

Cultural Survival and the Contribution of Indigenous

Cultures to Humanity

by Anthony Ippolito Ph.D.

I'm never one to shirk adventure or new experiences, whenever, where ever. My first experience with the indigenous people of southeastern Venezuela, they call themselves, the Pemón, would be yet another set of unparalleled experiences and unique memories. Amidst the towering, enduring behemoths, the famed tabletop tepui mountains of Doyle's lost world, my new Pemón friends were teaching me the significance of a fruit of a local tree. The juice of the fruit was clear but was the basis for tattoos used to adorn their bodies during various rituals. A night would pass and the next days' light would melt the darkness before the beauty and significance of their invisible designs would be revealed: symbols of protection, homage, and unity of the burgeoning and sustaining life around them. As they painted various parts of my body they were almost giddy, but they appreciated that I was such a willing and enthusiastic participant. I was mildly confused because their transcriptions were not visible and the approximate 12 hours had yet to pass. Their work came into its full fruition the next morning as I awoke and noticed the simple yet moving patterns that covered my body. Admittedly, I didn't understand nor could anyone understand all of the meanings, depth, and rich intricacies of their culture. However, I felt warmly welcomed into their lives and honored by their act of sharing this ritual, an invitation that I graciously and humbly accepted.

I went to teach on that trip but I could not help to learn from the Pemón. The Pemón perspective of their wild surroundings is refreshing, the respect and awareness of the life around them is inspiring, their knowledge of how to use the forests is voluminous, their governmental organization is respectable, their social interactions within their communities are compassionate, and their acceptance of foreigners is charitable and genuine. The Pemón perspective is unique to them, but indigenous cultures across the globe each have unique perspectives of their environs, their people, and the people outside of their communities. However, like a falling raindrop is lost forever into the ocean, the theme that unites most indigenous cultures is that they are being engulfed into the sea of modern industrialized culture and the advance of globalization, in danger

of being lost forever, no documentation of their heritage, their wealth of knowledge, and, frequently, like a raindrop, no longer with a cultural identity and unity.

Often, the industrialized knee jerk reaction to preserving indigenous cultures is to keep them in a hypothetical pristine state, as if to maintain a living anthropological museum. However, the wave of globalization and modernization has already drenched most indigenous cultures, and to deny these people access to modern technology or methods that can improve their lives, would be criminal. At some point in the near future, inevitably, modern ways and cultures will reach even the most isolated or insular indigenous people. This is a certainty. One challenge is to make sure these people do not drown in the wave and lose themselves as the outside world arrives. A second challenge is to recognize that the current flows both ways; indigenous cultures are not just receptacles of outside information but are sources of information as well. However, most indigenous cultures do not yet possess the modern vehicles of rapid dissemination of their knowledge such as computers or the internet, and frequently, the “intrinsic value” of their cultures (Musschenga 1998) is not fully appreciated by the outside world.

UNESCO made preserving cultural identity a priority in October of 2003 with their adoption of the Convention for the Safe Guarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (Keitumetse 2006). The term safeguarding is defined as 'measures aimed at ensuring the viability of the intangible cultural heritage, including the identification, documentation, research, preservation, protection, promotion, enhancement, transmission, particularly through formal and non formal education, as well as the revitalization of the various aspects of such heritage" (Article 2.3, unesco.org). Although some of the stated goals are to catalog, preserve, and protect, the definition also thoughtfully includes the hope of maintenance of the culture within the people themselves by teaching or reeducating about the nuances and meaning of various cultural aspects. The people from these cultures, living, practicing, understanding, and transmitting their own culture, will be the surest and most secure safeguard. This is an important step towards preserving the information but the information also needs to be available and flow outside of these cultures.

The importance of indigenous knowledge has been recognized and is currently being integrated in many useful and creative ways. Indigenous cultures can contribute significantly to contemporary issues, such as, conservation, sustainability, resource

management and utilization, global education, partnerships with research scientists, and the development of tourism (Davis and Wali 1994, Mabulla 2000). Orlove and Brush (1996) argue that protected areas and genetic resources, particularly from plants, are dependent on indigenous groups and links are naturally forged with these groups, regional and national agencies, and international organizations. The Kayapo of the Brazilian Amazon originally allied with international conservation organizations to claim rights to their land and the natural resources and the biodiversity contained therein (Schwartzman and Zimmerman 2005). The conservation and sustainability of the land rests with the Kayapo, their understanding of their resource base, and economic alternatives. Recently, the Kayapo people have partnered with local ranchers, private industry in the region, and environmentalist in order to garner real potential and legitimacy to negotiate with larger governmental agendas. The result of this partnership has led to the restoration of the headwaters of the Xingu River, outside of the Xingu Indigenous Park where the Kayapo reside. (Schwartzman and Zimmerman 2005).

The Penan people of Sarawak took action against logging operations of their native lands and ultimately saved them and the biodiversity held within (Brosius 1997). Because of their fervor and resolve to not let their land fall to the chainsaw, their efforts attracted international attention and since, the Penan have become icons to environmentalist and conservationists around the world (Brosius 1997).

I work with the Pemón in an attempt to develop their tourism potential. The Pemón have been diligent to keep out the logging and the mining companies and preserve most of their native lands. This is not an easy task knowing that large sums of money could be made if they acquiesced to big, powerful industry. But because they stand firm, they need to build a viable industry based on the preservation of their natural resources. Developing tourism in the more out lying areas seems to have enormous potential to create a revenue stream that maintains their lands.

Ultimately, the reasons for preserving indigenous culture and knowledge can be argued academically from many points of view. More philosophically, why do we care when most of humanity will never meet, contact, or perhaps, never be directly affected by these cultures? Why do most of us agree with saving elephants, giant pandas, or even obscure plants in the wild when we will never see them outside of zoos and conservatories? From my perspective, humanity has become more than an

evolutionary, integrated part of ecology. We have put ourselves in a position of stewardship, not only for other species, but for other humans in which we share the planet as well. The preservation of indigenous cultures offers more than information and knowledge, but a context in which we understand ourselves, the accomplishments, and diversity of humanity.

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