

Mission Statement

Cultures on the Edge

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Worldwide some 300 million people, roughly 5 percent of the global population, still retain a strong identity as members of an indigenous culture, rooted in history and language, attached by myth and memory to a particular place on the planet. Though their populations are small, these cultures collectively represent as much as half of the intellectual legacy of humanity. Yet increasingly their voices are being silenced, their unique visions of life itself lost in a whirlwind of change and conflict.

Too few recognize the full significance and meaning of what is being lost. Even among those sympathetic to the plight of small indigenous societies, there is a mood of resignation, as if these cultures, quaint and colorful though they may be, are somehow fated to slip away, reduced by circumstances to the sidelines of history, removed from the inexorable progression of technological life.



Viewing these societies as marginal, however, misses the central revelation of anthropology. Just to know that nomadic hunters exist, that jaguar shaman yet journey beyond the Milky way, that the myths of the Athabaskan elders still resonate with meaning, is to remember that our world does not exist in some absolute sense but rather is just one model of reality, the consequence of one set of adaptive choices that our particular intellectual lineage made generations ago. The Penan in the forests of Borneo, the Vodoun acolytes in Haiti, the Inuit of the high Arctic, teach us that there are other options, other possibilities, other ways of thinking and interacting with the Earth.

Once we embrace this lesson, our concept of humanity grows. We discover that our way of life is not determined by nature, but by culture and history. No longer prisoners of our past, we become free to make informed

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judgments and choices about what we are doing as a society today. We come to recognize that the attitudes and practices that have served us well for the last 500 years since the expansion of Europe and the rise of science are not working so well anymore. The unleashing of technology has been a mixed blessing. We have contaminated the air, water, and soil, driven wild things to extinction, dammed the rivers, torn down the ancient forests, poisoned the rain and ripped holes in the heavens. In liberating the individual - the sociological equivalent of splitting the atom - we severed the obligations of kin and community that constrain the individual in traditional societies. In glorifying the self, we did away with community. We encounter the consequences everyday on the streets of our cities. An American child grows up believing that homelessness is a regrettable but inevitable feature of society. A nomadic child of the Gabra, raised in the deserts of Kenya, is taught that a poor man shames us all.



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Cultural survival is not about preservation, sequestering indigenous peoples in enclaves like some sort of zoological specimens. Change itself does not destroy a culture. All societies are constantly evolving. Indeed a culture survives when it has enough confidence in its past and enough say in its future to maintain its spirit and essence through all the changes it will inevitably undergo. Indigenous cultures only disappear when they are overwhelmed by external forces, and when drastic conditions imposed upon them from the outside render them incapable of adapting to new possibilities for life. A Kiowa does not stop being a Kiowa when he gives up the bow and arrow, any more than a white American stops being an American when he ceases the use of a horse and buggy.

If diversity is a source of wonder, its opposite - the ubiquitous condensation to some blandly amorphous and singularly generic modern culture that takes for granted an impoverished environment - is a source of dismay. There is, indeed, a fire burning over the earth, taking with it plants and animals, cultures, languages, ancient skills and visionary wisdom. Quelling this flame, and re-inventing the poetry of diversity is perhaps the most important challenge of our times.