

# Human Tribes

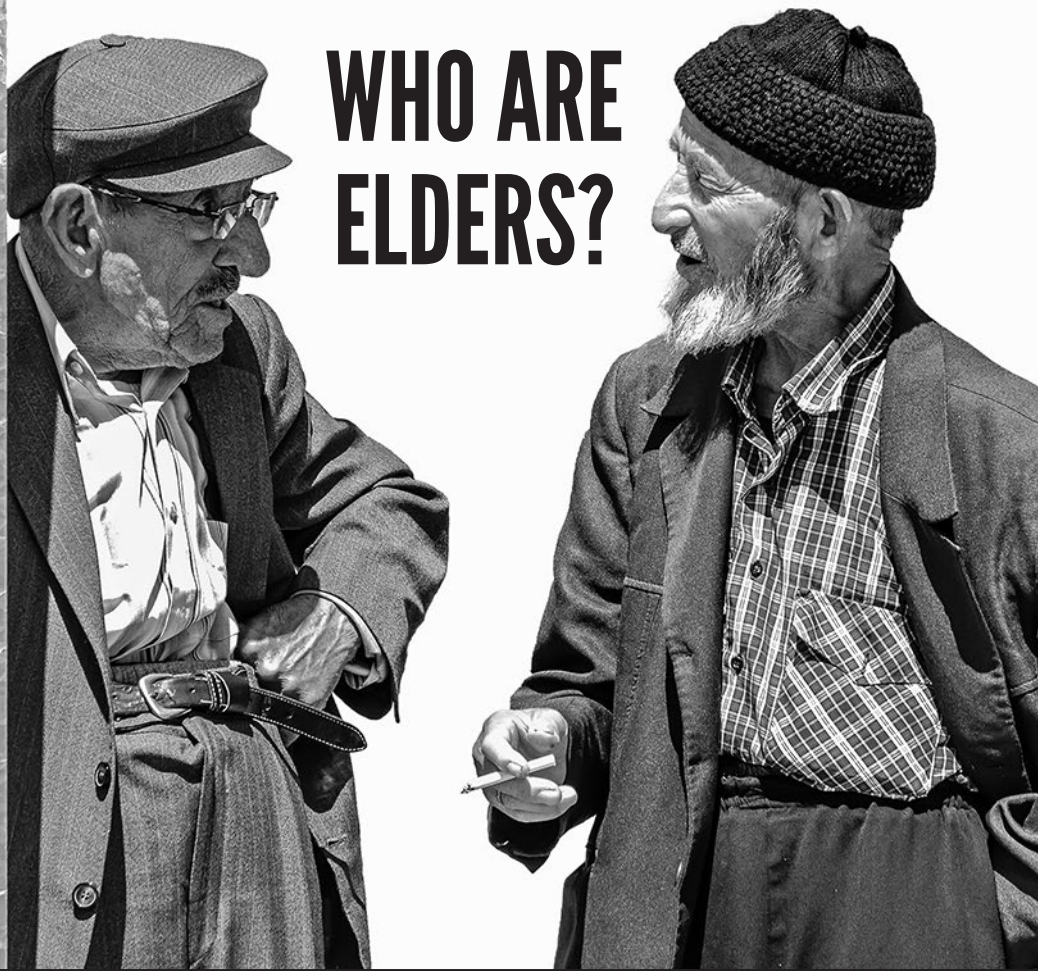
## THE ELDERS

***"Elders are the living  
history books of the tribe."***



**Iris Kleinlugtenbelt**  
Minds In Nature

# WHO ARE ELDERS?



**T**o be an 'Elder' that sounds quite respectful. I personally hope to become an elder for someone one day. In the Netherlands we commonly speak of elderly persons as 'old aged' people. This sounds more like cheese that has been lying on a shelf for a very long time than as a person with knowledge and wisdom. Now I like cheese a lot, but I definitely do not prefer 'old aged' as a way of describing people who started their journey on earth long before I did.

To be an Elder you at least must have a certain age. What age is difficult to say. In some tribes and in some periods in history people had a lower life expectancy than we do now. If you would have a

child at the age of 16 and that child would become a parent at the age of 16, you would be a grandparent at 32! In my country the average age of first time mothers is 29.8 years. The people I would see as 'Elders' are over 60 years of age and probably they themselves, do not think they would fit in that category until maybe at the age of 80 or even 90. Life expectancy and the total number of elderly people will affect whether or not someone will be considered as an elder. Age alone is not a qualification! Who is an elder can be different between countries and tribes. So it is clear that age does not make an Elder, but it is clear Elders are some of the oldest persons of the tribe. Whether that would be 40, 60 or over 80.





# VALUE OF ELDERS

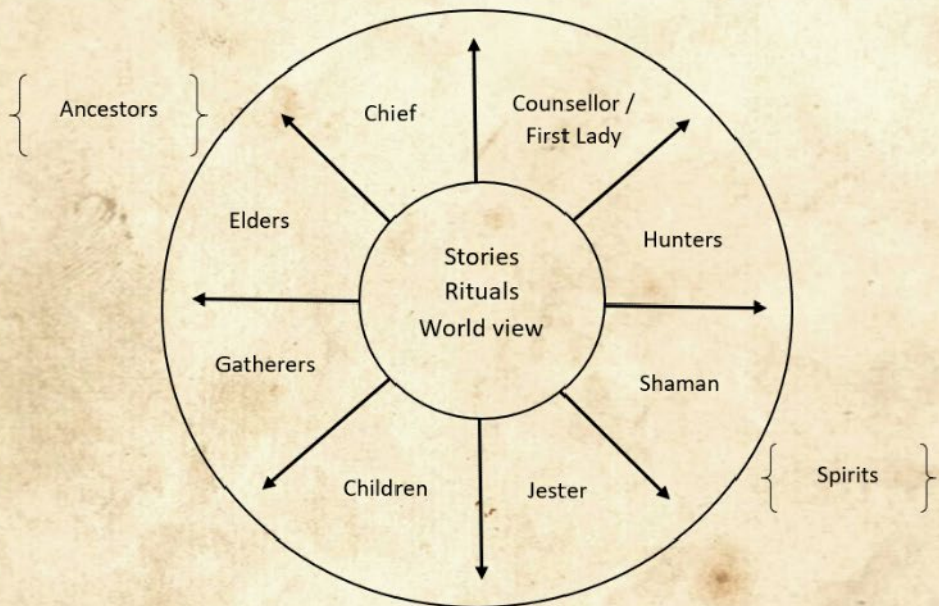
Many cultures had high value and high respect for their elders. And there are numerous reasons for it. Elders are the living history books of the tribe. They have the knowledge of the past. In societies where there is no written tradition, memory is everything! The elders are keepers of tradition, they have stories about events that do not occur every year but are relevant for situations in the future. For example what to do in extreme weather conditions, what other plants are edible in case of drought or maybe other places to go to. It will be the elders that might know what to do!

The Elders of a tribe have spent their whole lives in that society. They know every person from birth. They know every rock, every tree and maybe the

important members of other tribes. They can help in situations of conflict. They can offer comfort, a listening ear, they know both the joy and sorrows of life and can help others to come across difficult life events.

There are numerous other valuable tasks for elderly tribe members. They might be able to hunt for small game, to help collecting food, take care of the children so the parents can go off for hunting or collecting food further away. Some skills might take years to perfection and it might be the elderly who are best at it. They can be teachers in different skills, for example: tracking and trailing, pottery, basketry, and all sorts of crafts.

# POSITION IN THE TRIBE



In the model above you see all the different roles and perspectives as I have put them together. In each article I will explain more about every character. They are all places in opposite of another role. The Chief has an opposite connection to the Jester and the both the Elders and the shaman are keepers of stories, from different perspectives. Furthermore to the sides of every role are others who are strongly connected. Mothers take care of their children, babies they need to be fed. Children need to learn the ways of the community. Until they receive their full initiation they are more free to play and make mistakes. So both the gatherers (mothers) and the Jester have certain aspects, children have. In his foolishness, a Jester is an adult child so you can say.

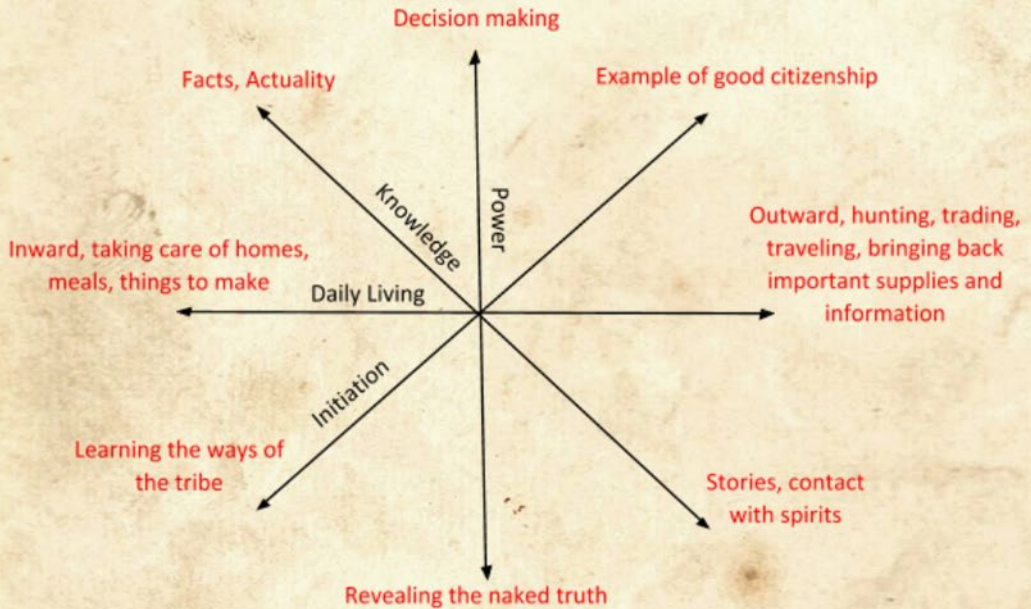
In this model everyone is connected to all and the shared stories and beliefs. In modern psychology people like to frame others as a typical leader or a real mediator etc. A tribe is more a web of relations where all find a place. You grow into new positions, make transitions by rites of passage. And we all hope to grow old and become a wise elder!

As you can see, I have placed the Elders between the Chief and the Gatherers. It is likely that the Chief is an elderly person himself. Elders can advise what to do in case of difficult decisions.

They can assist the gatherers and are likely to be at home helping with all sorts of tasks. Their opposite is the Shaman. Both are closely related to the stories of the tribe. The Shaman from the spiritual perspective and the Elders from history and all their knowledge of the past.

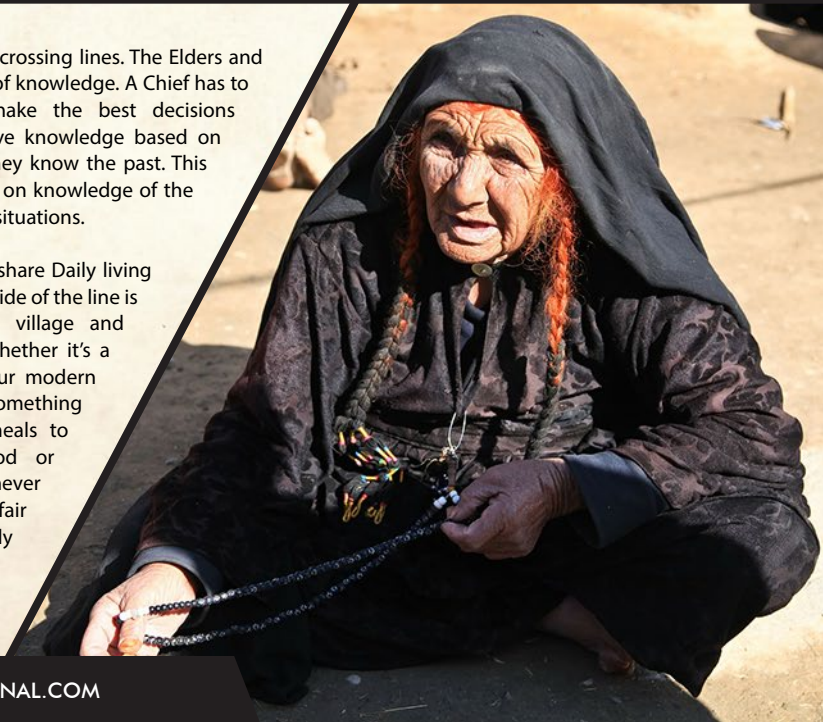


# KNOWLEDGE AND DAILY LIVING



In this circle there are 4 crossing lines. The Elders and the Chief share the line of knowledge. A Chief has to have knowledge to make the best decisions possible. The Elders have knowledge based on their life experiences. They know the past. This side of the line focusses on knowledge of the facts, history and actual situations.

On the other side, they share Daily living with the gatherers. This side of the line is the inward focus. The village and nearby surroundings. Whether it's a native community or our modern society. There is always something to do, from making meals to laundry, gathering food or shopping groceries. It's never done! Elders can make a fair contribution to these daily tasks, making it more easy for all.



# PERCEPTION ON LIVING

Many native cultures have a world view where spirits are part of the land. You would have non-human spirits and human spirits. Ancestors are human spirits. They can be contacted for help, to assist with all sorts of events, to help with the harvest, helping to heal people etc. It's the Elders who are most closely related to these human ancestors. The Elders are most probably the next ancestors in line! It makes sense to take care of them if you appreciate a good relationship with your ancestors. Ancestors can either be helpful or be a threat to the living. In either case it's best not to offend them.

We are so coloured in our view on how things are that it is hard to imagine that other cultures have a different perception of concepts such as death. We consider someone dead when he stops breathing and when there is no heartbeat. Jared Diamond describes in his book, 'The World Until Yesterday', a situation that he visited New Guinea at the age of 46. They were shocked, hearing his age calling him 'half dead'. In an essay published in 1912 W.H.R. Rivers describes the use of a local word in the Solomon Islands meaning dead but also applies to people who are very old or very ill.

Many cultures have some form of afterlife or other realms where a spirit will go to after his life. These realms and other worlds are just as real as this one. This of course will highly influence the way someone perceives life and death.

## LIFE EXPECTANCIES

The western world is totally different from traditional ways of living. We have the highest life expectancy in history. Although the world population is bigger than ever we have less children per family (on average). This creates a shift in the ratio younger versus elderly people. Healthcare, vaccination programs and good personal hygiene have contributed to this.

In traditional society it would certainly be possible to reach a high age, however this would not be for all! In some cultures the age of 50 would be a highly respected old age.





# WHAT TO DO WITH GRANNY?

With our healthcare and all sorts of technological inventions we have more elderly people than ever. We stopped living in large family groups in many countries. It is common in some cultures to take your parents /grandparents in house and look after them. In a traditional society there would probably always be someone to look after the eldest people of the tribe. We have invented the retirement and nursing homes. This actually is a long tradition. The first 'almshouses', 'poor houses' and 'old men's and women's houses' date from the 13th century often run by the church. Privacy was not guaranteed with quite often large sleeping halls, with only a bed and a small closet. Couples were separated into men's houses and women's houses. In the Netherlands the first modern nursing home opened in 1965. Now we have almost 2500!



Of course you are taken care of as a child. That seems to be quite universal. As soon as you are adult, you can take care of yourself, off you go, good luck, earn money, buy a house and the cycle starts over again. But when you get older and loose vitality there is a problem. Your kids, if you have them, still work, have kids themselves and certainly do not have place for granny. From traditional perspectives we probably could learn a lot in how to value and treat our elderly! And in some cases it might be better that we do not have to face certain difficult decisions leading to senicide or gerontocide.

## SENICIDE

Senicide is the killing of elderly people. We all have heard tales of elderly people being abandoned by the rest of the tribe. Jared Diamond describes several cultures who actively or passively kill or abandon their elderly people. This seems to be more common in situations where life is harsh, like the arctic or desert regions. Imagine that you do not have transport, no pack animals and you need to take everything along, kids, food, tents etc. It would be difficult to carry elderly people who cannot walk for themselves. It is easy to have a moral opinion about this subject. But what is the difference between this and the modern euthanasia, more and more people request? (over the 6000 in 2016 in the Netherlands, 4% of the deaths) Are we better because we use medicines to help our elderly to the other realms? Would it be different if people would live with their relatives in extended family groups?

# MODERN ELDERS

In a positive way our Elders can help us build the future. They have life experience and however technology changes fast, certain life aspects will always be relevant. Such as how to build a strong partner relation, how to take care of children, how to make important decisions.

We could have high benefit in corporations from Elders. Large companies would have their own board or council of elders. The United States have their 'Supreme Court'. This is a board of Elders that once chosen have their seat for life and cannot be fired. The Supreme Court is the highest federal court in the USA.



The most positive Elder stronghold in my personal opinion is the organisation: "The Elders", founded by Nelson Mandela on his birthday 18 July 2007. The Elders consists of former global world leaders now taking action on global issues. They are an independent voice with shared human interest. They have had powerful positions in the world but no longer aspire leading positions. This makes it possible to boldly speak up, to overcome taboos and to create positive change.

This shows us both the strength and the value of Elders in our society. In every small tribe and every family and are hidden stories worth listening to.

## BOOKS AND LITERATURE

Jared Diamond; The world until Yesterday  
Keith Wilcock; Hunting and Gathering in the Corporate tribe  
Joy Hendry; An introduction to social anthropology  
[www.theelders.org](http://www.theelders.org)  
Wikipedia on: Almshouses and Euthanasia

By Iris Kleinlugtenbelt  
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