

Will Indigenous Cultures Survive?

- 1 In Western Mongolia, a **Kazakh** girl offers food to a baby eagle. She wants the eagle to trust her. Trust is the first step in many years of training the eagle, so that later on the eagle will hunt with her. In **Oaxaca**, Mexico, a **Mazatec** child whistles¹ as he nears his cousin's house to ask if he wants to come out and play. In Australia, a young **Aborigine** boy learns to rub a rock in his armpit² and throw it in the water to tell the water spirits that he is there. These stories come from three different **endangered** indigenous cultures.
- 2 About 370 million people, or almost 5 percent of the world's population, belong to indigenous cultures. These cultures have deep **roots** in their histories, languages, and the places they live. Their ways of life go back thousands of years. Over those years, they have made many small changes to their culture in order to **survive**. For example, they find new hunting grounds when the animal populations move or they use new tools that make work a little easier. But today changes are so large and they are happening so fast that many indigenous cultures can no longer **adapt** to them. These cultures are in danger of disappearing forever.
- 3 The most difficult changes to adapt to are usually changes to a group's land. For example, in Ecuador, the **Cofan** homeland is full of chemicals from oil companies. The Cofan can no longer drink the water or grow food there. In India, over 250,000 indigenous people had to leave their homes in the **Narmada River** valley because the government built a dam³ on the river, and now their villages are under water.
- 4 What happens to the people from these cultures? Where do they go? Usually they have to move away from the lands of their **ancestors**. Often they move to the poor areas outside of large cities. They have to learn a new way of living and thinking. Their children will know little of the language and culture they came from.
- 5 There are 5,000 indigenous cultures with their own **unique** languages alive today. Some scientists predict that by 2100, 50 percent of these will disappear. When a language disappears, the voice of a culture disappears. There are many indigenous people who are working hard to stop this from happening to their culture. They know it is important to keep their languages and their voices. They are fighting against governments who want them to become part of the modern world. They are fighting against oil and logging companies⁴ who want their land.
- 6 The **Ariaal**, an indigenous **nomadic** group in Kenya, have been fighting for years. So far, their culture is surviving. The Ariaal understand that some changes may help them, but other changes may **destroy** their way of life. The Ariaal are trying to stop the things that will hurt their culture and accept the helpful parts of the modern world. For example, the Kenyan government wants the Ariaal to move to villages. The government wants the Ariaal and other indigenous people to become more modern. The Ariaal know that if they move to villages, their nomadic way of life will disappear. So about half of the Ariaal refuse to let go of their nomadic lives and move to villages. But many are sending their children to Kenyan schools or using health clinics. They decided that schools and clinics are modern things that can help their culture survive, but villages are not.
- 7 Indigenous cultures must adapt to survive. Most *want* to adapt. But in order to adapt, the world's people, governments, and businesses must respect and support them. The big questions are: Will the world let them adapt in ways that *they* decide? Or will these cultures simply have to say goodbye to their ways of life because the changes are too big and too fast?
- 1 **whistle**: to make a high or musical sound by blowing air out through your lips
2 **armpit**: the part of the body under the arm where the arm joins the body
3 **dam**: a wall built across a river to make a lake and produce electricity
4 **logging companies**: companies that cut down trees to make wood and paper