





# Indigenous Cultures: The Survival of the Maya of Mesoamerica

## 10.1 Introduction

You are traveling by bus through the **highlands** of Guatemala. The road winds through steep, misty mountains. It passes small mud-brick houses set in fields of corn. The bus is piled high with bags, bundles, and even a crate of live chickens.

Most of the passengers on your bus are Mayan Indians. The woman next to you is wearing a colorful headdress and a beautiful woven blouse called a *huipil*. As she gives her children a snack of corn tortillas, she talks to them in a language you don't recognize. You feel like you are a world away from everything familiar. Suddenly, you hear a ringing sound. The woman reaches into her bag, pulls out a cell phone, and begins speaking in Spanish.

You have just witnessed an example of how old and new cultures are blending together in the Mayan world. Mayan Indians are one of the largest groups of **indigenous peoples** in the Americas. Indigenous peoples are natives of an area who have been conquered or dominated by other people who came to the area later. Indigenous peoples often try to preserve their **traditional culture**, or the customs and ways of life handed down from their ancestors.

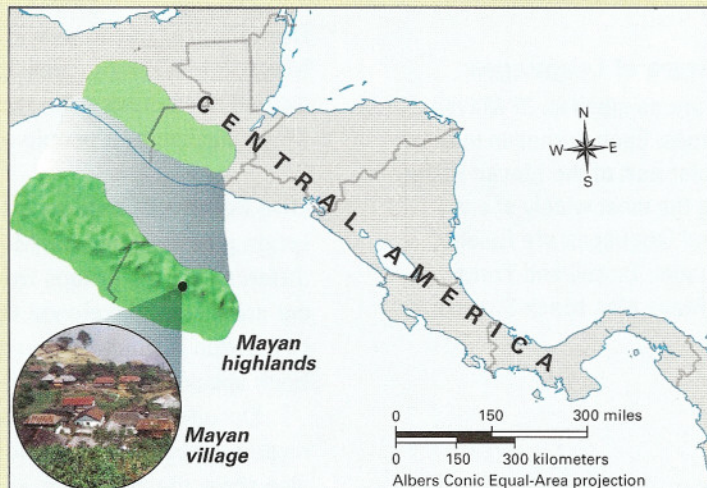
Mayan Indians still maintain much of their traditional culture, but they have also changed along with the world around them. In this chapter, you will learn how the Maya have both preserved their traditions and adapted to, or changed with, modern life.

### Essential Question

**How do indigenous peoples preserve their traditional culture while adapting to modern life?**

This illustration shows where the highland Maya live. The Mayan highlands stretch from southern Mexico through Guatemala. Notice the photograph of a highland village. You will learn about key features of Mayan life in a village like this one. Keep this illustration in mind as you try to answer the Essential Question.

### Graphic Organizer





## 10.2 The Geographic Setting

The Maya live in an ancient cultural region known as Mesoamerica. A cultural region is an area with a distinct culture or set of similar cultures. Mesoamerica stretches from central Mexico to the Isthmus of Panama, a **region** that includes hot jungle **lowlands**, dry **plateaus**, and cool mountain highlands.

**The Maya Created an Advanced Civilization** About 2,000 years ago, the Maya created a remarkable civilization in Mesoamerica. They built great stone cities with towering pyramids, some of which stand today. They developed a writing system and created the first books ever made in the Western Hemisphere. They also developed an advanced system of mathematics and combined their knowledge of math and astronomy to create one of the world's most accurate calendars.

Around 900 C.E., Mayan civilization collapsed. Scholars believe that **drought**, warfare, and other problems led to a sharp decline in population, and the Maya abandoned their cities. Then, in the 1500s, Spanish soldiers arrived and took over the region, which was later divided among several countries.

**Geography Isolates the Maya from Modern Life** Today there are around 6 million Maya. Some still live in the lowlands, especially Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula, but most live in the highlands of Guatemala and the Mexican state of Chiapas.

The Maya highlands are a rugged **landscape** of steep mountains and deep valleys. Heavy clouds often hang over the mountains, and moisture from the clouds helps produce dense **cloud forests**. A line of great **volcanoes** rises up along the southern edge of the highlands. These volcanoes have erupted many times in the past, covering the land with **lava** and ash. Several of these volcanoes are still active.

Volcanic ash has enriched the soil in much of the highland region. As a result, the land is generally fertile and good for farming. Most Maya practice **subsistence farming**, which means they farm mainly to provide food for themselves and their families. In general, they sell very little of the food they grow.

The mountain geography of the highlands has helped isolate the Maya from the rest of the world. Few roads cross the highlands, and many Maya live in remote areas miles from the nearest town. This isolation has limited contact between the Maya and others, but it has also helped the Maya survive as a people and preserve their culture.

**One People Speaking Many Languages** Not only has the mountain geography separated the Maya from the outside world. It has also separated different Mayan groups from one another. Over time, the Maya in different areas have developed their own customs and languages. More than two dozen distinct Mayan groups now live scattered across Mesoamerica. Each speaks its own language and has its own special form of dress.

Despite these differences, the Maya are still a single **ethnic group**, meaning they share common physical features and a cultural identity. They also share the challenge of making **adaptations** to modern life. An adaptation is a change in a way of life to suit new conditions. As the story in the introduction shows, old and new are blending in the Mayan world.

### Mayan Languages



### A Mixture of Languages

There are as many as 31 Mayan languages. Each is spoken in a particular part of the Mayan region. Among the most widely spoken highland languages are Quiché, Cakchiquel, Tzotzil, and Tzeltal. Many Maya also speak Spanish.



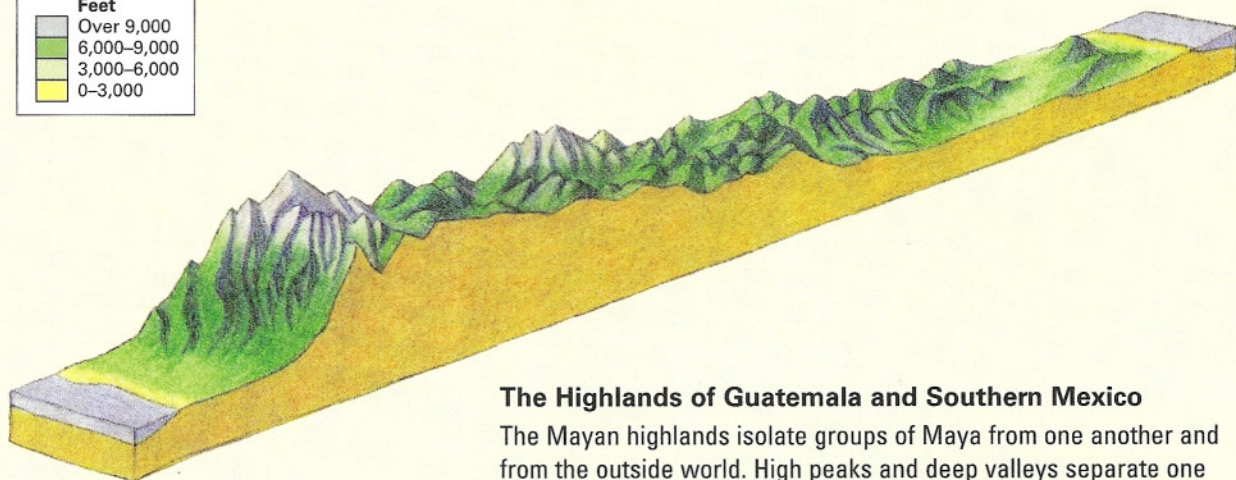
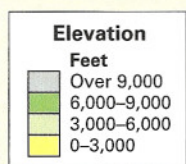
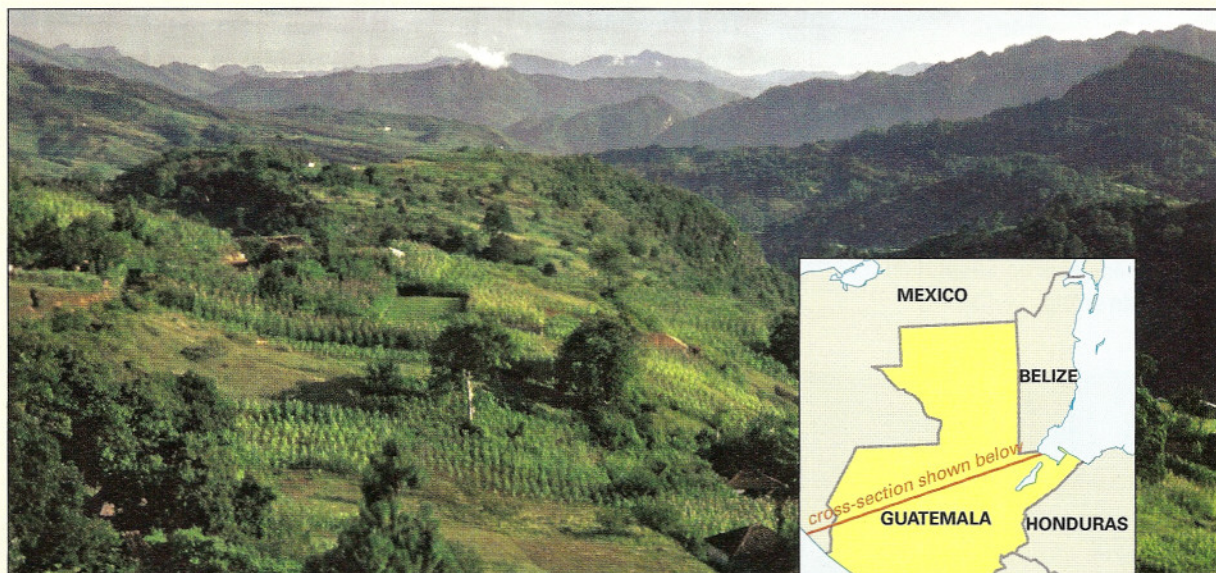
## ► Geoterms

**adaptation** a change in a way of life to suit new conditions

**indigenous peoples** natives of an area who have been conquered or dominated by others who came later. Native American tribes, such as the Cherokee and Navaho, are indigenous peoples.

**subsistence farming** farming carried out mainly to provide food for farm families, with little surplus for sale to others

**traditional culture** customs and ways of life handed down from ancestors



### The Highlands of Guatemala and Southern Mexico

The Mayan highlands isolate groups of Maya from one another and from the outside world. High peaks and deep valleys separate one mountain range from another. Some Mayan villages are perched on high mountain ridges. Many can be reached only on narrow paths.



### 10.3 A Strong Sense of Community

Several Mayan judges are seated at a table. Two men are standing before them. One man claims that the other killed and ate one of his chickens. The accused says the chicken entered his yard and ate his chicken feed. Finally, one of the judges speaks up. In the Quiché language, he says, “You will pay the man for his chicken by working for three days in his fields.”

This story is an example of Mayan community justice. As you will see, this justice system is one part of the Maya’s deep attachment to their local villages and their strong traditions of self-rule. These traditions are part of what enables the Maya to preserve their way of life while adapting to the influences of the modern world.

**Local Government** The highland Maya are citizens of either Mexico or Guatemala. Over time, their local communities have adapted to the demands of national life. For example, most highland towns have a mayor who governs the community according to national laws.

The Maya also have their own traditional forms of government. Many towns have a municipal council that follows Mayan customs. The council members are respected members of the community and make decisions based on traditional values.

Mayan towns also have religious brotherhoods. In Guatemala, the brotherhoods are called *cofradías*. In Chiapas, they are called *cargos*. These brotherhoods are responsible for guarding the images of Catholic saints and for organizing ceremonies and festivals. The heads of these brotherhoods are also important community leaders.

#### A Mayan Community

Mayan villages are a mix of old and new. The ancestral shrine (on the left) and sacred tree in this illustration are traditional. The tree connects heaven and earth in the ancient Mayan religion. The plaza, with its Spanish colonial buildings, is an adaptation to the outside world.





**Meeting Community Challenges** The Maya work hard to keep their communities together. One way they do this is through their justice system. Mayan judges rarely send offenders to jail, which would take those offenders away from their families and hurt the community. Instead offenders usually pay for crimes through labor or community service, a traditional form of punishment known as *restitution*. At the same time, the Maya have adapted to national laws. For serious crimes such as murder, Mayan judges turn offenders over to the national courts.

In spite of their strong tradition of community problem solving, some Maya face challenges that prompt them to leave the community. Poverty and lack of jobs, schools, and good health care have caused some Maya to move to cities to find work or to get an education.

## 10.4 The Traditional Home and Family

Home and family are the foundation of Mayan life. Most Mayan families live in simple one-room dwellings constructed of wood or mud brick called **adobe**. But the Maya don't see a house as just an arrangement of building materials. Rather, they envision their dwelling as a living thing, with a soul like a person. In fact, the Maya believe that everything on Earth is alive. Before they build a house, they hold a ceremony to ask Earth's permission.

**The Old and New at Home** A traditional Mayan house is simple on the inside. The floors are made of packed earth, and there is little furniture. A family might own only hammocks for sleeping and a small wooden table and chairs. A cook fire typically sits in the middle of the floor, with a few clay pots by the side. Or there might be a small cook-house next door to the main house. There is also a family altar for religious worship.

Like other aspects of Mayan life, the traditional Mayan home is changing. Some houses in larger towns now have electricity and running water, and some have a radio or a television. Metal and plastic cooking utensils are now common, and some homes even have gas stoves, blenders, and other appliances.

**Men's and Women's Roles** There is still a very clear division of labor between men and women in most Mayan communities. The men work in the fields, planting, weeding, and harvesting the crops, as well as doing occasional hunting. The women work mostly at home, caring for the children and weaving clothes for the family.

Women also cook the meals, consisting mainly of beans and tortillas, which most women make the traditional way. They pat the corn dough out by hand and fry it on a griddle. Some women, however, use a tortilla press made of metal.

Most children go to school, though many quit at an early age to help out at home. Parents teach their children traditional skills such as farming and weaving, as well as the old customs that children are expected to pass on to their own children. Still, many young Maya also adopt new ways. They may listen to popular music and wear jeans, T-shirts, and sneakers instead of traditional Mayan clothing.



### Weaving on a Belt Loom

This woman is weaving on a traditional belt loom. The loom is made of two wooden rods linked together with threads. One end is attached to a post or a tree. The other is attached to the weaver's belt. In the past, each village had its own designs. Today villages borrow designs from each other.



## 10.5 Changing Ways of Work

Two farmers are heading to work in a highland Maya village, but they are heading in different directions. One is walking to his field on the slopes above town, where he will work to provide food for his family as his ancestors have done for hundreds of years. The other is catching a bus for the lowlands. This farmer works for cash on a modern **plantation**. While farming has always been central to the Mayan way of life, changing circumstances and new agricultural methods have altered the way farmers work.

**Traditional Farming** Most Maya are subsistence farmers, growing corn, beans, squash, and other vegetables on small plots called *milpas*. Each year these farmers hope to gather enough food at harvesttime to feed their families for the next year. The majority of what they harvest will be corn, the Maya's most important crop. In fact, corn is considered sacred to the Maya, who call it the "giver of life."

Traditionally, Mayan farmers cleared their land using the **slash-and-burn method**. They cut down the forest and burned the cut trees and shrubs after they dried out. Then, using simple wooden tools, the farmers dug the ash into the ground to fertilize the soil. Some also mixed in manure and other natural fertilizers to help their crops grow.

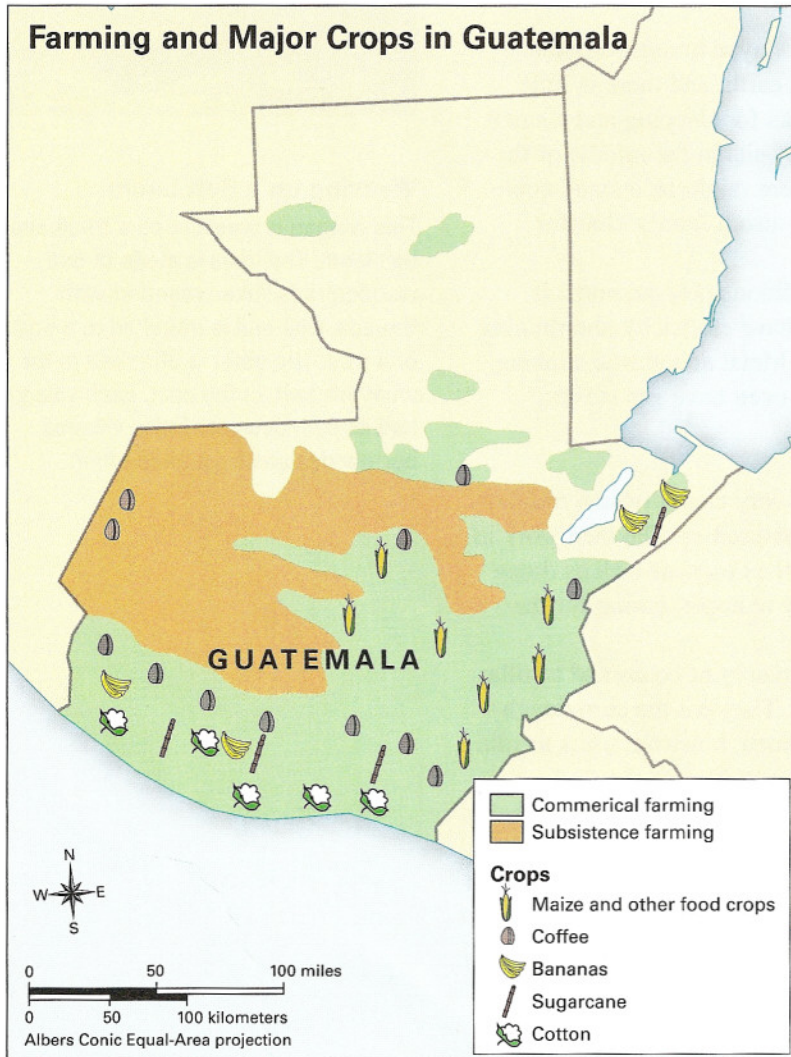
Some Maya still follow traditional farming methods, but in many parts of the highlands, much of the land has already been cleared. As a result, slash-and-burn agriculture is no longer as common as it once was among Mayan farmers. Many farmers have adapted by using chemical fertilizers to enrich the soil. Some Mayan farmers have developed new methods for growing crops in the shade of their own orchards.

**Working for Wages** Mayan farmers have adapted in other ways. Many spend part of the year working for wages on commercial farms, which now account for most of the land in Guatemala. This concentration of land on large farms dates back to when the Spanish colonized and took over the best land. Today about 2 percent of the population still owns 70 percent of the land. Most large land-owners raise sugar cane, coffee, cotton, and other crops for export.

Large plantations depend on Mayan farmers who travel to the lowlands to work. These **migrant workers** spend weeks or even months away from their families. When they return, they usually have some money saved. But plantation wages are low, and many farm families still struggle to make a living.

### Land Use in Guatemala

This map shows a mix of old and new in farming. Subsistence farming takes place mainly in the highlands, where most Maya live. Commercial farming takes place at lower elevations. Many Maya work on lowland plantations as migrant workers.







## 10.6 Making the Most of Market Day

It's market day in Chichicastenango, Guatemala. At 7:00 A.M. a chilly mist still hangs over the town, but already the plaza is jammed with people. Most are Maya from the surrounding countryside. They have come to buy and sell food, tools, and other goods. There are also many tourists from around the world who have come to experience one of the most famous markets in the Mayan region.

Market day is an important tradition in the Mayan highlands. Markets still offer a strong flavor of Mayan culture. They also reflect many changes taking place in the Mayan world.

**Trading Goods and Services** Mayan markets are held one or two days a week, with Sunday often the most popular choice for market day. A Mayan market typically spreads out from the central plaza into the surrounding streets. Stalls selling the same type of goods are usually grouped together; fruits and vegetables are found in one area, household goods in another, and so on. Markets also have food stalls to feed hungry shoppers. Merchants in some stalls offer such services as shoe repair, portrait photography, and money lending.

**The Growing Tourist Trade** Highland markets have changed as tourists have come to the highlands to see historic Mayan sites. In Chichicastenango, a large part of the market is devoted to tourist items. Some popular items are traditional Mayan products, like weavings and wood carvings. Other items, such as purses and baseball caps, are designed just for tourists.

The way merchants conduct trade in Mayan markets has also changed as a result of tourism. Many years ago, **barter** was a common way to obtain goods in these markets. For example, a Maya might exchange a basket of vegetables for a certain amount of salt or sugar. With so many outsiders visiting the markets, merchants today trade mostly with money.

Other recent changes in the Mayan marketplace also reflect modern influences. For instance, at one time merchants did most market trading in Mayan languages. Now that more people from outside the local community shop at the markets, Spanish has become the common tongue. In addition, certain goods in highland markets, such as radios and plastic toys, show adaptations to modern life.

### Mayan Markets and Tourism

Mayan markets are colorful affairs. While many tourists come to Guatemala to see Mayan ruins, they also visit highland markets. Here they find traditional crafts, some of which are made especially for tourists.



## 10.7 Keeping Mayan Traditions Alive

On a hillside above Chichicastenango sits the Mayan shrine of Pascual Abaj. The Quiché Maya come to this shrine to worship their ancient gods, kneeling before a small, carved altar and burning candles and incense. They ask the gods to bring a good harvest and to cure the sick. Five hundred years after the Spanish conquest, the Maya still keep their ancient traditions alive.

**Religion and Celebrations** The ancient Maya worshiped many gods. These gods represented elements of the natural world, such as the sun, rain, and lightning. For the Maya, everything in the world, even rocks and water, had a spirit.

When the Spanish arrived in the 1500s, they sought to convert the Maya to Christianity. Spain was a Catholic country, and over time most Maya also became Catholics. But they also kept their ancient beliefs. In fact, they blended their old beliefs with Catholicism to form a new kind of religion.

The Maya saw little conflict between their old and their new beliefs. They felt that they could worship Catholic saints and still remain faithful to their own gods. Mayan representations of Catholic saints even took on features of the Mayan gods.

Today religious festivals throughout the Mayan highlands express this blended religion. Easter week and Christmas are major holidays, celebrated by attending Catholic mass and carrying images of the saints through the streets. The Maya also celebrate these occasions in Mayan fashion. They listen to traditional music played on Mayan instruments and watch traditional dances performed by masked dancers in Mayan costumes. They also pray to Mayan gods in **rituals** that date back thousands of years.

At festivals, the Maya dress in their finest traditional clothes. Women wear beautiful woven blouses, or *huipiles*, and colorful skirts, belts, and headdresses. Even men who usually wear modern clothing may dress in Mayan style for festivals. The designs in traditional clothing reflect the history and myths of the Mayan people, providing a living link to the Mayan past.

### Marimba Players

Music plays a key role in Mayan celebrations. Musicians play traditional instruments such as drums, flutes, and the marimba. A marimba is a type of xylophone.







### Mayan Healer

Mayan healers are experts in herbal medicine. They know how to use plants and other natural remedies to cure disease. They preserve other traditions, too, such as sacred rituals and the ancient calendar. But they are also familiar with modern medicine. They will send patients to modern doctors when necessary.

**Traditional Medicine** The Maya have also preserved their traditional medicine. They may go to modern doctors for major problems, but many still prefer to visit traditional healers.

Mayan healers have great knowledge of their natural environment, and they use medicinal plants to help cure disease. They know how to fix broken bones and heal snakebites. But Mayan healers don't treat only physical illness. The Maya believe that illness has both physical and spiritual causes. For this reason, healers also use rituals to treat the soul and mend the spirit.

The most skilled Mayan healers are also the wise men of their community. They may also become "daykeepers"—men who preserve knowledge of the ancient Mayan calendar, which was central to Mayan religion. Daykeepers perform rituals on key days to maintain harmony among people, the gods, and the natural world.

## 10.8 Beginning to Think Globally

In this chapter, you read about Mayan culture in the highlands of Guatemala and southern Mexico. You learned that the Maya have kept alive many of their ancient customs and beliefs while at the same time adapting to the modern world.

Other indigenous peoples have also tried to preserve their cultures while adapting to modern life. The Navajo people of the American Southwest are one such group. The Navajo still practice their traditional crafts and observe their ancient religious customs. At the same time, they drive cars, attend colleges all around the United States, and leave home to find work.

Indigenous peoples live all around the globe. In the next section, you will find out more about how they preserve their culture and yet adapt to the modern world.



## 10.9 Global Connections

The map shows some indigenous groups around the world. There are at least 250 million indigenous peoples spread across 70 countries. Note that some groups live in areas that span national borders. Why might this be?

### What do indigenous peoples gain by adapting to modern life?

The graphs below the map show that indigenous peoples are generally poorer than other people in their countries. They may benefit from adopting the language and customs of the majority population in order to give them access to better jobs, health care, and schools.

**What is most often lost when indigenous peoples adapt to modern life?** Indigenous peoples often lose their language, history, and customs when they join the dominant culture. Over time, children stop being taught about the things that make their culture special. As a result, they may lose some of their sense of identity as adults. When certain cultures are lost, the world as a whole loses some of its cultural **diversity**. Notice the number of languages listed in the table below the map. As indigenous people integrate into the dominant culture, many of those languages will disappear.

**Can indigenous peoples preserve their traditional culture while adapting to modern life?** Many are trying to do just that. The Maori of New Zealand, for example, turned to modern courts of law to win back their traditional lands and fishing areas. The Inuit of Canada now use rifles and snowmobiles for their traditional hunting activities. Like other indigenous peoples around the world, they are using new tools to preserve ancient ways.

## Indigenous Populations Around the World

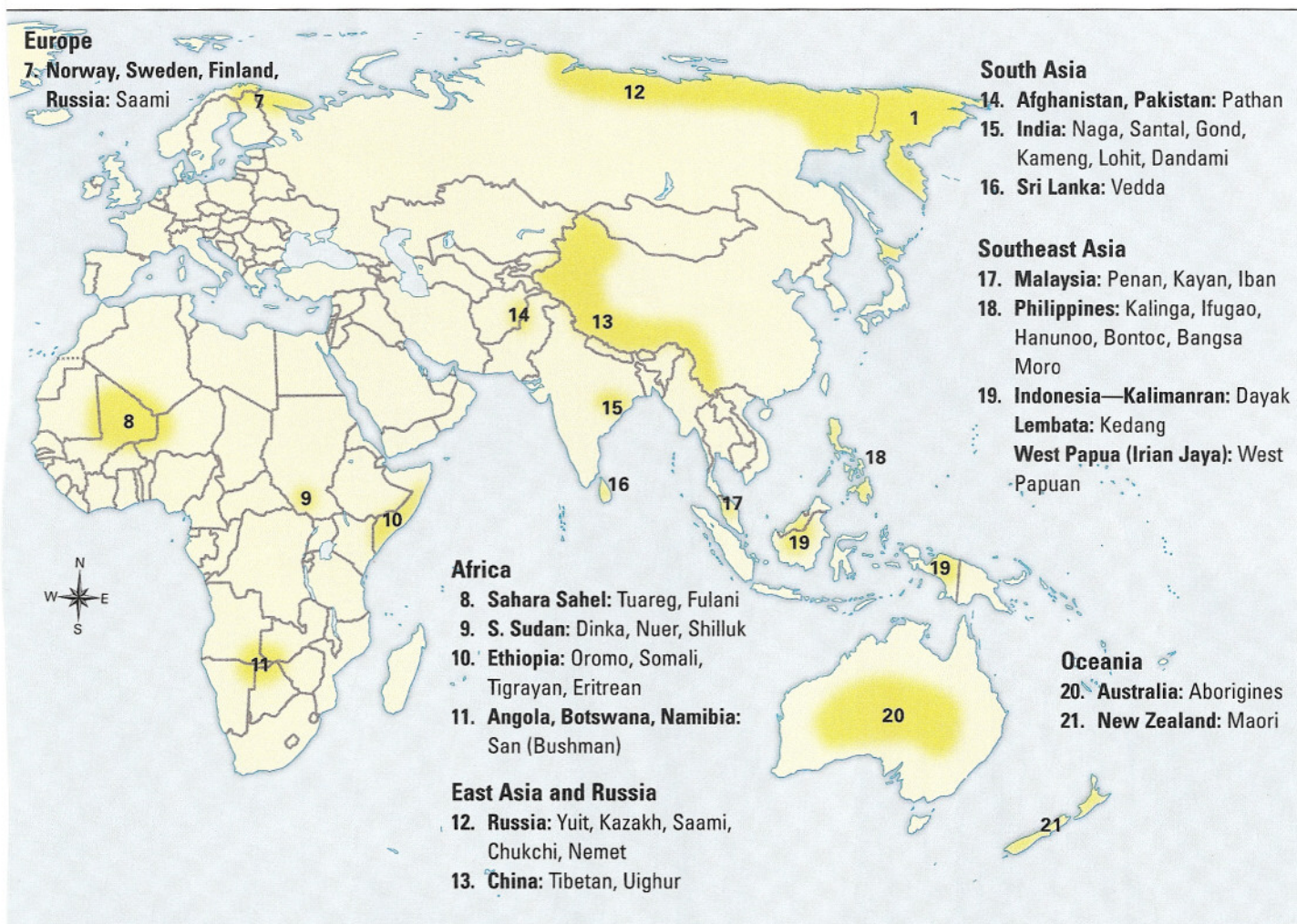


## Languages in Active Use

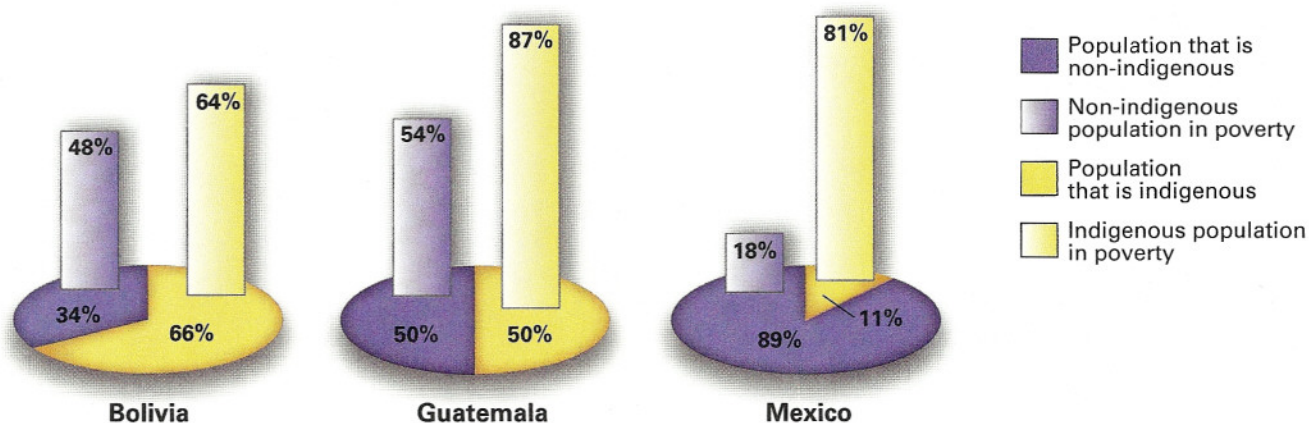
Country	Number of Languages
Indonesia	694
Nigeria	455
India	337
Cameroon	247
Australia	226
Mexico	188
United States	165
Brazil	150
Malaysia	128
Russia	90

Source: *Your Dictionary.com*, "Endangered Language Repository: Living Languages by Country," [www.yourdictionary.com](http://www.yourdictionary.com).





### Poverty Among Indigenous and Non-indigenous Populations in Latin America



Sources: *Indigenous People and Poverty in Latin America*, by George Psacharopoulos and Harry A. Patrinos, World Bank Group. *The Gaia Atlas of First Peoples*, by Julian Burger, London: Gaia Books, 1990.