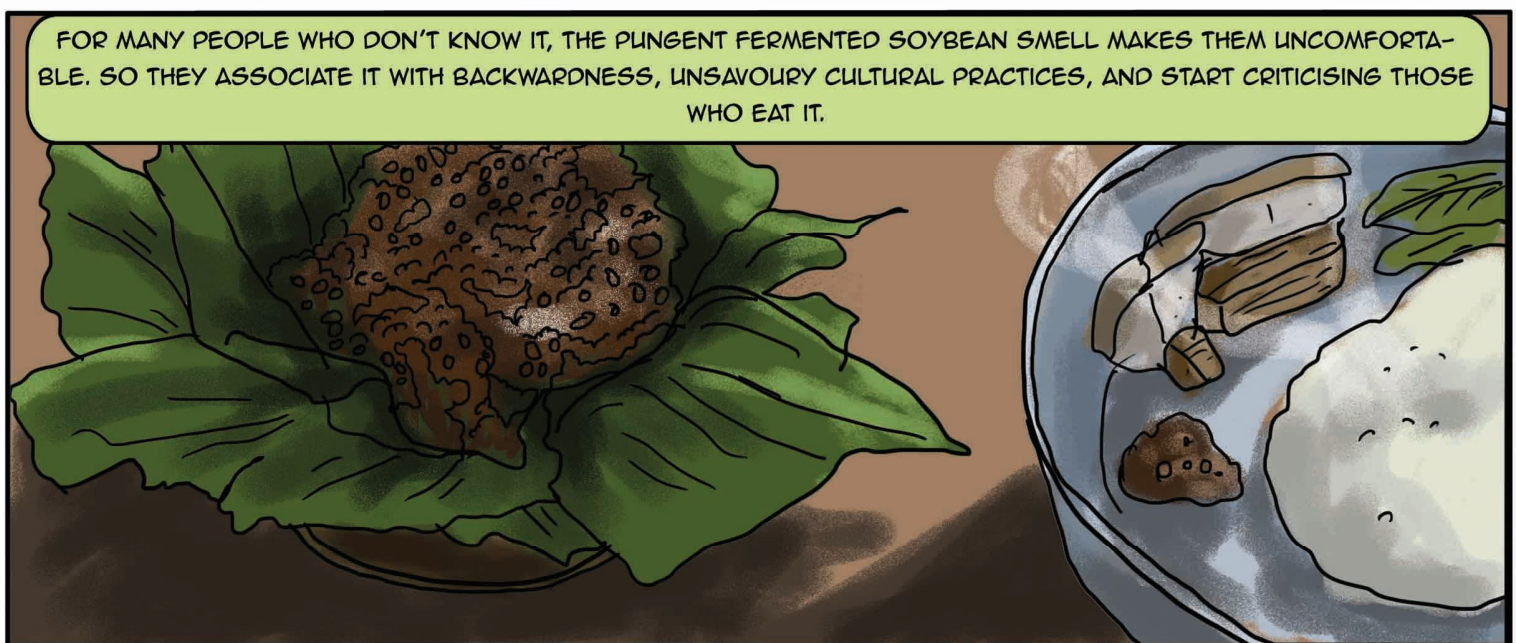


IN ONE SENSE, IT CAN MEAN THE WITHDRAWAL OF COLONIAL FORCES FROM THE LAND OF THE COLONISED. BUT MORE IMPORTANTLY, IT MEANS TAKING OWNERSHIP OF OUR HISTORIES THAT EUROPEAN AND WESTERN POWERS HAVE DISMISSED AND LONG IGNORED.

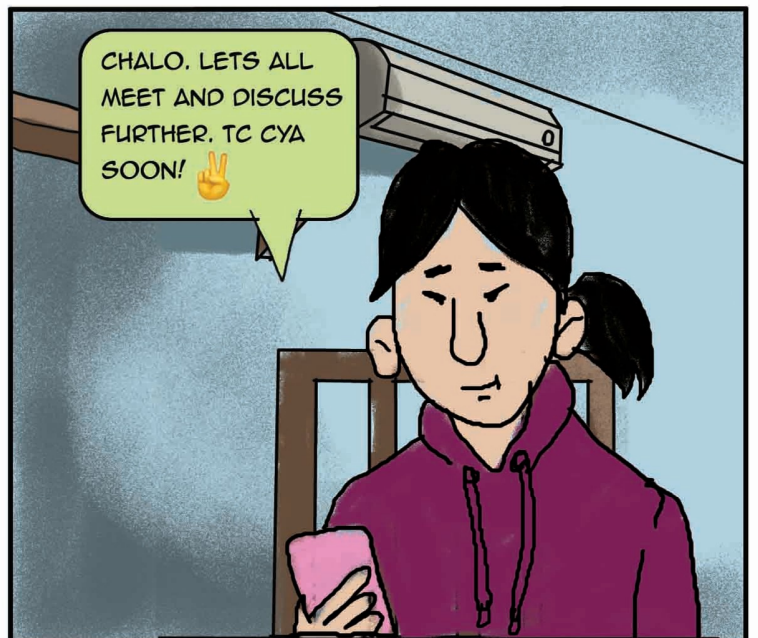


DECOLONISATION CHALLENGES THE POWER STRUCTURES THAT CONTROLS THE WAY KNOWLEDGE IS PRODUCED, LIKE...CERTAIN GROUPS WHO CLAIM THAT IT IS THEIR WAY OR THE HIGHWAY. IT'S NOT ONLY ABOUT THE EURO-CENTRIC OR WESTERN POINT OF VIEW, BUT IT CAN ALSO BE APPLICABLE TO OUR CURRENT PREDICAMENT IN INDIA.

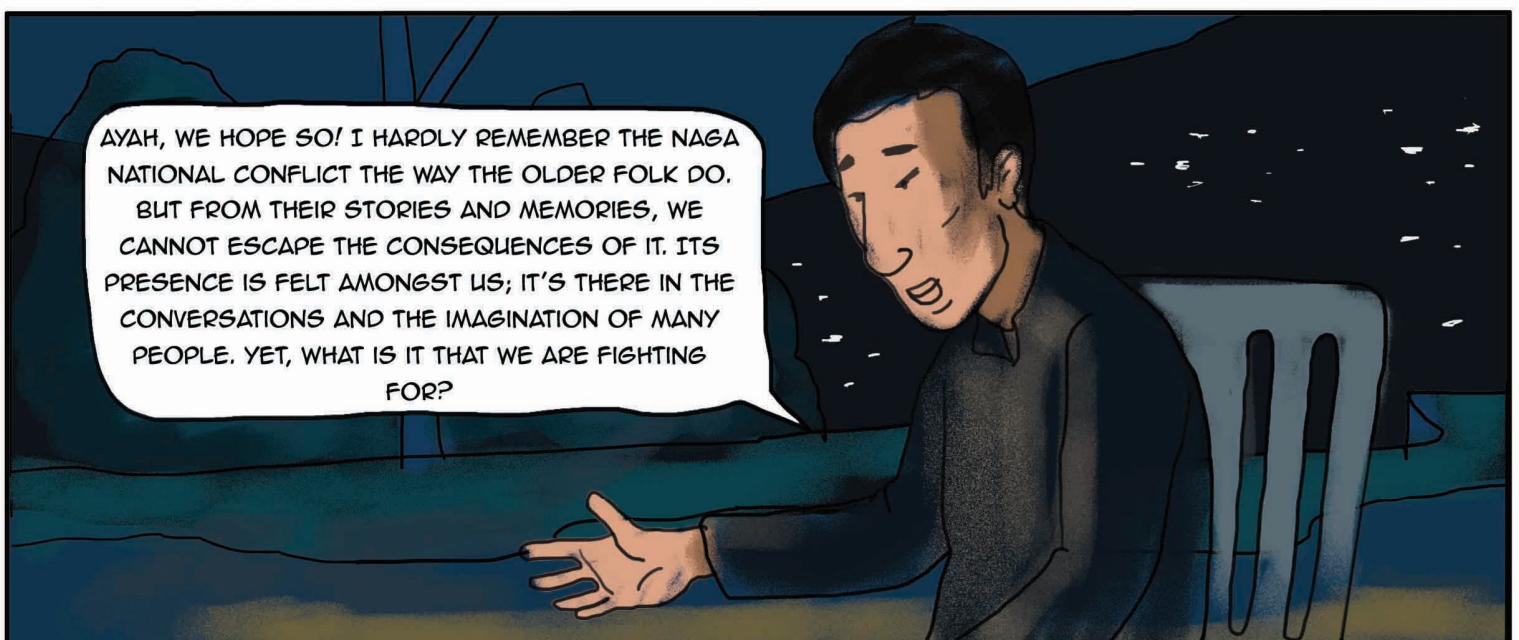




NOW, DECOLONISATION IS TO BRING AXONÉ BACK INTO OUR PRACTICES AND CELEBRATE IT NOT ONLY AS A FOOD THAT WE LOVE, BUT SOMETHING THAT IS PART AND PARCEL OF OUR WAY OF LIFE, DESPITE THE HISTORY OF TRYING TO DEHUMANISE US AS A PEOPLE FOR EATING IT.















BIRDS, ANIMALS, AND PEOPLE LIVED IN HARMONY WITH THE TREES, PLANTS AND RIVERS IN THE FORESTS. THEY COULD UNDERSTAND ONE ANOTHER'S LANGUAGES AND WOULD GATHER TOGETHER TO FEAST FOR THOSE WERE THE DAYS OF PLENTY.

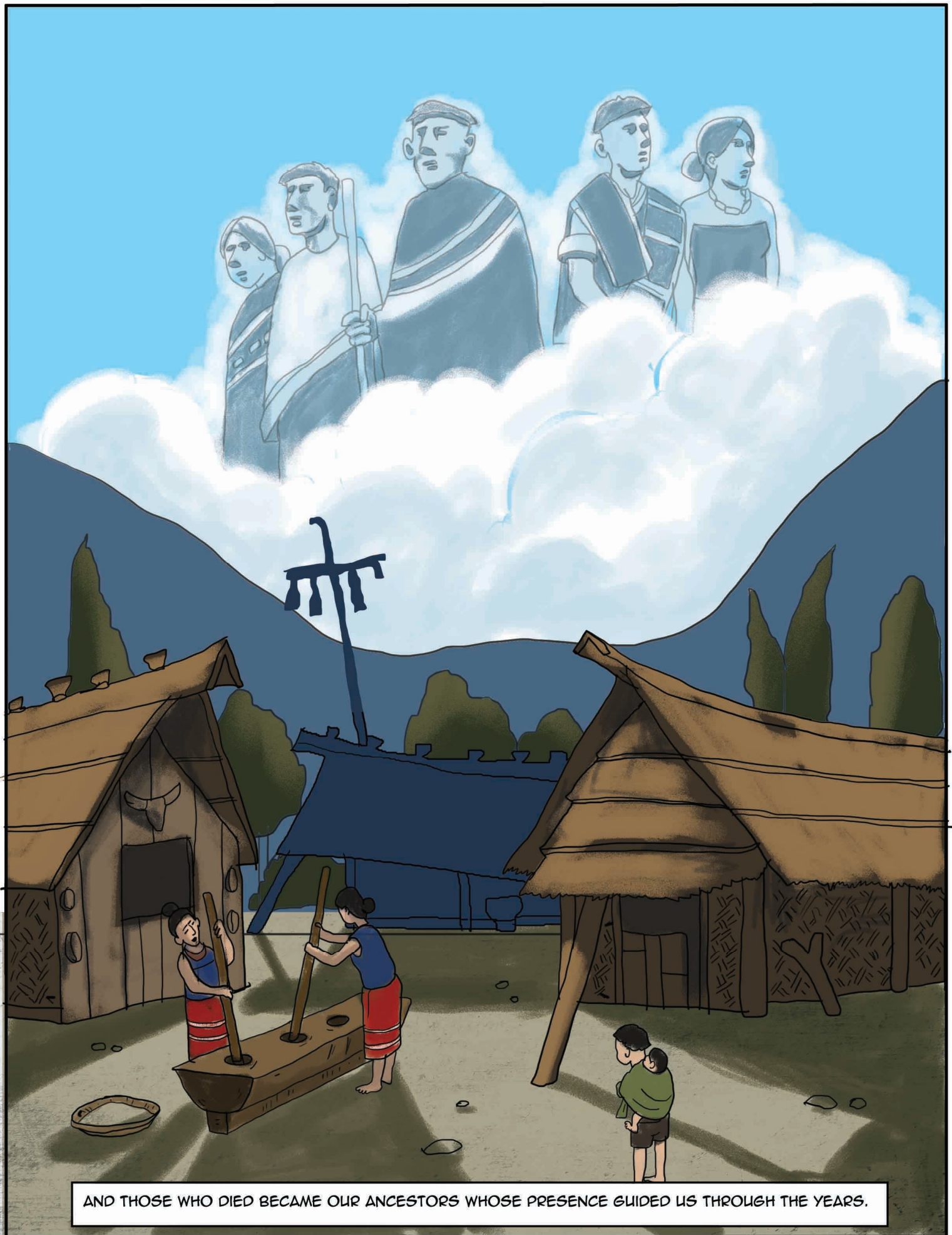


HUMANS AND TIGERS WERE FRIENDS AND LIVED TOGETHER;



SPIRITS CAME AS PEOPLE AND BIRDS BECAME SPIRITS;





AND THOSE WHO DIED BECAME OUR ANCESTORS WHOSE PRESENCE GUIDED US THROUGH THE YEARS.

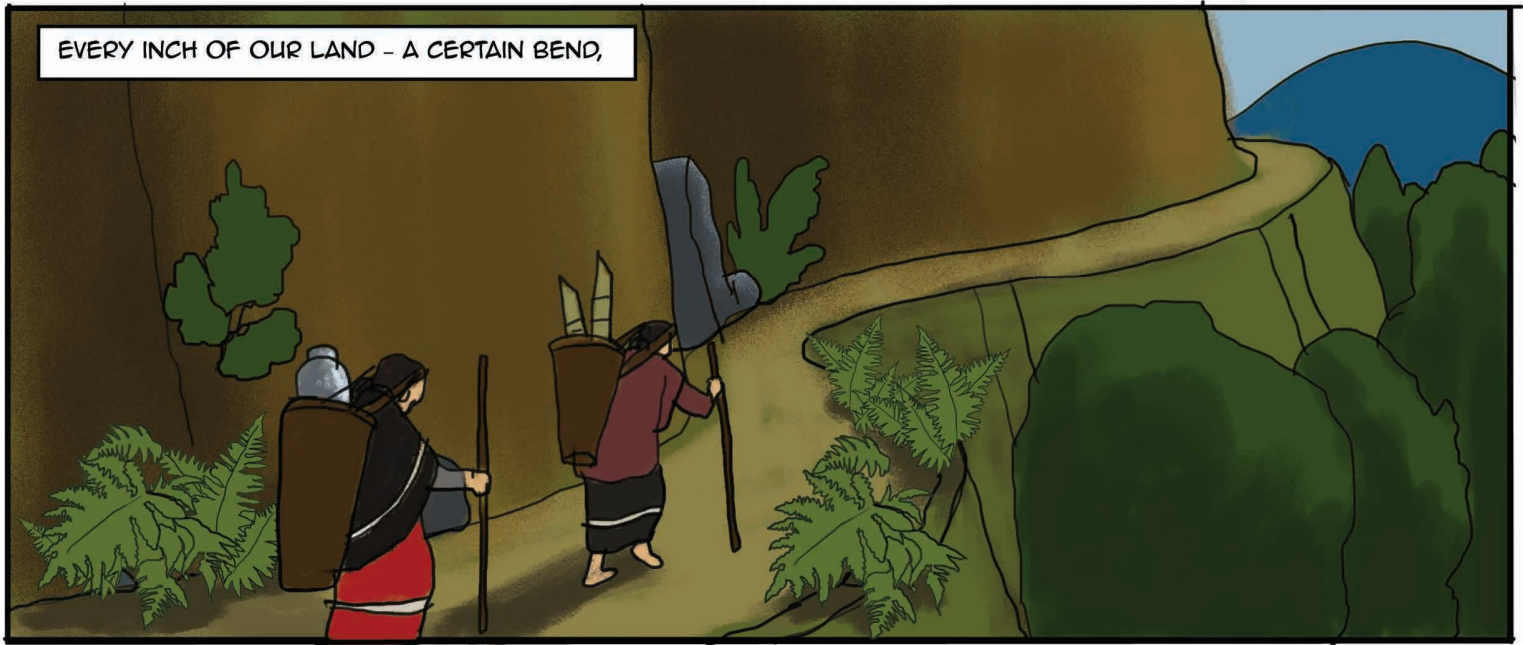
THEIR STORIES AND THEIR DEEDS ARE REMEMBERED AND RETOLD TO YOUNG ONES IN THE COLD WINTER NIGHTS AROUND THE FIRE,



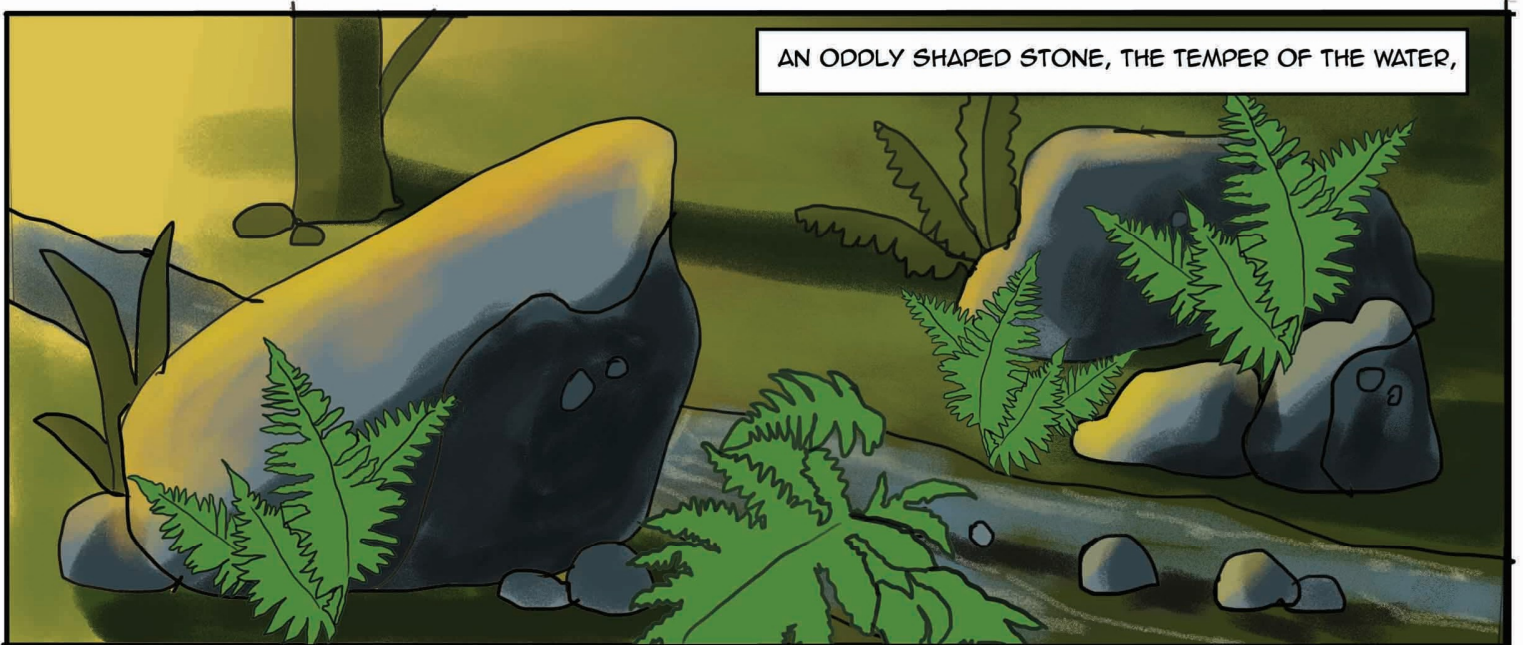
OR IN THE WARM SUMMER MONTHS IN THE FIELDS.



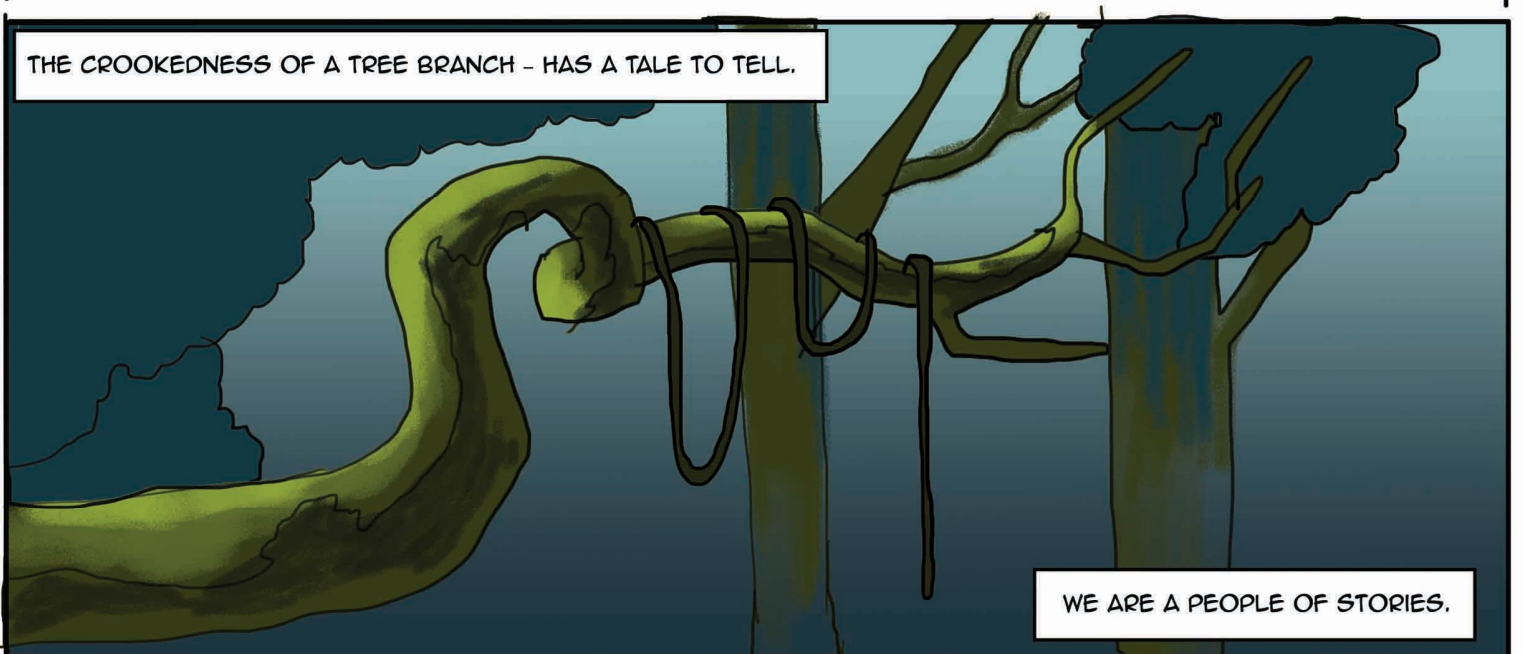
EVERY INCH OF OUR LAND - A CERTAIN BEND,



AN ODDLY SHAPED STONE, THE TEMPER OF THE WATER,



THE CROOKEDNESS OF A TREE BRANCH - HAS A TALE TO TELL.



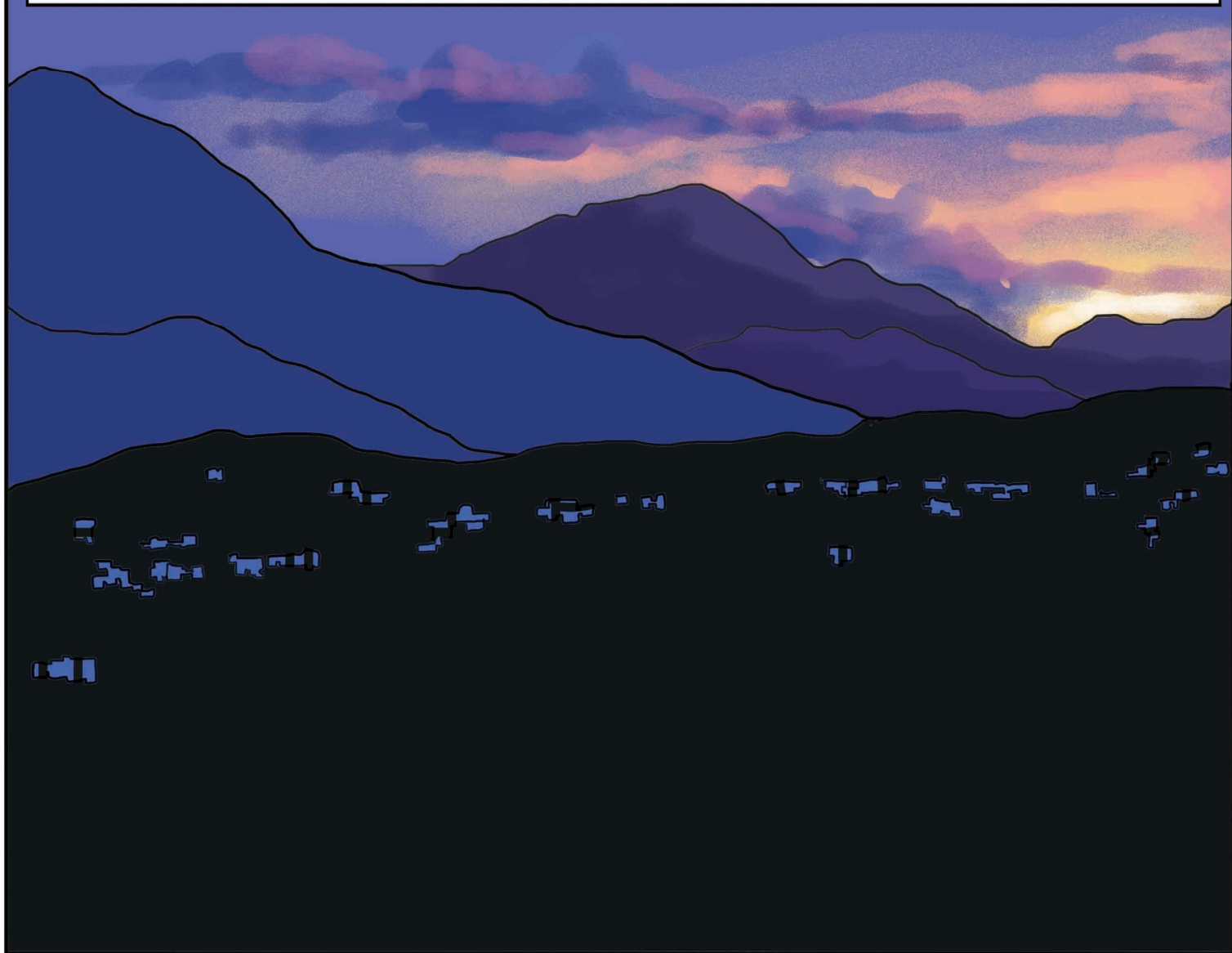
WE ARE A PEOPLE OF STORIES.

A SPACE FOR REFLECTION HAS OPENED UP FOR US. WE NEED TO FIND COMFORT IN THE DEEP ABIDING MEMORIES OF OUR LANDS AND OUR PEOPLE. OUR HILLS, TREES, RIVERS, AND FIELDS REMIND US OF THE SACRED LAND THAT WE CALL HOME. NEVER FORGET THAT. TIME HAS REACHED FOR US TO RENEW OUR LANDS. COULD THE RETURN OF OUR ANCESTORS LEAD TO A SPARK THAT IGNITES OUR SPIRITS?





REMEMBERING THOSE WHO HAVE GONE BEFORE US - UNDERSTANDING THEIR STORIES, AND THE EVENTS THAT HAVE COME OUR WAY, IS NOT A TASK FOR ONE PERSON, BUT FOR THE MANY. KNOWING THAT I CAN SHARE THIS WITH YOU GIVES ME THE STRENGTH TO FACE WHAT'S COMING.



Arkotong Longkumer teaches at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland, UK. This is his first graphic novel, though he has written a few other things. When not working, he likes to think of himself as a father and a husband. You can also find him in the kitchen, or on the sidelines of a football pitch.

You can find more of his work here: <https://www.ed.ac.uk/profile/dr-arkotong-longkumer>

Meren Imchen is an Animator and Story Artist with more than 19 years of experience in developing and executing projects of animation/motion design/direction/illustrations/concept art. Projects under his belt include animated short films, commercials, promotions, music videos, concept art and graphic novels.

You can find more of his work here: <http://meren.portfoliobox.net>



merenimchen2277

Remembering those who have gone before us — understanding their stories, and the events that have come our way, is not a task for one person, but for the many. Knowing that I can share this with you gives me the strength to face what's coming.



ISBN: 978-81-960850-0-1

