

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 are Mayan Indians. The woman next to you is wearing a colorful headdress and a beautiful woven blouse called a *huipil*. She feeds her children corn tortillas and talks to them in a strange language. You feel like you're in another world. 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 are blending in the Mayan world. The Maya 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 others who came later. Indigenous peoples often try to preserve their **traditional culture**, or the customs and ways of life handed down from their ancestors.

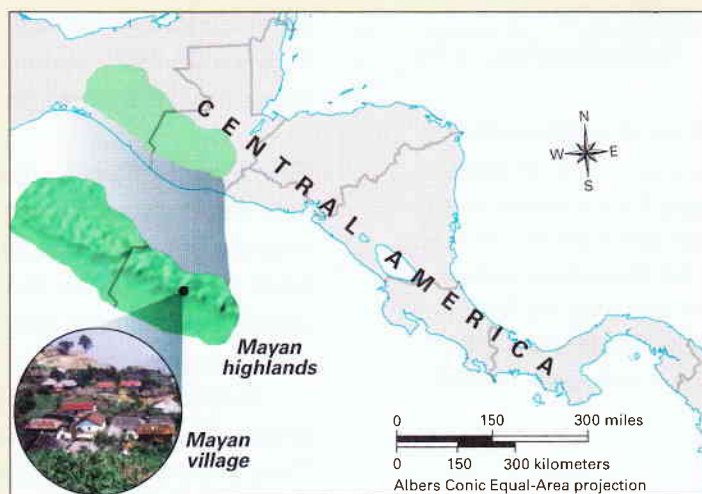
The Maya still maintain much of their traditional culture. But they have also changed along with the world around them. In this chapter, you will learn how the Maya have both preserved their traditions and adapted to, or changed with, with modern life.

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. This **region** 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. They created a writing system. They also developed an accurate calendar system.

Around 900 C.E., the Mayan civilization collapsed. **Drought**, warfare, and other problems led the Maya to abandon their cities. In the 1500s, Spanish soldiers arrived and conquered the Mayan region. Later the Mayan cultural region was divided among several countries.

Mayan Languages



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 Mayan highlands are a rugged **landscape** of steep mountains and deep valleys. Heavy clouds often hang over the mountains. 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**. That is, 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. Few roads cross the highlands. Many Maya live in remote areas miles from the nearest town. This isolation has limited contact between the Maya and the rest of the world. But it has also helped the Maya survive as a people and preserve their culture.

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.

One People Speaking Many Languages Mountains are not the only factor separating one Mayan group from another. Over time, the Maya in different areas developed their own customs and languages. More than two dozen Mayan groups now live scattered across Mesoamerica. Each group speaks its own language. Each also has its own special form of dress.

Despite these differences, the Maya are still a single **ethnic group**. 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.

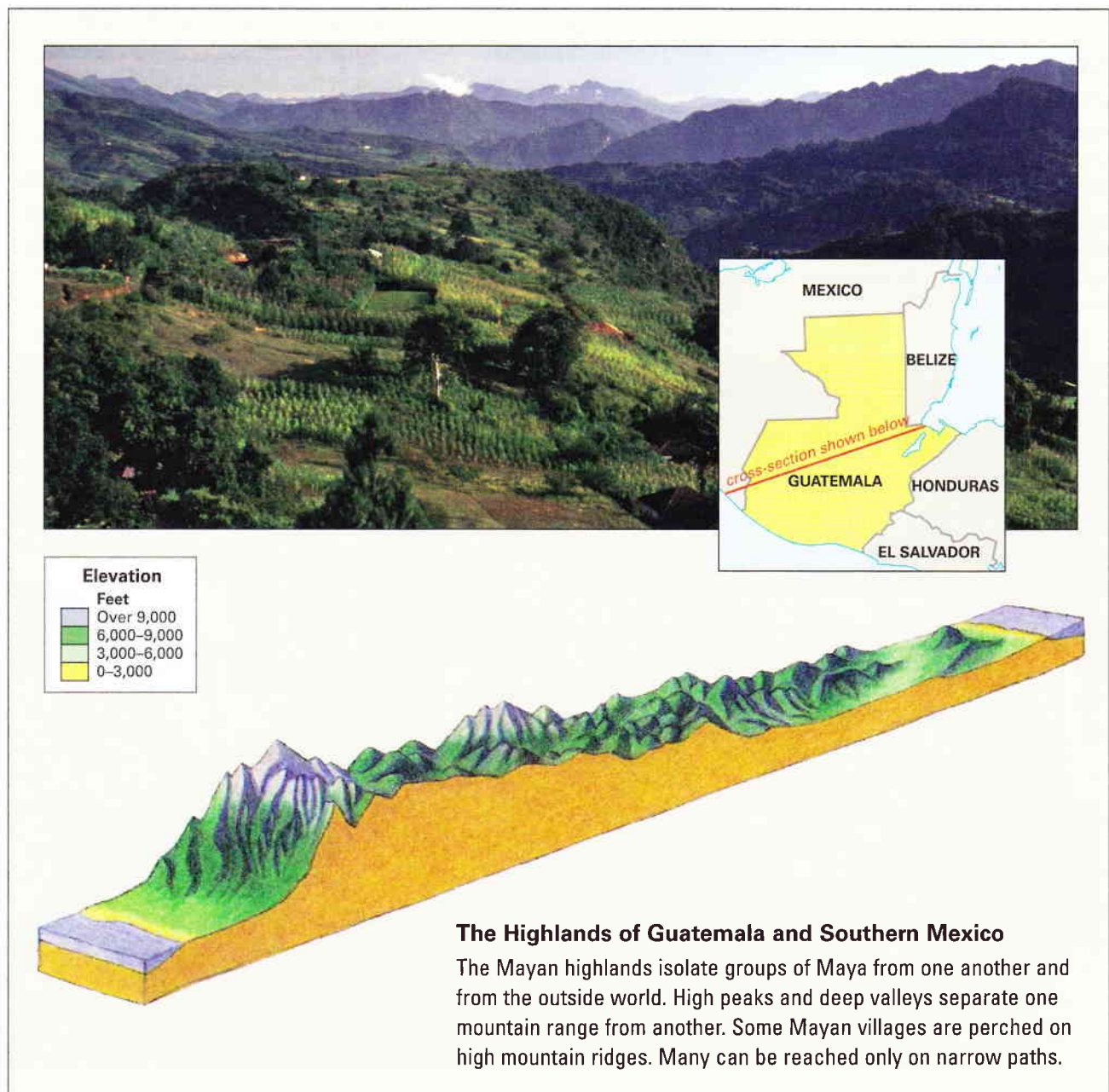
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adaptation a change in a way of life to suit new conditions

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



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 other 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 is an example of Mayan community justice. The Maya are deeply attached to their local villages. They try to preserve their community’s way of life while adapting to the modern world.

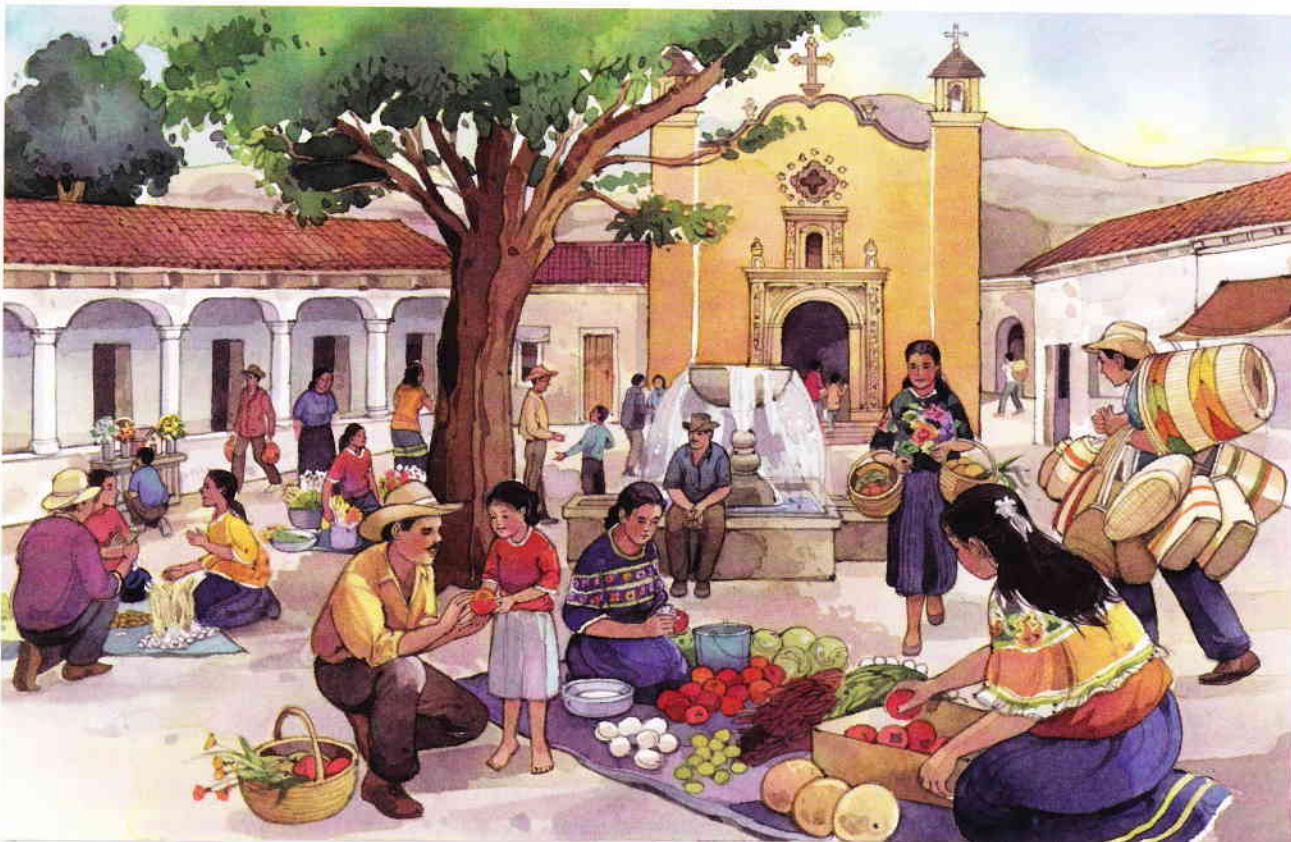
Local Government The highland Maya are citizens of either Mexico or Guatemala. Over time, their communities have adapted to the demands of national life. For example, most highland towns have a mayor. He governs the community according to national laws.

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. They 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*. They guard the images of Catholic saints. They organize 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. This would take them away from their families and hurt the community. Instead, offenders usually pay for crimes through labor or community service. This traditional form of punishment is called *restitution*. But the Maya have also adapted to national laws. For serious crimes, such as murder, they turn offenders over to the national courts.

Mayan communities face other challenges. Most lack jobs, schools, and good health care. Some Maya adapt by leaving their villages. They 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 made of wood or mud brick called **adobe**. But the Maya don't see a house as just an arrangement of building materials. They see it as a living thing, with a soul like a person. In fact, they believe that everything on Earth is alive. Before they build a house, they hold a ceremony to ask the 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. There is little furniture. A family might own hammocks for sleeping. They also might have 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 cookhouse next door. There is also a family altar for religious worship.

The traditional Mayan home is also changing. Some houses in larger towns have electricity and running water. Some have a radio or a television. Metal and plastic cooking utensils are now common. 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 in most Mayan communities. The men work in the fields and sometimes hunt. They plant, weed, and harvest the crops. The women work at home. They care for the children and weave clothes for the family.

Women also cook the meals, which consist mainly of beans and tortillas. Most women make tortillas the old 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. They learn traditional skills such as farming and weaving from their parents. They also learn the old customs that they are expected to pass on to their children. 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 off to work in a highland Maya village. Farming is important to the Maya. It connects them to the land they depend on to survive. But the work of these two farmers is very different. One is walking to his field on the slopes above town. The other is catching a bus for the lowlands. The first farmer will work to provide food for his family, as the Maya have done for hundreds of years. The second will work for cash on a large, modern **plantation**.

Traditional Farming Most Maya are subsistence farmers. They grow corn, beans, squash, and other vegetables on small plots called *milpas*. Corn is their most important crop. In fact, corn is sacred to the Maya. It is the “giver of life.” With luck, at harvest time Mayan farmers gather enough food to feed their families for the year.

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

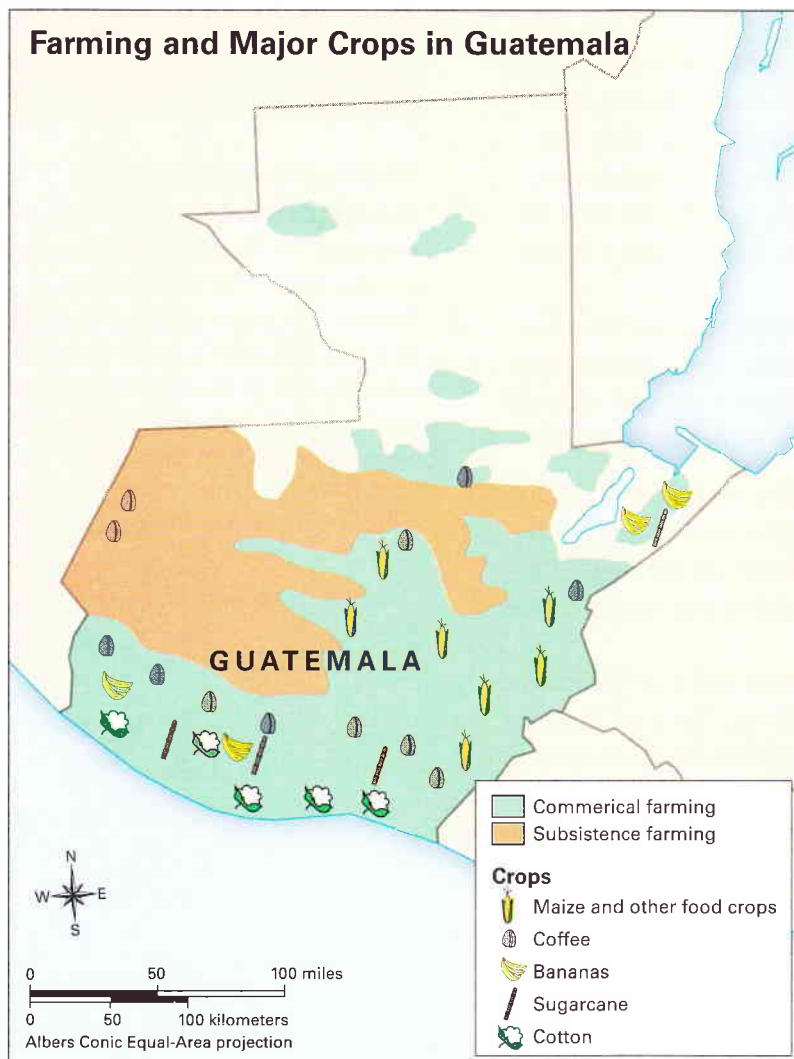
Some Maya still follow traditional farming methods. But in many parts of the highlands, much of the land has already been cleared. As a result, slash-and-burn agriculture is no longer as common as it once was among Mayan farmers. Many farmers have adapted by using more modern farm tools, such as axes with steel blades, as well as chemical fertilizers to enrich the soil.

Working for Wages Mayan farmers have adapted in other ways. Many spend part of the year working for wages on commercial farms. When the Spanish colonized Guatemala, they took over most of the best land. Little has changed since then. About 2 percent of the population still owns 70 percent of the land. Most of these landowners raise sugar cane, coffee, cotton, and other crops for export.

Mayan farmers travel to the lowlands to work on these plantations. 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. 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. They have come to see one of the most famous markets in the Mayan world.

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. Sunday is a popular choice for market day.

A Mayan market typically spreads out from the central plaza into 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. Markets also have food stalls to feed hungry shoppers. They may offer other services too, such 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 are traditional Mayan products, like weavings and wood carvings. Other items, such as purses and baseball caps, are designed and made just for tourists.

Other changes in the market also show adaptations to the modern world. Many years ago, **barter**, or trade, was a common way to obtain goods in Mayan markets. For example, a Maya might exchange a basket of vegetables for a certain amount of salt or sugar. Now most trading is done with money.

There are other changes as well. For instance, once most market trading was done in Mayan languages. Now Spanish is the common tongue. In addition, many goods in highland markets, from radios to 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 here to worship their ancient gods. They kneel before a small, carved altar and burn candles and incense. They ask the gods to bring a good harvest and cure the sick. Five hundred years after the Spanish conquest, the Maya still practice their traditional beliefs.

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 began to convert the Maya to Christianity. Spain was a Catholic country, and over time most Maya 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 new beliefs. They could worship Catholic saints and still remain faithful to their own gods. Many saints even took on features of the Mayan gods.

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

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.

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





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. They use medicinal plants to cure disease. They know how to fix broken bones and heal snakebites. But they 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." These are men who preserve knowledge of the ancient Mayan calendar. They 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 many of their traditional customs and beliefs. Yet they have also adapted to the modern world.

Other indigenous groups have also tried to preserve their culture while adapting to modern life. The Navajo people of the American Southwest are one example. The Navajo still practice their traditional crafts and their old religion. But they also drive cars, go to college, 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 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. They may also gain 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 modern society. They forget the things that make their culture special. As a result, they may lose their sense of identity. At the same time, the world loses some of its cultural **diversity**. Notice the number of languages in the chart below the map. As indigenous people adapt, many of those languages will disappear.

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

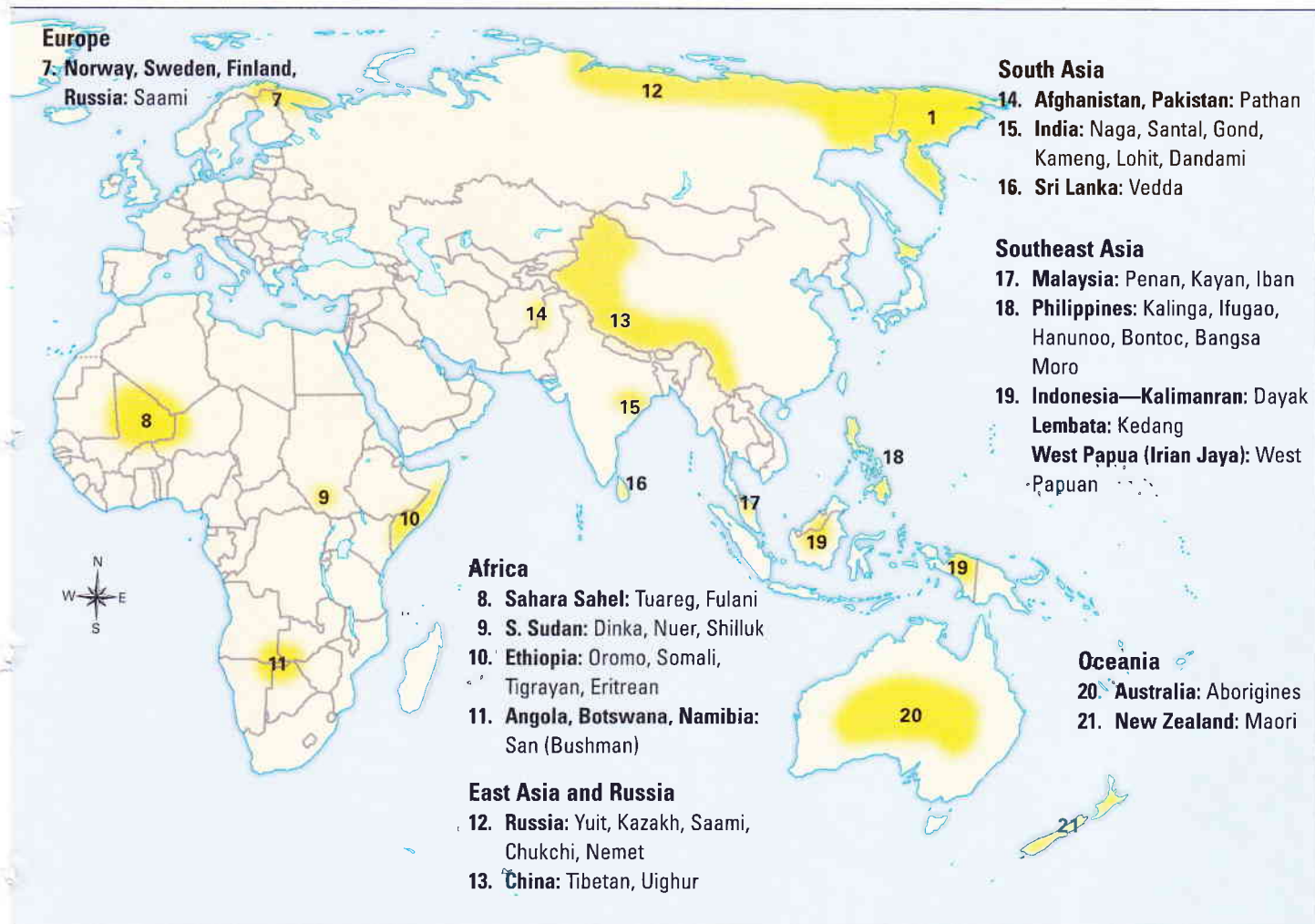
Indigenous Populations Around the World



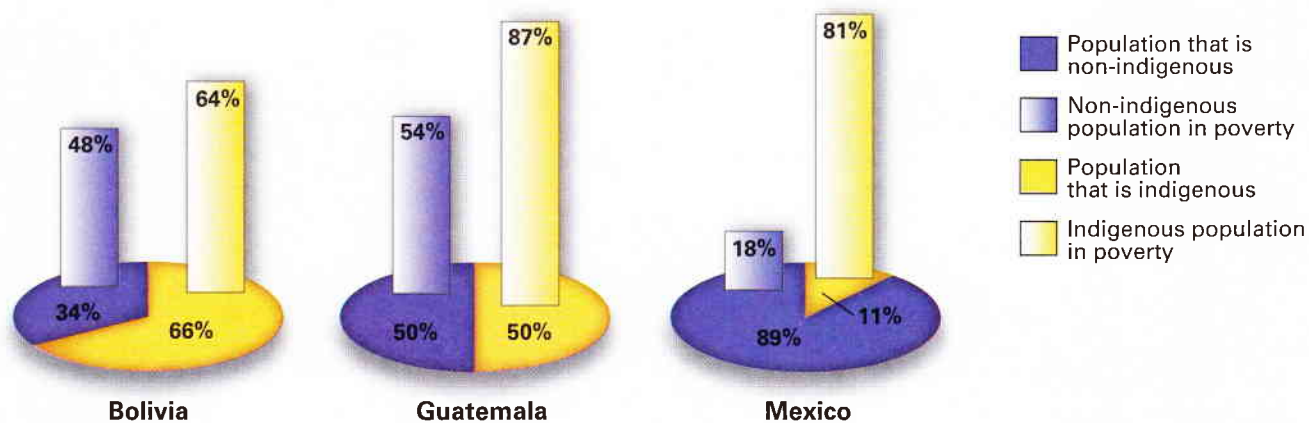
Languages in Active Use

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.



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.