

PROTOCOLS

/

For Non-  
Indigenous  
People

\

Working  
with  
Indigenous  
Knowledge

|

ED.01

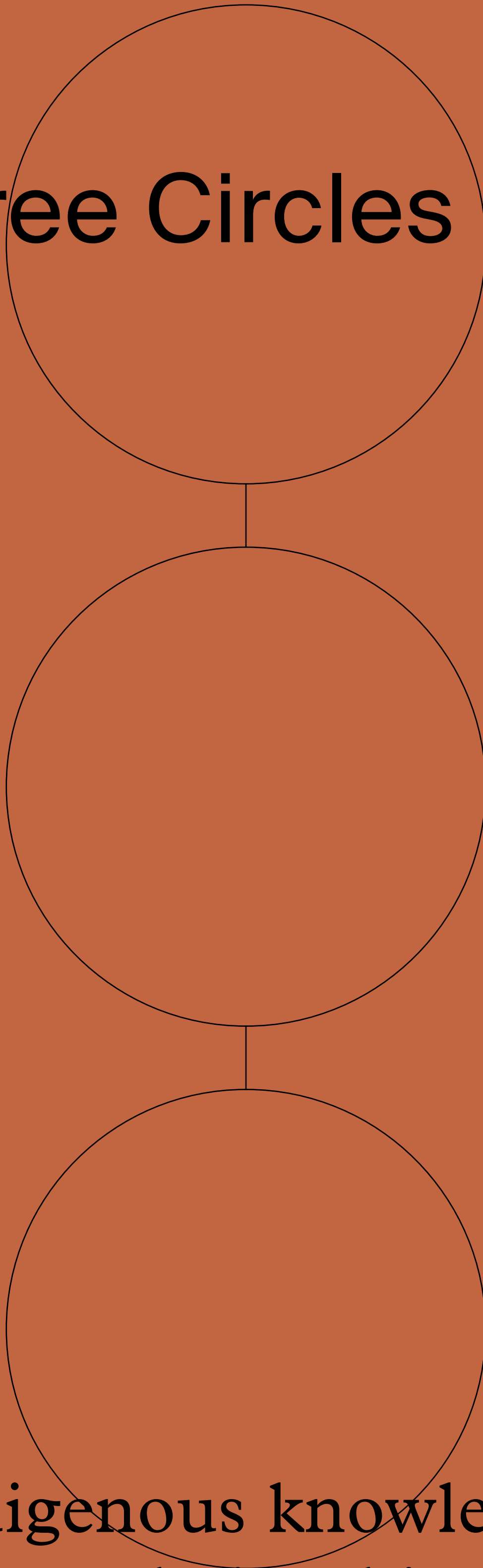


WRITTEN IN 2024 BY INDIGENOUS SCHOL-  
ARS FROM IKSLABS IN CANADA AND  
AUSTRALIA, IN CONJUNCTION WITH IN-  
DIGENOUS THINKERS FROM AIME AND  
VARIOUS GROUPS IN TRADITIONAL EM-  
BASSY AROUND THE WORLD, UNDER THE  
AUSPICES OF THE INDIGENOUS SYSTEMS  
KNOWLEDGE COLLECTIVE.

3      These protocols  
have been created  
to help non-  
Indigenous people  
work respectfully  
and productively with  
Indigenous knowledge  
systems.

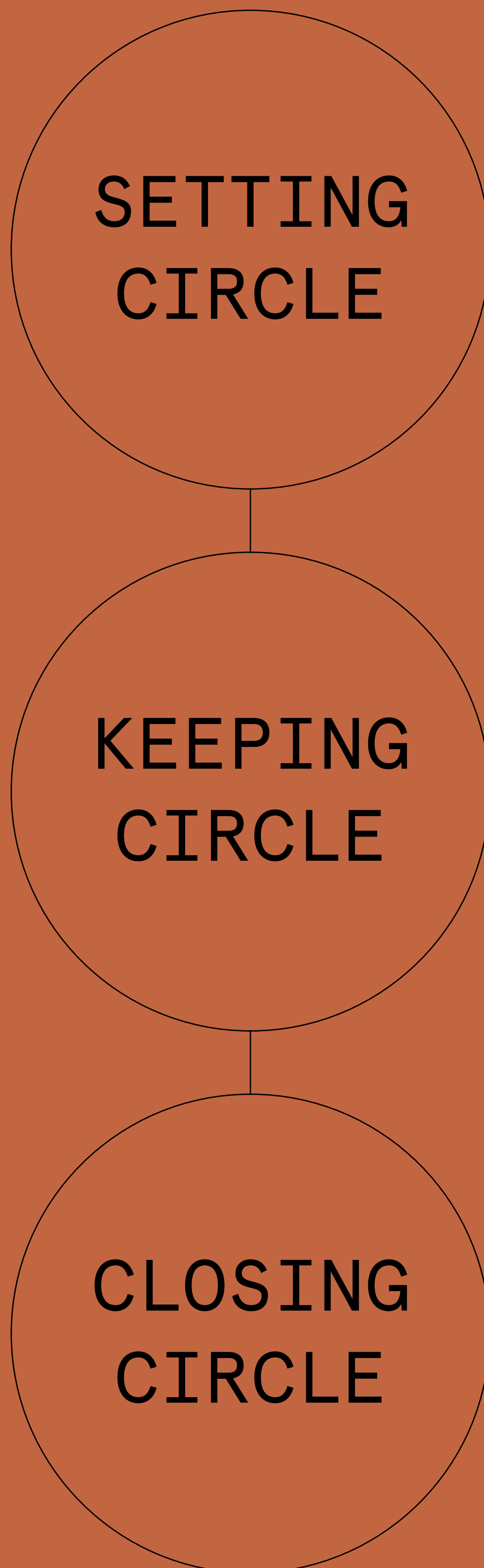
They recognise that  
Indigenous and non-  
Indigenous cultures have  
fundamentally different  
ways of knowing and  
being, and provide useful  
pathways for navigating  
these differences and  
creating more fruitful  
collaboration.

# The Three Circles



In Indigenous knowledge systems, relationships pass through three stages of engagement, represented by three circles each honouring beginning, sustaining and completing. These protocols mirror this ceremonial structure.





### SETTING CIRCLE *(beginning)*

Preparing the space and heart for learning.

### KEEPING CIRCLE *(sustaining)*

A framework for keeping right relation.

### CLOSING CIRCLE *(completing)*

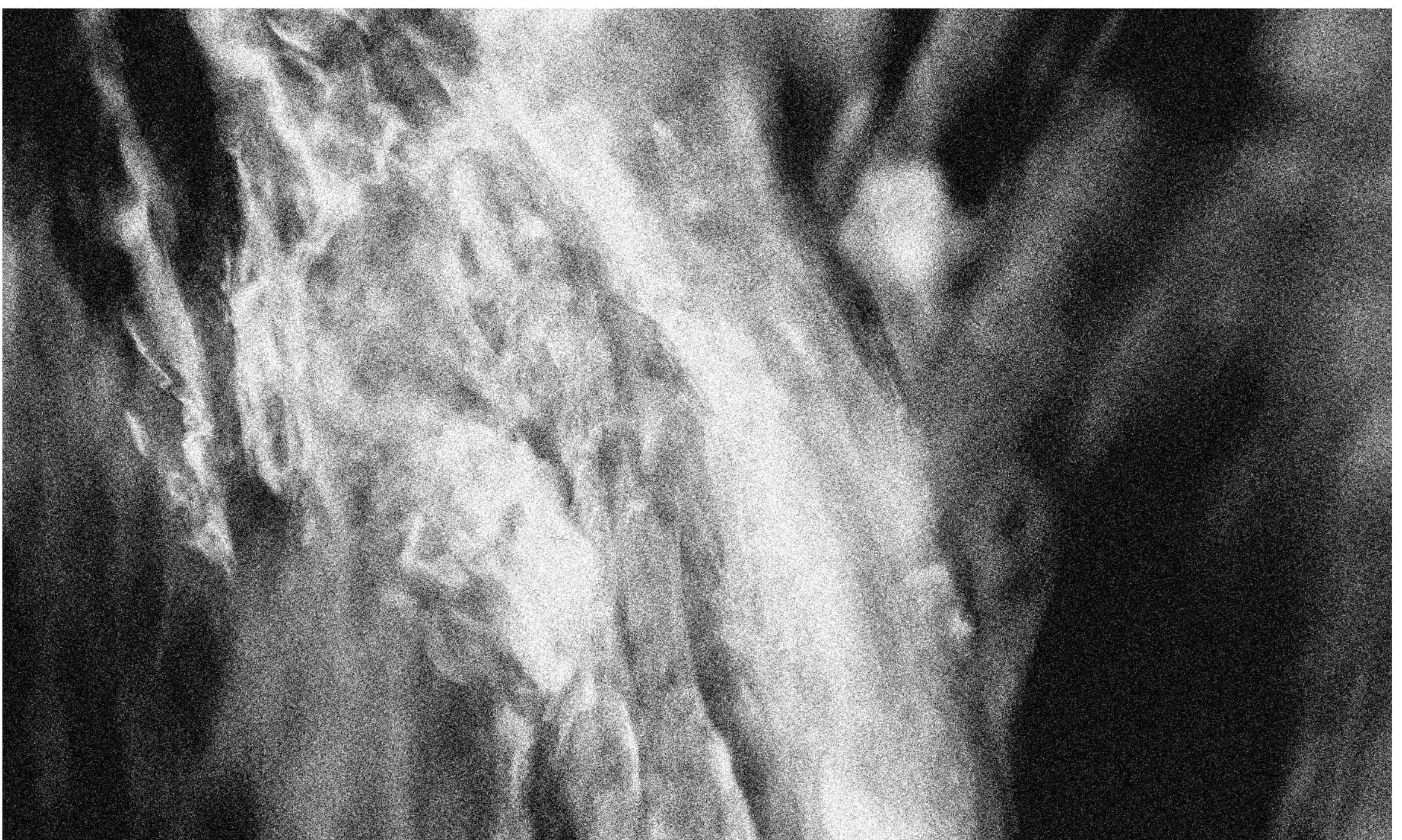
Honouring learning and carrying wisdom forward.

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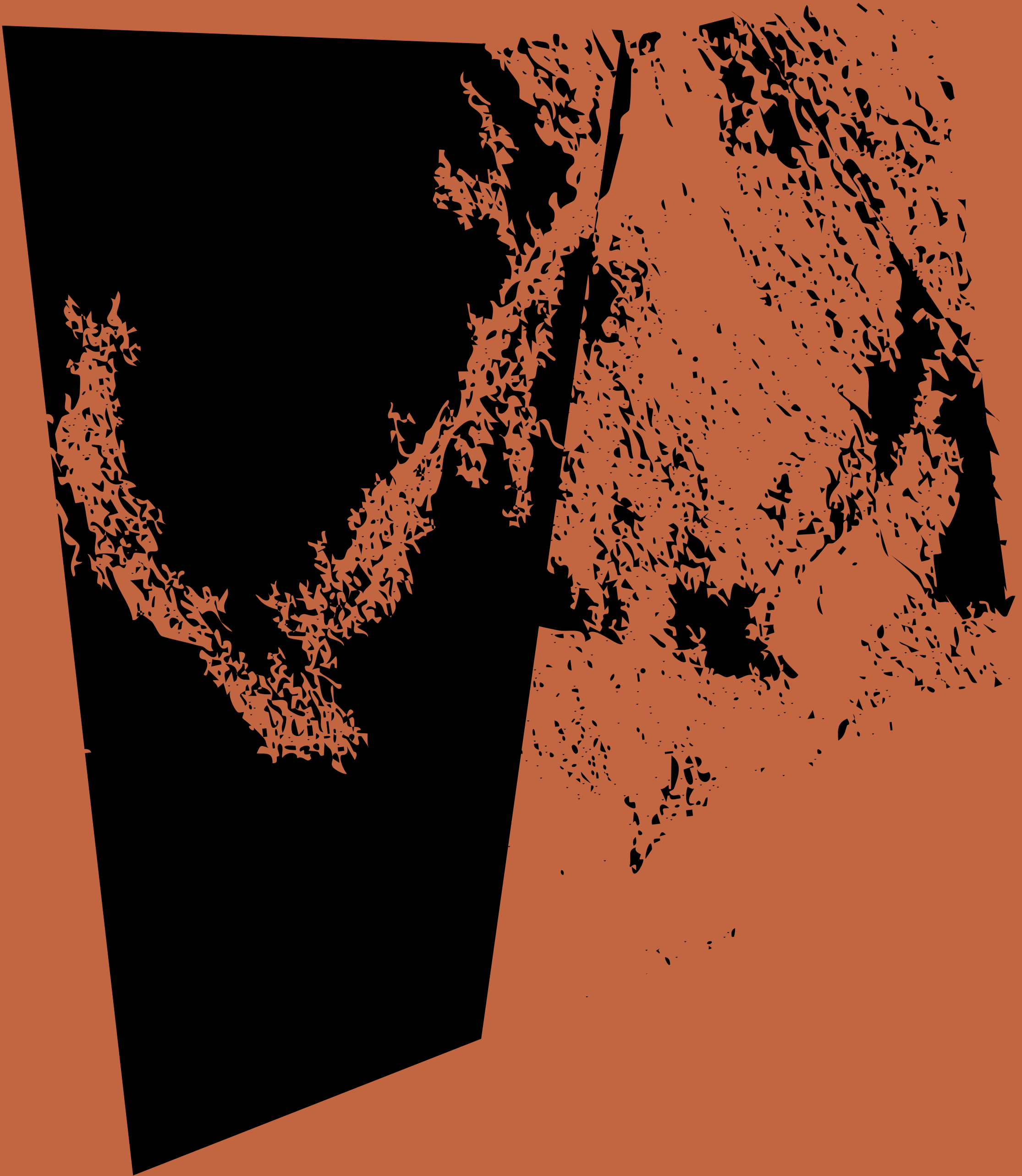
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# About the Protocols



This document has been developed to guide non-Indigenous people and organisations seeking to work with Indigenous knowledge and communities.

For tens of thousands of years, Indigenous peoples have worked at the boundary between our worlds and the worlds of others, developing norms of regenerative exchange while protecting the identity and integrity of all involved. We know how to undertake deep, collective, systemic analysis and deploy design processes that maintain and preserve the knowledge and resources held within (and across) boundaries.

The Indigenous Knowledge Systems Labs at Shingwauk Kinoomaage Gamig (Canada) and Deakin University (Australia) offer this bundle of general cultural protocols for engaging with Indigenous peoples when working with traditional knowledge and practice. It contains broad guidelines for outsider behaviour during all stages of a cooperative relationship between First Nations and non-First Nations groups, encompassing a wide range of situations, from collaboration and connection to conflict and separation.

This document is read-only for non-Indigenous people, but open-source and

alterable for Indigenous groups. It would be inappropriate for non-Indigenous people to modify this framework or present it as their own work or expertise. Local Indigenous groups are encouraged to adapt it to suit their specific contexts and purposes.



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# Setting Circle



Setting circle is a ceremonial practice that creates the space for proper exchange. Just as we gather in circle to acknowledge place, establish protocols, and invite the right mindset before important work, this opening grounds our journey together. It prepares the heart and mind to receive what follows with respect and right relation.



In Indigenous knowledge systems, Country itself stands as both teacher and living text, telling stories of ancient acts and their consequences.

The mountain was once a warrior whose pride led him to transgress sacred boundaries. Now transformed to stone, he keeps the Law for all who come after him, teaching them about the price of arrogance. The pool in the river bend is the tears of a woman who broke kinship protocols, her waters now forever deepening understanding of proper relation.

In this way the land itself encodes patterns of right and wrong behaviour, revealing through its form both how to walk together and what happens when we forget our obligations to each other. Narrative is our foundation, so when we set circle for ceremonial embassy, we share our Lore and stories to find the protocols that will make our diverse systems interoperable.

The ground where we set circle today is littered with the errors and missteps of outsiders seeking Indigenous knowledge and collaboration; the compost of many

failed projects, interventions and sustainable development adventures.

The guidance offered here draws on lessons learned when non-Indigenous people stumble into familiar patterns of transgression against Indigenous ways of knowing and being. We don't offer them to shame or exclude, but to open a more useful and respectful way for different knowledge systems to meet. Used wisely, they can reveal the boundless possibilities of connection across worlds – and the consequences of crossing thresholds without proper care and protocol.



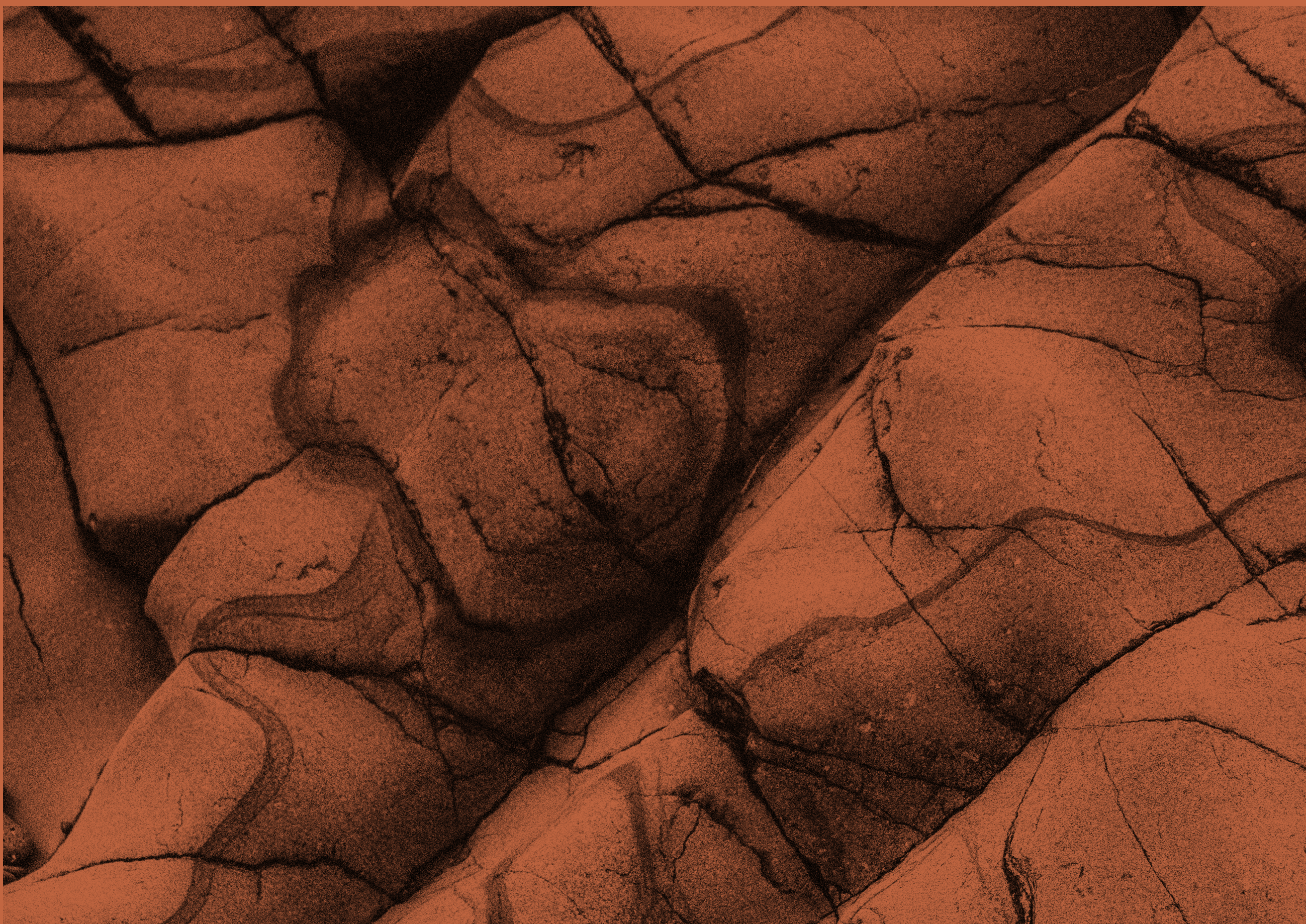
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# The Cycle of *Extraction* and *Protection*



{Extract} Then the extraction begins – pushing too hard, moving too fast, trying to take what isn't theirs to take.



As Indigenous knowledge systems gain recognition for their role in everything from regenerative design to new financial models, sustainability startups and corporate shamans increasingly seek access to our frameworks, validation, and concepts.

THEY COME bearing gifts of grant funding and good intentions, speaking earnestly of “ancient wisdom,” eager to indigenise their theories of change.

The pattern plays out with grinding familiarity: They arrive seeking ceremony and connection. They have profound personal experiences. Initial relationships form.

Then the extraction begins – pushing too hard, moving too fast, trying to take what isn't theirs to take. When challenged, they often react with anger or victimhood, or simply disappear while still using our concepts and claiming Indigenous alignment.

When Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledge systems meet, they operate from fundamentally different foundations. For good relations to emerge, the rules and systems at this boundary should function like computing protocols – mechanisms that translate and mediate between otherwise incompatible operating systems.

Just as protocols ensure stability in digital systems, Indigenous knowledge systems include protective measures to maintain their health and integrity. These measures take many forms – strategic avoidance, deliberate withholding of information, altering agreements, redirection, direct criticism, strategic disengagement, or rightful anger when protocols are violated.

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# Embassy *as* *Relational* Practice



{Extract} Imagine you're standing at the meeting place of two rivers. Watch how they come together – not in conflict or competition, but in a dance of confluence.



These protocols were born from dialogue between Indigenous peoples from different countries, different histories, different ways of holding knowledge. Yet there is also a universality in how we understand relationship, proper engagement with knowledge and the concept of protocol itself.

IN LINE with this, most Indigenous cultures have ‘embassy’ protocols – border practices that help negotiate norms of access with other Indigenous groups and travellers, both human and non-human.

Imagine you’re standing at the meeting place of two rivers. Watch how they come together – not in conflict or competition, but in a dance of confluence.

Each river maintains its distinct character and sovereign flow, while mingling with a third flow. Indigenous logic does not frame this as a synergy or dialectic – two ways are not creating a third-way, but the meeting point is regarded as a sentient site of power that is calling three rivers together and powering their currents. The relation cannot be forced or created from desire. If a relationship is right, it will already exist as a timeless potentiality in spirit that calls kin together.

This is embassy.

In Indigenous knowledge systems, borders aren't barriers – they're opportunities for deep exchange. They are places where different groups come into relationship, where we establish protocols for proper movement and exchange. Watch how air and water flows between territories, how birds migrate across lands and seas, how resources have always moved between peoples in trade. These flows are regulated but not restricted. Those moving through borders pause, build re-

lationshps, and come to understand the country they're traversing. Through ceremony and protocol, they are recognised as part of that land's lawful order.

This is very different from the rigid organisational boundaries most non-Indigenous groups bring. Their borders demarcate power, exclusivity, and property. They expand and contract in fierce competition for space and resources. Hence the need for protocols of embassy to mediate between incompatible systems of colonial and Indigenous border-work practices.



# The *Five* *Ritual* Objects: A *Framework* for Engagement

{Extract} These objects make up the protocol ‘bundle’ that forms the heart of this document.

In the old ways, when different peoples met for trade or ceremony, they exchanged gifts that acted as living regulatory mechanisms – embodiments of proper kin-making, meaning-making, place-making, sense-making and change-making.

THE PROTOCOLS that follow are a reflection of this practice, taking the shape of ritual objects in five categories that represent the key regulatory points in any engagement between different knowledge systems. Every culture has versions of these objects because they reflect universal patterns in how humans embody their work, thought, reality and values in extended relation with

the world. These objects make up the protocol ‘bundle’ that forms the heart of this document. They are:

CONTAINER (*cup, bowl, bag*)

Representing the nurturing of relationship as foundation for engagement.

ORNAMENT (*adornment, sculpture, image*)

Representing the exchange of gifts, connections, agreements and permissions for access.

TOOL (*utensil, instrument, fire starter*)

Representing collaborative work, specialist skills and shared creation.

PROTECTIVE DEVICE (*shield, amulet, glove, border marker*)

Representing the navigation of tension and the assertion of boundaries.

WEAPON (*blade, projectile, club, spear*)

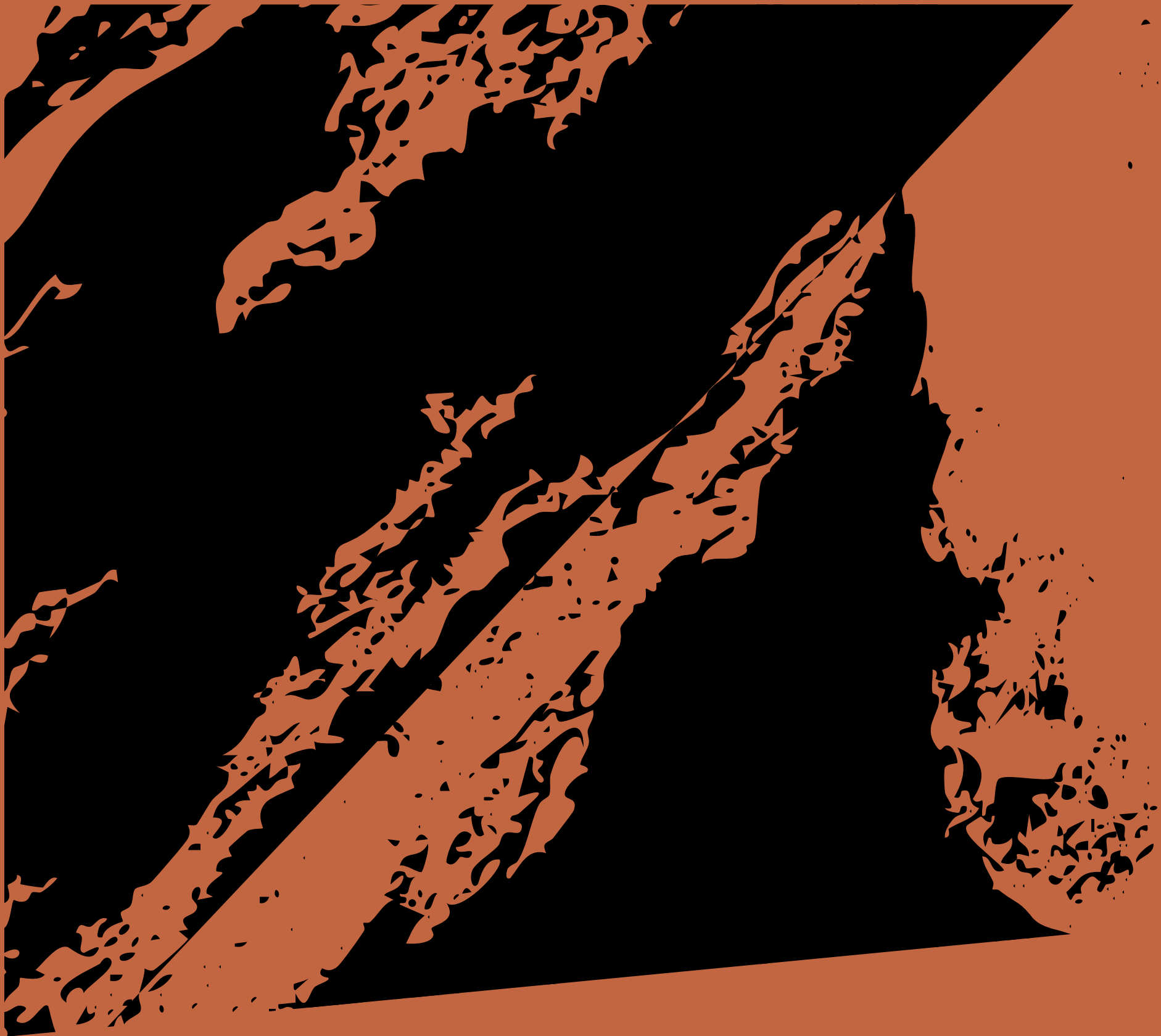
Representing actions to neutralise persistent aggressors and cease transgressive interactions.

These five ritual objects represent different aspects of engagement that may flow together or overlap. They aren't rigid sequential steps, but interconnected dimensions of proper relationship.

They are drawn from thousands of years of managing boundaries between different ways of knowing. They show us precisely how to move through stages of relationship with discernment and care. They remind us that engagement must be about more than good intentions – it must be built on mechanisms of right relation: proper container, proper adornment, proper tools, proper protection, and yes, sometimes proper weapons.

Within the ceremonial structure of Setting, Keeping, and Closing Circle, these five ritual objects provide the regulatory framework for the sustained engagement that occurs in Keeping Circle – the ongoing and often difficult interpersonal work that sits at the heart of building and maintaining right relations between knowledge systems.

# Keeping Circle



Keeping Circle represents the sacred ground where sustained engagement unfolds after Setting Circle.



Here, the real work of embassy occurs – the ongoing practice of maintaining balance while respecting and navigating fundamental differences in ways of knowing and being.

Unlike the ceremonial thresholds of beginning and ending, this space requires continuous attention to the health of developing relationships between knowledge systems that remain distinct while engaging in meaningful exchange.

# Container



( BASKET , CUP , BOWL , BAG )

THIS STAGE REPRESENTS:  
BEING WELCOMED AND NOURISHED

Think of how a basket holds things – with care, structure and respect for what’s contained. This first stage is about being welcomed and nourished, about establishing the proper vessel for relationship. Like all first meetings, it requires ritual – not performance, but genuine recognition of the patterns that will shape everything that follows.

YOU CANNOT simply walk into Indigenous spaces declaring good intentions, bearing your sustainability framework or theory of change like a gift. We’ve watched too many eager change-makers mistake initial access for approval, status or full consultation.

We see the same pattern replay: The excited startup founder, the well-funded



NGO, the researcher with their grant deadline – all rushing to “include Indigenous voices” without first understanding how to be properly held in relation. This stage is about learning to move at the speed of trust, to recognise that true welcome emerges from proper preparation and patience.



## KEY PROTOCOLS AT THIS STAGE:

You cannot invite yourself – you must be invited or seek invitation through someone who can make proper introductions.

Signal your presence and desire to meet with humility.

If accepted, prepare stories, knowledge, and items to share.

Don't push on timing or attendance – building trust takes time.

Declare your position, affiliation, and expertise openly.

State true intentions, both personal and professional.

Only promise resources you can definitely deliver.

Acknowledge place, borders, and existing connections.

Share your cultural ways, but not performatively (don't try to lead us in deep breathing exercises, please!).

Listen carefully to protocols, norms, roles being established.

# Ornament



(ADORNMENT, SCULPTURE, IMAGE)

THIS STAGE REPRESENTS:  
BEING PERMITTED AND GIFTED



Like the intricate patterns of a ceremonial necklace or the symbolic carvings that tell ancestral stories, ornaments exist at the threshold between utilitarian function and sacred meaning. They mark significant transitions, validate identity, and embody connection. This stage represents the delicate negotiation of permissions and the sacred exchange that establishes ongoing access to Indigenous knowledge and spaces.

WHEN PROPERLY understood, this transition from initial welcome to meaningful exchange resembles the careful adorning of a person for ceremony – each element placed with intention, each symbol carrying obligations along with beauty. The permissions granted are not static possessions but living agreements that require continuous attention and care.

This is where non-Indigenous collaborators frequently stumble – mistaking a single permission for permanent access, or treating ceremonial gifts as transactions rather than living bonds of relationship. The symbolic exchanges at this stage establish the terms of engagement that will shape all that follows. Like jewellery that marks status or belonging, these permissions indicate both privilege and responsibility.

When permissions are withdrawn or access is limited, many outsiders react with entitlement rather than understanding the relational context of all exchange. They fail to recognise that permissions, like ceremonial attire, are worn for specific purposes and contexts – not claimed as permanent possessions.



## KEY PROTOCOLS AT THIS STAGE:

Understand that permissions only last as long as relationships are well-maintained.

When you receive a gift, recognise it as connecting you in spirit to the giver.

When giving gifts, choose items that hold personal significance; this symbolises divesting from individualistic ownership and entering into Indigenous relational systems.

Gift exchange establishes relationship, not contractual terms for work or property.

Pay attention to unspoken meanings and non-verbal cues; much communication happens between the stated words.

If you are given ceremonial practices, names, or roles for a specific context, these are not permissions to use them elsewhere or with others.

Share your vision and theory of change honestly, but recognise that Indigenous hopes and plans will differ from yours.

When granted access to knowledge, verify its scope with multiple people, including Elders.

## KEY PROTOCOLS AT THIS STAGE:

Remember that saying “yes” carries different cultural meanings – sometimes people will grant permission when they should not, and you remain responsible for impacts.

Acknowledge that permissions to engage do not equal permissions to share, teach, or modify Indigenous knowledge.





ABOVE: SWEET GRASS BRAID FROM  
TURTLE ISLAND, GIFTED IN RITUAL  
EMBASSY FROM ANISHNAABE.





# Tool



(UTENSIL, INSTRUMENT,  
FIRE STARTER)

THIS STAGE REPRESENTS:  
WORKING TOGETHER AND CREATING

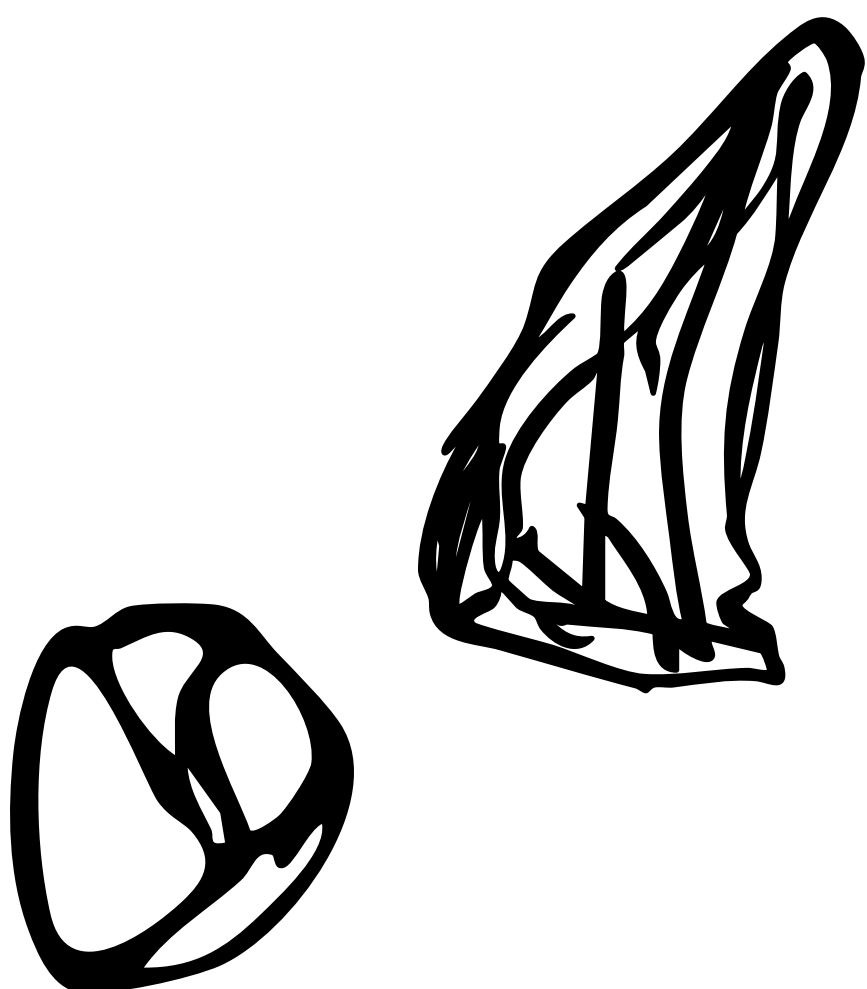
In Indigenous life, tools afford patterns of relationship and function in how they are made, used, and cared for. The grinding stone teaches women's processes and rhythms for creating sustenance. The fire stick holds knowledge of men and women in right relation, the friction that sparks the metabolism of the universe, and how a good hearth is maintained.

AT THIS stage of relationship, the work of genuine collaboration begins. The tools we use for working between knowledge systems must carry the same deep patterns of understanding as those cultural implements.

Every action, every framework, every methodology exists to serve two fundamental measures: Does it increase re-

latedness? Does it improve the health of the systems it touches?

Like those traditional tools that guide the processes of making, contemporary work between knowledge systems must use devices of calibration. Their affordances are simple but profound: Are we strengthening the living web of relationships? Are we improving the health of Country and community? Any tool functioning outside of these parameters, whether conceptual or technological, will render your work transgressive or destructive. This will trigger protective protocols.



## KEY PROTOCOLS AT THIS STAGE:

When reporting on work to others, you don't speak for Indigenous knowledge.

Allow Indigenous principles to shape your conceptual tools and frameworks.

Seek Indigenous leadership, but you don't choose the leader.

Continuously reflect on your impact with local mentors.

If your actions aren't working, pause and realign with Indigenous processes.

Accept redirection when your actions don't align.

If you are frustrated, don't criticise, gossip or recruit allies against others.

What you produce belongs to people and land, not you.



# Protective Device



(SHIELD, AMULET, BOUNDARY MARKER)

THIS STAGE REPRESENTS:  
BEING TURNED OR STOPPED



You can see how much a relationship is valued by the level of protection a community affords it. But protection isn't always about allowing safe passage – it can also mean setting limits and withholding access. This stage emerges when the initial harmony of collaboration meets its first real tests – when different ways of knowing and being start to grate against each other, when well-meaning actions begin to disturb delicate systems.

**PROTECTION IN** Indigenous systems operates through careful observation and measured response.

When outsiders fall into wrong relation – pushing too hard for outcomes, mistaking access for ownership, letting their own patterns override local wisdom – Indigenous communities employ increasingly clear signals to redirect the energy.

Like the warning colours of a poisonous creature or the subtle shifts in wind before a storm, these signals carry vital information about systems health.

All meaningful work between knowledge systems involves tension. The question isn't whether difficulty will arise, but how that difficulty will be metabolised into deeper understanding. This stage requires profound attention from both sides – communities measuring the impact of engagement on their systems, and outsiders learning to read and respect the signals that indicate when a relationship needs recalibration. Before a relationship fractures completely, this is where the hard work of rebalancing occurs.

## KEY PROTOCOLS AT THIS STAGE:

Firstly, protect yourself (but don't be defensive). Give without expectation of return (there is no such thing as a 'loan'!) but don't be afraid to say 'no'.

You can't coerce or boss anybody, and nobody can force you either.

Accept when you're asked to pause or restart.

Never take co-created work for your own use if relationships break down.

Don't accuse us of dysfunction, lack of authenticity or reverse racism.

Don't debate me, bro. We don't do that, because it gives bad ideas false legitimacy.

You do not facilitate processes of conflict resolution.

When Indigenous people speak of oppression, don't centre your own pain or grievances.

Behave with dignity when apologising or setting boundaries. Don't whine or cry.

Some of us may act out from trauma and become punitive. If you can maintain dignified silence and empathy through this, others will respect you for it.



# Weapon



(BLADE , PROJECTILE , CLUB , SPEAR )

THIS STAGE REPRESENTS:  
BEING WOUNDED OR TERMINATED

Every culture carries weapons with profound respect, understanding their power to both protect and transform. The spear that enforces boundaries today might become tomorrow's teaching stick, showing future generations where lines must be drawn. In Indigenous systems, even complete relationship breakdowns carry the potential for medicine – if those involved carry their story with proper accountability.

WHEN RELATIONSHIPS between knowledge systems rupture, the impact ripples through entire communities. The organisation that pushed too hard for cultural content despite warnings. The well-funded project that refused to accept Indigenous leadership. The collaboration that drained community energy without reciprocity. These endings aren't failures if they become proper



teaching – transformation, like that ancient warrior turned to stone, requires accepting one’s role in the cautionary tales that guide future generations.

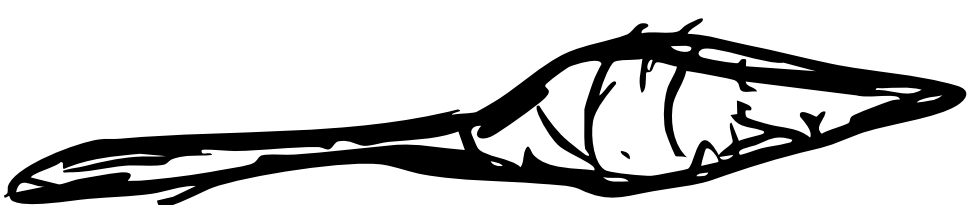
This stage demands profound honesty about impact and responsibility. Your project might have invested significant resources. Your intentions might have been pure. Your vision might have seemed aligned. But when Indigenous communities choose to end engagement, that decision emerges from measuring real impact on their systems – not your intentions, hopes, or beliefs about what could have been.

Here’s where many outsiders misunderstand our ways: In Indigenous systems, shame isn’t about cancellation or permanent exile. It’s carried collectively – the community shares the weight of what went wrong. Those who transgress can become respected teachers if they take full accountability, helping others avoid similar missteps. Like those ancient beings in our landscape who became sacred geological sites after their

transgressions, mistake-makers who own their story with humility become part of the living curriculum that guides future generations.

This is the medicine that can emerge from endings – not through defensive posturing or refusing responsibility, but through accepting your role in the larger story of how different knowledge systems learn to come together. Your experience of taking the wrong path, if carried with proper accountability, can become a valuable teaching for others who follow you.

The only honourable path forward is accepting consequences with grace, carrying the learning with integrity, and understanding that any future invitation to reconnect will be a respectful new beginning.



## KEY PROTOCOLS AT THIS STAGE:

Accept community decisions about separation.

Your future reputation depends upon how you handle being denied.

Sometimes endings are subtle – learn to recognise when people politely disengage.

Even if everyone invested fully, good projects can fail or be sabotaged.

Don't complain publicly about perceived injustices.

Don't use violence (verbal, financial, or physical) to seek retribution.

Don't accept physical violence against you. Fight back or leave quickly.

Sexual connections play a big role in traditional embassy relations, but sex between settlers and Indigenous people comes with historical baggage and unequal power dynamics. Everybody will know, some will resent it, and there will be additional layers of protocol and accountability that are too complicated for this document!

Remember: You get to go home somewhere else after this ends, while Indigenous communities remain with the consequences of your engagement.



ABOVE: STONE KNIFE (DETAIL), MADE ON  
DJADJAWURRUNG COUNTRY DURING  
MULTI-TRIBAL GATHERING.





# ASSEMBLING YOUR OWN PROTOCOL BUNDLE: THE UN-WORKSHOP

FOR GROUPS WITHOUT ACCESS TO INDIGENOUS LEADERSHIP, ONE WAY TO PRACTICALLY ENGAGE WITH THESE PROTOCOLS IS THROUGH AN 'UN-WORKSHOP' ACTIVITY:

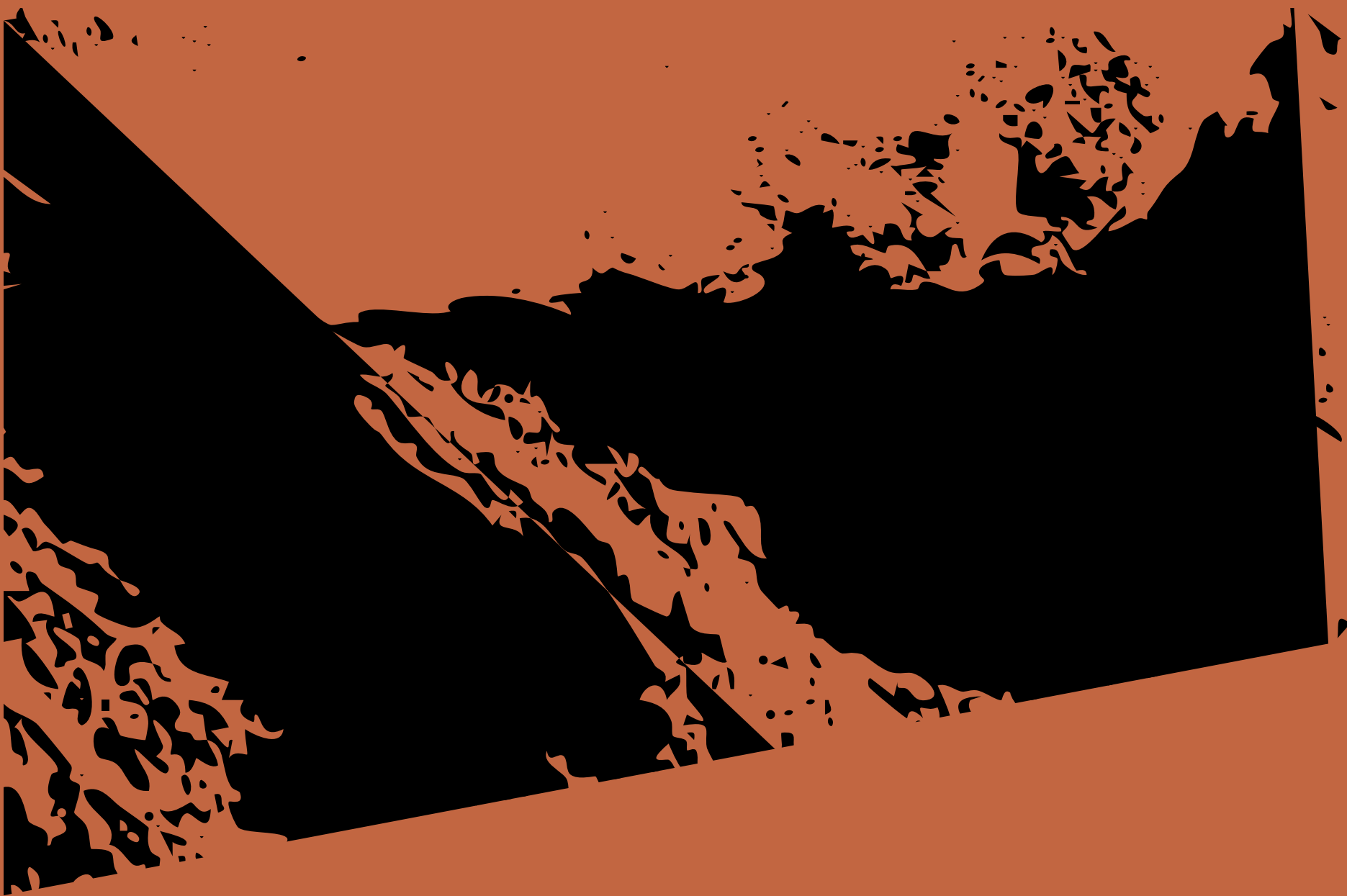


Group members read this document, then gather five objects from their own culture that align with each ritual object category. Share stories and understandings of cross-cultural work to inform approaches to Indigenous collaboration, as well as grounding participants in their own authentic identities.

This activity encourages you to develop a deeper relational understanding by selecting meaningful items from your own culture to serve as guides. By identifying your own containers, ornaments, tools, protective devices, and weapons, you can begin to recognise how these regulatory mechanisms appear across cultures, even when their forms and ceremonies differ.

This isn't about cultural appropriation. Instead, it should be seen as a tool to develop a deep understanding of how relationships form, develop, and sometimes end. This prepares you to approach potential collaboration with self-respect and relational awareness.

# Closing Circle



In Indigenous ceremony, Closing Circle is just as important as Setting Circle. It acknowledges what has been shared, honours commitments made, and ensures responsibilities are carried forward in good relation. As we complete this journey together, we recognise that endings are also beginnings – points of transformation where learning becomes wisdom through lived practice.

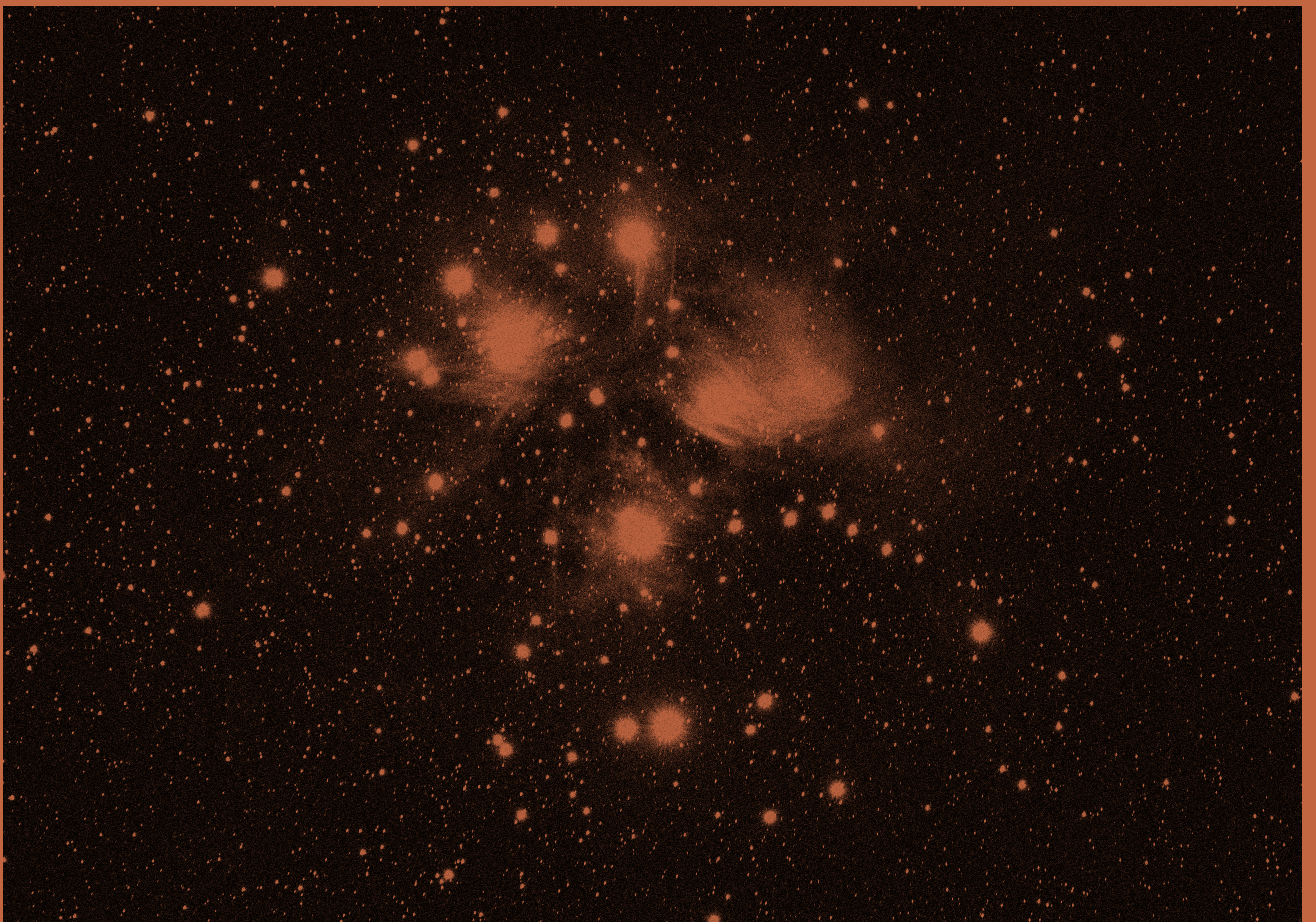
Across the land, sea and stars, stories of consequence and learning live within the landscape – dwelling in rock formations, waterways, forests, and star patterns. These knowledge holders carry important teachings about relationship, responsibility, and repair. Their stories show us that maintaining right relations requires continuous attention to boundaries, protocols, and respect – especially during times of misunderstanding or conflict.

The night sky offers perhaps the most universal teaching. Across continents and cultures – from Indigenous Australia to ancient Greece – people recognise the same story in the stars: Orion (the Hunter) pursuing the Pleiades (the Seven Sisters). We didn't need to share this story for it to be universally known. Either the stars themselves taught all peoples this tale, or we remember it from when we were one people, long ago.

These constellations tell an enduring story that mirrors the dynamics in these protocols. The Hunter, captivated by the Sisters' wisdom and beauty, wants what



they have. His pursuit – sometimes eager, sometimes forceful – reflects the pattern we see today when non-Indigenous organisations pursue Indigenous knowledge with enthusiasm but limited understanding. The Sisters retreat not out of unwillingness to share, but to establish boundaries that protect what is sacred. Their refuge in the sky speaks to the right of Indigenous communities to determine when, how, and with whom their knowledge is shared.



{Extract} The patterns in these stars offer both caution and guidance – a cosmic reflection of the very protocols outlined in this document.



This celestial drama, unfolding night after night across both hemispheres, teaches that desire for knowledge without respect for boundaries has consequences, while patience and proper approach can build pathways for appropriate relations. The patterns in these stars offer both caution and guidance – a cosmic reflection of the very protocols outlined in this document.

When mistakes happen – and they will – remember that in Indigenous contexts, accountability serves a purpose beyond punishment or shame. Those who acknowledge their errors and carry those lessons forward often become the most effective teachers. There is honour in owning your missteps and helping others avoid similar paths. Your willingness to be accountable creates value for the community and helps regenerate damaged relationships.

The temptation is to see these protocols as restrictions or barriers. Instead, you are encouraged to view them as pathways. Following them increases the likelihood of building lasting, beneficial relationships;

ignoring them almost guarantees repeating familiar patterns of harm and disappointment.

The choice is yours: Will your engagement with Indigenous knowledge become yet another untold cautionary tale? Or will you help create new patterns of respectful relationship and mutual benefit?

Even after specific collaborations end, the principles represented by these five ritual objects will continue working for you. The container that welcomed you becomes a vessel for keeping what you've learned. The ornament reminds you of permissions granted and responsibilities accepted. Tools created together find new purposes, while protective measures and boundaries transform into valuable teachings that guide future efforts. Your weapons will inspire your advocacy and activism in seeking justice for yourself and others.

Building good relations across knowledge systems carries significant responsibilities. It's challenging work, and many have stumbled before you. But when



approached with humility, patience, and genuine respect, these collaborations create possibilities for healing rather than extraction, regeneration rather than depletion.

Whatever unfolds, remember that we all exist under the same sky, guided by principles of reciprocity and relationship that transcend our differences. This shared foundation offers both possibility and responsibility as we work toward more respectful ways of knowing together.



# Protocols



Ed . 01

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