WRITERS MOSAIC

Allen Zimbler

In Conversation with Vayu Naidu

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[Music]

Presenter: This is *WritersMosaic, In Conversation*. Vayu Naidu talks to Dr Allen Zimbler about his memoir, the *Kalahari Diaries: Impressions of a Desert People*.

[Music]

Vayu Naidu (VN): I'm going to invite you, Allen, to take us to the place you've literally just come back from, with the inauguration of—is it the second village school? So, take us to the location I want to experience in this winter, that landscape.

Allen Zimbler (AZ): It's hard to imagine that you will fly into the capital of Namibia, a place called Windhoek, which basically means 'windy corner', and surrounded by hills and mountains, there's always some breeze, but you're actually within the Namib and Kalahari Desert system in the western—southwestern corner of Africa. You fly into Windhoek, and to get up to the area in which we are working, which is in northeastern Namibia, near the border of Botswana and under a place called the Caprivi Strip, which separates Namibia from Angola and then, of course, Zimbabwe, you have to drive for 11 hours north. There is one long mechanised road, which goes all up to a place called Grootfontein, which means 'big fountain'. There's no fountain to be seen because you're in the Kalahari Desert. And then literally before going up to a place called Etosha, you turn right off this main highway, and what faces you is 300 kilometres of gravel road going east. And it's quite likely that you don't see a vehicle for those 300 kilometres, but what you do see is massive skies. In our case, they were having rain. So, we had beautiful clouds and this unending stretch of gravel road with bush on either

side. And the bush would contain various animals, and from time to time, you might see those animals, which would include elephants, giraffes, various types of antelope, many, many different types of birds. And on one occasion, when I was traveling down this road to the school that we had built, a leopard crossed the road in front of me. So, this is trying to give you a sense of where this is. And it's in a place called Bushmanland. And after the establishment of the modern state of Namibia, after so-called South West Africa became Namibia and achieved its independence, the Bushmen of the Kalahari, who still lived in that country, were excused for having, some of them, fought as trackers for the South African Defence Force because there were others who'd fought on the other side with the Liberation Forces.

VN: So, in a way, you're talking—I mean, it's almost like a time capsule and yet it's timeless. So, what you've described to me is the location and landscape which is now, and your book covers a time from the 1970s.

AZ: Yes. Yes, because in the 1970s, as a very young lecturer in psychology at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, I had this incredible opportunity which sprung out of, really, I would say just luck, or maybe Carl Jung would say synchronicity, that I attended an evening lecture by an organisation called the Institute for the Study of Man in Africa, and which I had done on many occasions because they

were looking at rock art and tribal customs and isangoma, which is traditional healers. So, I used to enjoy going to these lectures. And one night, in front of us stood this gentleman that I recognised as representing the conservative right-wing of South African politics because he was an Afrikaans speaking man, dressed in khaki shorts, khaki long socks, very much what you would call a Boer, a farmer. In fact, he was a maize farmer from the so-called Western Transvaal, the heartland of conservatism. So, I wasn't sure how they let him into our very anti-apartheid university.

VN: And this is very much the time of apartheid.

AZ: This is the time, still under the apartheid era. And this man stood up and said in his inimitable accent, 'We are going to see the Bushmen.' Now, that was enough for me. I had done a little project on the Bushmen at the age of 13 at high school, and I was utterly intrigued. And now 13 years later, the man promised to go and see the Bushmen. And I thought, *whatever happens, I am going with him*. Because he talked of having a chemical toilet, and he held up a spade and a toilet roll, and I thought, *I'm going with him*.

VN: So, you had all your luxury conveniences.

AZ: All the luxury. And that started a 15-year privilege of driving with this wonderful man called Izac Barnard into the bush on these Bushmen expeditions. And I was a bit adopted by him as someone who he knew was passionate. And I was a camp hand or a driver or gave talks on the Bushmen to his guests, who were mainly people from America or Western Europe who were interested.

VN: And he was running a school as well, wasn't he?

AZ: On his farm, he had built and was running a school for all of the local farm workers and surrounding black farmers in a so-called 'black homeland' across the road. That was a fictional creation by the apartheid state. But these people were farming, and he would fix their combine harvesters and their tractors. He ran a workshop on his farm as well as having built a school, which he equipped with black teachers for black children, who were smartly dressed in uniforms provided by him and his family. Extraordinary.

VN: So, you're going in there with your mind that has been educated, urbanised, and you're a lecturer in psychology in the University at Witwatersand. So, now you, as you—with great humility and generosity also in the book, you keep talking about 'permission'. And it's this permission to be with the Bushmen, and I really sense how

much you feel that sense of privilege of being with them. Could you open that out in terms of the first people you met, what was that feeling, and also the different roles and functions of them as a community that you engaged with?

AZ: Izak Barnard had told me that when he met the Bushmen, it changed his life. This was something I only understood later because when I met the Bushmen, it changed my life too. And why? Because here was—at the time, a hunter-gatherer people, when I first met them dressed in animal skins, making fire by rubbing sticks together, finding water in tubers and roots under the ground because there is no potable water in the Kalahari Desert, people whose bushcraft knowledge was immense, and people who lived off the bush but left no trace behind, caused no damage whatsoever. Their knowledge of plants, animals, and insects was superb and vast.

VN: I love your expression 'leaving no trace behind'. And I think it's something—is it the kind of sand or the dryness of the land that you really can't leave any footprints or—and this is why these impressions are so deep, because it's an engagement of the heart?

AZ: In a way, you can. We can leave footprints in the Kalahari Desert, as the mining exploration organisations some years later proved with horrendous results. We do not

know how to walk lightly. And the Kalahari is a very timeless place. It hasn't been disturbed. But we arrive with our discardable rubbish, and the way we live, we certainly leave traces behind. They live in perfect harmony. What they need comes from the Kalahari, what they don't need goes back to the Kalahari. So, they are a people who leave no trace. It's a light footstep. So, it's more what I found was a group of people who were regarded by those of us more arrogant as "primitives", quote/unquote, whose real sophistication, in terms of the way in which they found food; in terms of the way in which they raised their children, which was multi-parenting; in terms of the way in which they resolved their conflicts, which was without aggression; in terms of the way in which they managed a community, which is without any overt form of leadership; they were quite sophisticated, and they were quite remarkable in ways that we simply could not manage to be. So, that struck me very quickly.

VN: And are they very aware of the size or depleting numbers of their community, which is why somewhere deep they need to hold together?

AZ: Not at the time. At the time, the people we met in the 1970s were, in their various community groups, spread out over thousands of square kilometres. And each group would have what they call a [missing word], which is a large area in which they hunted and gathered. And they would have another group somewhere there that had their

own [missing word]. If need be, they could, with permission, gather and forage in each other's natural area. They weren't aware even that there was a government. They didn't understand that people 500 kilometres or 300 kilometres away were making decisions about their lives. So no, there was no sense then of this diminishing group. What they weren't in touch with, although they spoke historically about the wars with the Botswana people, was that originally, the Bushmen would have occupied the whole of the southern part of Africa. And the only places they were left when I started visiting were in fact in Botswana and Namibia. They had been literally shot out or chased out or killed by white settlers and black colonists. Because within their cosmology, if they saw an animal in the bush, all animals were there to be treasured by people and, if need be, to be eaten. No one could own an animal, and no one could own land. It is not within their cosmology, which sadly has meant that others have taken the land and declared it theirs, and the Bushmen have been unable to defend what was originally their own territory. So, slowly over a period of time, they were pushed further and further into the far reaches of the Kalahari Desert, which was too inhospitable for most people but not for them.

VN: And your book so graphically and meticulously talks, yes, about the whole what is botanically the kind of plant life, if at all, but the ingenuity of the engineering skills of these people, whether it's harvesting water in an ostrich egg or even the—I think

your—another life of yours, which is as past master of the Worshipful Company of Carpenters, because you also create things and engineer things. And I—was that something that you found very striking in the tools that they made? And who—were there a specific group that made the tools?

AZ: Well, all of the people made things. So, they would make rope out of the fibers from a *Sansevieria* plant, rope that was incredibly strong, and they would weave that into carrying bags for ostrich eggs containing water. Or, of course, they would make their bows and arrows or an adze with which they would scrape the skin of an animal to cure it. So, the tools that they required, they made. I even, just a few years ago, in Tsumkwe, was introduced to a relatively old man called [missing name]. And he sat on his haunches in the sand, with a little fire in front of him of very hard wood, so it was a very hot fire. He had the flat edge of a large axe embedded in the sand, and he had found a piece or bartered a piece of steel reinforcing rod from some building site obviously or someone. And he was heating this rod up in his very hot fire and then hammering it against the flat side of the axe with another axe head, and by so doing, crafted the most beautiful knife, which he then fitted to a wooden handle, which itself fitted to a wooden sheath perfectly, and there was no glue involved. And here was this man, sitting on his haunches in the sand, managing to make an iron object with a

wooden scabbard and handle, which was absolutely perfect. And I don't think many of us could do that with the rudimentary tools that he had.

VN: Absolutely. It's such a visual imagination and then working through hands to deliver that. As you just so evocatively described the cutting implement that comes in, I was fascinated by your recounting of the hunt because here there is a pre-visualisation. If I'm not wrong, would I say this is a kind of a dream time? And now I'm also looking at you as somebody who has taught psychology, you've entered this space of the Bushmen where there is this reality which we would otherwise call 'other reality', and I'm sort of seeing you dovetailing or immersing. So, take us through a hunt.

AZ: Well, I'll take you through the hunt because in 15 years, it was the only hunt that I had the privilege of accompanying the Bushmen on, with Izak and one or two of our colleagues. It's almost impossible to go on a Bushman hunt. We are too large, too noisy, too heavy-footed, too insensitive. Our presence crashing through the bush would chase the animals away. They have to get within about 20 metres of an antelope with a very relatively small bow that they use to shoot an arrow which pierces the hide. That is an incredibly difficult thing to do because the animals are alert, and clearly if they see or hear anything, they will scarper. And once they start running, the Bushmen will find it impossible to catch them.

VN: And the arrow is made of?

AZ: Well, the arrows traditionally used to be bone, but in the time that I went to the Kalahari, they obviously found or bartered pieces of wire, which they then beat into very sharp pointed arrowheads, which went on to an ostrich bone shaft, and that got fitted in to the reed, a long reed shaft of the arrow, which was unfletched. And the idea was once that barbed arrowhead got into the hide of an animal, it would try and remove it, and all that would come off was the actual shaft; the arrowhead would stay in the animal with its hemotoxic poison.

VN: And that was something they made?

AZ: They found the poison. It's extraordinary how they found it. I don't know how they discovered it because the poison they were using – and it's traditional, it's not the only poison they use – came from a grub called *Diamphidia* simplex, which they would find about a metre under the roots of a *Commiphora* tree bush only at a certain time of the year. So, how they knew to dig under that particular bush at a certain time of the year, going a metre deep to find these tiny sand encrusted grubs which contain the poison, that is extraordinary.

VN: It's extraordinary. Mind boggling.

AZ: But of course, after 30,000 years of evolution, anything is possible.

VN: Which is why we call them the first people.

AZ: The first people. They certainly are the first people of Southern Africa.

VN: And I think in your book you mentioned very clearly that the poison hits the animal, but when they are eating the flesh?

AZ: Okay, they cut out the section immediately around the arrowhead and either bury it or burn it. What the poison does is it causes hypoxia; it causes the inability for the blood to carry oxygen. So it doesn't poison them once they eat the animal, but they are careful. They're very careful with the arrowhead, and they're careful to get rid of that section.

VN: Extraordinary science around all of it.

AZ: Well, of course, yes. I mean, it's remarkable. But you go back to the question of the hunt. It was a very dark and grey and wet morning, and I was at our little campfire. We always set up our camp, and the Bushmen would arrive and set up their camp 100 metres away from us or whatever. We were always respectful not to intrude, which goes to the point of you go to see the Bushmen. Well, we went into the Kalahari terribly conscious of the fact that we were intruding into their land. By the time that I went, Izak had established some relationships with some of the people who trusted him. We met people who'd never seen white people before. So, it was extraordinary that with that level of trust, we were able, by sitting in a place, to wait, people would show up, we would share the most precious commodity of all, pure water and food. And while they were with us, we shared, and they would then have the relief from the oppression of trying to find water under the ground and so on in the bulbs and roots that they used.

So, this early morning, I was called just around about dawn by the interpreter who we had took along with us, and he said, 'You must come quickly, they're talking of a dream.' Now I had just—I couldn't help myself. I had decided as a psychologist that when I went into the bush, I'm not an anthropologist, and I'm not going in as a scientist. I'm not here to study these people. I'm here to learn and to observe and to just have the privilege of seeing a people who are somewhat different from us in so many ways. So, when I heard this idea that there was a dream being discussed around the campfire, I ran

across, sat down on the sand, and listened. And the interpreter was quietly sitting next to me. And the dream was about a hunt. It was about the hunt for an antelope called a hartebeest. I'm sure there is an English name for that, but sadly, I don't think I know it. And what happened then was the detail of the dream unfolded that they were tracking this hartebeest, they shot off an arrow, later on they found the shaft of the arrow, not the arrowhead, so they knew that the arrowhead was in the animal, and then after hours of tracking – this is all in the dream, and I heard this all in the morning and made a note of it – then they saw this antelope, it jumped up, they shot a second arrow, they ran it to the ground, and killed it with a spear. That's fine. Now, we'd heard a few dreams before that. All the dreams, particularly from the men, were about hunting. So, it was not remarkable in and of itself, but nevertheless, it was interesting.

After breakfast, some of the Bushmen came to us and said they had been tracking the day before, and they had found some hartebeest, and they had shot at one, should we go and see if we could find it? Of course, we jumped in our vehicle with them, and we went to where they thought they had shot it. Now, you and I read a book, but they read the land in a way that is remarkable, so they knew exactly where it was. And we started walking with them. The sky was overcast. It was quite cold. And we were walking. And there were just thousands of crisscrosses out of this—spoors, we call them, tracks. After walking for a few hours, eventually they discovered one track with a drop of blood

in the front of the hoof. I thought this was remarkable. They also had discovered the shaft of the arrow. So, now they knew that they had in fact shot an animal, and the tracking started in earnest. Unfortunately, it then started raining, and very quickly they made a fire, and we sat under a tree, but we were worried that the spoor would be wiped away. They still were able to track afterwards. They chased the rain away with incantations, and we started walking. Now, this is walking for about four hours. When we noticed that the spoor started being a bit lopsided, they were still chasing one animal, remarkably. To cut the very long story short, ultimately, in some bushes ahead of us, we saw a pair of horns. And as we got closer, a red hartebeest stood up and started running. In a flash, they were running. We couldn't keep up with them. They'd been walking four hours already. And they sprinted after this animal, shot a second arrow, and eventually, with us now jumping on the vehicle to follow them, they cornered this hartebeest, and one gentleman took a spear and thrust it in the heart, and that was the end of it.

VN: So, it's an absolute recall.

AZ: Well, it only dawned on me afterwards. Only dawned on me afterwards, through the excitement of the hunt and the privilege of being with them on a hunt, that

actually, it was the dream. And that the dream unfolded as it was foretold, and the dream, as it were, dreamed us.

VN: The dream is—is that the role of the speaker of the dream is somebody who is a healer?

AZ: No, he wasn't a healer. He was one of the men. And I think one has to then understand the cosmology. When I studied psychology, it was so-called ‘scientific psychology’; it didn't venture into the areas of Jung and others. But here there was a very good example of what perhaps Jung called a transcendental consciousness, that information is available. And I've seen this too many times now, and I think that information is available. And their intense contact with their world, their cosmology, meant that when they threw the bones for divination, there was always a substance behind it. They saw things that we, through our more scientific arrogance, we don't see, we don't comprehend. So, the dream unfolding was not that unusual for them as unusual as it was for us.

VN: Yeah, and I think there's so much of—I mean, they are our living ancestors. There's so much to learn from that. I mean, these powers of seeing something. It's not clairvoyance or anything mystical; it's actually having that—being totally in touch with

their cosmology, as you say, and their collective consciousness. There's a wonderful—I mean, so much of your book has poetry in it. It's absolutely from the pure moment; that's the way I have read it. There's this celebration in a way. I'm seeing it as a continuity of the celebration of the dream through a gathering around the campfire as well after the hunt. And I think there's this particular being or consciousness that they call either [missing name] or Bïisá. I was wondering, would you read that moment from your book?

AZ: Happily. Because in all the years of traveling, it was very difficult to access any supernatural beings. And we know that they have contact with ancestors. The ancestors, for them, are present and come into the dance. So, in all the years of listening to their stories and talking to the Bushmen – and notice I use the word Bushmen, there's a politically correct word called 'Khoisan', but that was actually coined by a German zoologist-anthropologist when he borrowed a word from the Khoikhoi, who are cattle herders. The word 'san' or 'son' means 'people who pick things off the ground'. So, in actual fact, it's derogatory. And it's being taught all over the world as the politically correct word, which clearly it isn't. But the people I met called themselves Bushmen. So, we discovered along the way, and I've always been corrected by a Bushman reader who said, 'You discovered nothing', but we came upon an old woman who had walked across the Kalahari. And her name was Sarana. And she was

remarkable and a very gentle spirit, with a beautifully broad smile and her eyes creasing at the corners and just a wonderful woman. And we sat down, and were talking to her one day, and then out came something important. And I'll read from here.

[AZ reads from *Kalahari Diaries: Impressions of a Desert People*]

> ‘We sat down with her, apart from the group. I decided on a different approach today, more aware of how different her world was from mine, and asked her whether she dreamt and, if so, whether she could tell us of a dream. Her thin limbs had been burnt and scarred by sun, thorn and fire, her stomach was hardened and wrinkled like leather and she wore a skirt of duiker skin tied around her waist, the cocoon of an insect around her neck. Her eyes, narrow under the tired folds of her brows, sparkled with the joyfulness that was clearly within her and that seemed to define her, and she began to tell us a story about the spirit deity Bïisá – a story which had not been heard around these parts by a white person for many years, so Izak said, a story that was central to Bushman beliefs and one that we were keen to hear.
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> Her story started with the dream of Bïisá. She explained who Bïisá was, where he came from and what he did. Beyond all our expectations,

we had stumbled on the essence of the story of these people, living as they did amidst what must be some of the most harsh and elemental conditions ever known to modern humans. We had uncovered the story of stories, a story of a supernatural creator spirit and their spirit. In all the hundreds, if not thousands, of kilometres we had traveled – over dirt road, tracks and remote Kalahari bushveld – we had never heard the story before.

Our encounter with Sarana was the first true encounter with Bïisá, the powerful being who appeared in different forms, who arose in the east to travel his nightly path to the west, and who took the souls of sleeping people so that they died, then cut these souls up, planting them again into the earth in many places; Bïisá, who has made all things and is all things; who has created man in his upright magnificence and connected all plants and animals to him for his use; who, entering through the nostrils of people, placed in their eyes what must be seen, creating the dream which steered a man to the animal that had been placed there for him to find, and who suggested in a dream where the women would find the eggs with which to trap the francolin and sand grouse. Bïisá, who prohibited men from sleeping with a woman in blood, and who entered the dance when the *n/om* started boiling and dancers

> experienced being 'out of their bodies', when physical and spiritual healing took place on an individual and community level. It was Bïisá who told them to prepare in readiness for the kill, or for the rains, and it was Bïisá whom these people both feared and revered, whose name they did not say in words but only in their hearts, and whose unquestioned existence, reinforced by the influence he exerted on their healers, manifested itself in their adherence to an ancient system of belief and an archetypical, transcendental consciousness.'

VN: Thank you. That explains, in one sense, so much because we tend to see time as linear, even in our narratives, but that really evokes a sense of continuity and connectedness. I feel that in some of the other cultures, global cultures that we belong to. And thank you for that reading. It just took me straight away. And it connects so wonderfully with Bïisá touching that dream of that seer and the wildebeest, yeah, that was hunted.

AZ: And what was remarkable is that last year, when this young woman called [missing name], who is a [missing word], a Bushman woman, reading for a law degree through the University of Tanzania, I asked her to read the book to give me feedback on whether I was culturally appropriating, culturally inappropriate, inaccurate, or in any

sense offensive. And she was wonderful. She read the book. And she actually resonated because she had been told about Bïisá, this being that no one talks of. So, this is now 50 years later.

VN: So, when it's not being talked of, and especially with the closed and living community, it would be something that is passed on as an experience, like a very deep, meditative thing where, in a way, you do become wordless. But it's wonderful that with subsequent generations, there is an awareness of it, and hopefully, this is something that comes up also in the school curriculum. I mean, it can't be taught, but an awareness of the old stories, the awareness that where these originate from. Is that something in setting up the schools you'll think about?

AZ: Well, in the schools, of course, inevitably, as was the case in Botswana, in Namibia, all children are supposed to follow the school curriculum and be educated. Now, these people live in a very remote part of the country. In the terminology of the country, they are called 'marginalised, impoverished people'. The irony is when the Bushmen are left alone to hunt and gather in their own environment, there is not just the sufficiency in the way in which they can find the foods that they require, there is a balanced diet that they obtain by so doing, but there's an abundance sometimes if it's not drought because they know what to find, they know where to find it. I'm told recently they can

recognise what we thought was 60 to 70 plant varieties, 800 plant varieties. And so, they are by no means marginalised or impoverished, but they have to be educated.

So, schooling doesn't go into those remote areas, number one. Number two, if it does, it's taught in the language of education of the country. The official language would be English or Afrikaans, strangely enough. The kids don't speak those languages. So, what happens is, if they do attend a school, they soon drop out, and schooling never, never sticks with them. The decision that we had to make was what could we do to help these people? And the best thing we could do is to help them to help themselves, given that the time of roaming in an unrestricted fashion is now gone, the world has closed down on the Bushmen or those that still remain, people with the oldest human DNA on the planet, and we are encroaching on their lands, as happened in Botswana and has happened in South Africa, Zimbabwe, Angola, Zambia, where there used to be Bushmen, have all disappeared. So, what can we do? So, what we do: we have a tiny charity which provides the first three years of schooling in mother tongue, which is the language of that group, which is Ju|'hoan, and we find teachers from the community. So, we have to train those teachers, put together the school materials in Ju|'hoan, and then introduce a language like English towards the end of those three years, because then if the kids go further, they'll start being schooled in a language that is not a

frightening and unfamiliar language. If we can do this, and that's why we build the schools, we introduce them gently.

One of the things we do is in building a school, we're building hostels, classrooms, teachers' flats, kitchens, and storerooms, because some of the parents are still gathering, and they may go away for days and days at a time. We have solar power, and we have a borehole always, so the kids have running water and they have electricity. It is then the task of community elders around that particular school to come in and ensure the children get exposed to the stories of their people, the ways of their people, the culture, how to make fire with sticks, how to recognise the spoor of animals, how, in fact, to recognise the ways in which they live together as distinct from what they're being taught in the school sometimes. So, we ensure that they get the cultural immersion as well as the national curriculum.

VN: That's so vital what you'll have thought about for the school because, yes, linguistically you can have the mother tongue, but in a language is the cauldron of the way of understanding the world and identifying also with an emotional intelligence, and you're preparing them for a world and the future. You have spoken of some of the challenges, one of them was land appropriation. I mean, it's like England before the enclosures. People roamed and fed off the forests, and suddenly this whole idea of

privatising or appropriation comes in. I'm also thinking of something very specific you mentioned in the book which absolutely caught my attention, cut my heart open, is two things: one is how important water and moisture is in this terrain, but how it also impacts so much on eyesight. So, you talk about the only moisture available, that's when it really struck me, is sometimes the water from the eyes. And there's—could you tell us, could you tell our listeners, more about what can happen?

AZ: It's hard to imagine an environment in which there's no water. We simply cannot relate to that. When one first goes into the Kalahari, as I did, it was an unremarkable place with literally seas of sand, very stunted plants and trees. Sometimes a plant that would grow into a beautiful shrub in an English garden has very little on the surface. Everything is below the surface of the land because that's where insects, animals, sometimes birds, and plants can survive. So that bohemia that you love to see in the garden is a little strand with maybe a leaf or two on the surface and builds a big tuber under the ground. Now, from these tubers and some of the root vegetables that grow naturally, including some quite bitter melons that grow in the Kalahari, the Bushmen find their water. And they would dig up these tubers and scrape the pulp from the fiber using a sharp stick, the edge of a stick, and then literally squeeze that fiber, which they mix with the leaves of a plant called the *Terminalia sericea*, and they chew those leaves to get enough of a substance that removes the astringency of what comes out of the

ground, and they squeeze that all together down their thumbs into their mouths. That is how they survived—and into their children's mouths. It's hard for us to imagine that you might be looking for bulbs for hours in a day when it's not too hot – sometimes the sand is too hot to walk on – and spend most of your evening turning these bulbs into water. We can't conceive of this. There are certain trees which have forks in the branches, and if there's a branch that's broken off, there might be a slight cavity in the tree. And when it does rain, which it does, but the rainwater evaporates, some of that water is collected, and they'll use a reed stalk to suck out that water. So, whatever water they can find, they will conserve and use. The struggle to stay alive is the struggle for water. We can't even conceive of that.

VN: And I think that's why it's so important to hear about it. And also, the fact that that is something [that] is being given in the school, it's a big—

AZ: Water coming out of a tap is a wealth beyond all wealth for people who never saw that before. But you asked the question about the eyes. So, when there has been a good season – the Kalahari can sometimes have a good season where the rain falls – and while the capillary action of the soil means that a lot of that water is evaporated, some will be retained, and the plants literally spring into life very quickly. They grow very quickly to manage to get to seed before it all dries up again. Some of the grass

varieties will have those seeds at the height of the eyes of an antelope or a child. And when these seeds get into their eyes, they cause the eyes to—of course, they irritate the eyes, and they cause tears. There is a certain fly that only lays its eggs in a moist environment, and a moistening eye is a very good target for those flies. Once those eggs are laid in the eye of the child, it will lead to ophthalmitis, it'll lead to blindness. And we came upon children, very young children, who had been blinded by the cataract formation over their eyes where these flies had laid their eggs. Very, very tragic in that environment to lose one's sight.

VN: So, I mean, you've really put that as—it's a very local challenge, and then we've had a lot of global challenges of appropriation. But this book, I felt, has come at a very appropriate time in the world's life. And you have put so much intention and passion into it. So, what do you want from this book and for all of us?

AZ: What I wanted was to get my wife off my back because she had been saying repeatedly, 'You have to write the book.' She was right. I had kept detailed journals of all my expeditions, and the notes were intense and very, very detailed. And Karen, my wife, said, 'No one will read them.' And I wasn't particularly perturbed. But the point she was making, and it is the correct point, is in the 50 years since I started these expeditions, there have been books on the Bushmen, there have been more

anthropological books or lots and lots of studies and lots of people visiting, but there hasn't been a memoir of this kind, which tells the story in this way, which tries to capture the passing of a culture, tragically, sadly, painfully, the passing of that culture. Because these people who appear in my book are gone. The government of Botswana, in pursuit of its acceptable policies of exploiting its minerals, no one can criticise a developing country for exploiting its minerals, but a lot of that wealth was in the Central Kalahari. And people wanted to take cattle in because it was wonderful land for cattle ranching. Cattle destroy the environment. So, what then happened was the Bushmen of the Central Kalahari were physically moved out by the government. It's a long story. They fought a court case, they eventually won, and then disingenuously, the public prosecutor said, 'You've won, but only the named appellants in the case can return, and you can't hunt, and there's no water, and we won't give you water, and your kids have to come out for school.' So effectively, they destroyed that group. So, there's a group of people who I had the privilege of meeting, wonderful, peaceful, gentle people, who survived in the harshest environment or one of the harshest environments on the planet, who lived in total harmony with the environment, who didn't destroy it, who didn't deplete it, who husbanded the plants and the animals, who solved their problems gently and peaceably; that group has gone. And it went in my lifetime, and therefore, I feel a moral responsibility to share the story, if not for their own people, then for those of us who've never known that kind of existence, and those

of us in a society increasingly polarised, aggressive, intolerant, that there is another way that people can live.

VN: Absolutely, and so wonderfully said. And the other beauty and generosity of this communication that continues with you, memory, and the dream shared with the Bushmen, is that with the sales of the books, the benefits of that go into building these schools.

AZ: Vayu, the sales, I have a certain consignment of books, and all of the books I have, whatever money we get on the sale of books goes to the Bushmen. And so, it's already generated a not inconsiderable sum, not enough to build a school, but enough to keep children eating properly for four to five months. That's 400 children in our school system. So, I think the benefit of doing that is immense while we carry on trying to raise the money to build the schools that the government will then take over and pay for.

VN: But it's remarkable that now the government has noticed it through the book about the people and what has to be kept alive in a way for all of us.

AZ: I think it is remarkable. It's not the only group of so-called marginalised people in Namibia, but Namibia has allowed this conservancy now to stand and has allowed the

people in it to hunt with poison arrows. And that is the only place left in the whole of Southern Africa where the Bushmen can still hunt. It is a responsibility we all have to the first peoples that we have damaged by our own presence, not necessarily wittingly, but we have damaged, that we try and not only keep the story alive, but that we try and understand that they are not a marginalised people; we are on the margins of their existence. We just need to have the humility to understand that.

VN: Thank you so much for your research, your study, your sharing. And the fact that you wrote it as diaries, I as a reader, and I'm sure everybody else, feels they are there. I think too much criticism has been made of the word timeless, but there are peoples and places that we need to know we can return to. So, I'm going to thank you so much. This was my conversation with Dr Allen Zimler, who has shared the story. And he wrote this as diaries in the ‘70s, and we know that the world is not the same, but he gives us a geopolitical map of the Kalahari; he gives us the sunrises, the sounds, the sunsets, the desert fire nights, and he brings across time and continents a conversation of early tools which are also contemporary, like the struck sticks and the spark of fire. This is not the romance of a distant magic; it is the life of the first people who share the planet with us, the Bushmen. The facts and the story of these diaries also make us reflect that this is the life of a people whom we have temporarily forgotten to see as ourselves at the edge of appropriated lands and urbanising cultures in the linear idea of progress.

The *Kalahari Diaries* is a book, and it is chapter and verse, taking us from maps to the landscape with the precision of a botanical drawing of the veins and arteries of a studied leaf. [Music] It has poetry, and its existence impresses upon our perception of what the impressions of a desert people is. Thank you.

[Music]

AZ: Thank you very much.

[Music]

Presenter: Vayu Naidu was talking to Dr Allen Zimbler. To hear more writers, go to writersmosaic.org.uk

Allen Zimbler was in conversation with Vayu Naidu

A recording of this interview can be found at **writersmosaic.org.uk**

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