

## **Cultural Diversity: Another Endangered Resource**

Eighty-six-year-old Chief Tulalang Maway sat below cloud-covered Mount Apo in the Philippines. "Our Christian brothers are enjoying life here on the plains," he declared, pointing away from the mountain to the lands his tribe, the Lumad people, long ago surrendered to outsiders. Then, turning to the sacred mountain, he continued, "We only ask them to leave us our last sanctuary" (quoted in Durning, 1993:80).

Based on the number of languages anthropologists have identified, the 5.5 billion people on earth display almost six thousand distinctive cultures. Of these, between four and five thousand are found in small and localized societies. But these indigenous peoples are everywhere facing the same problem as the Lumad. Their land and way of life are in danger of disappearing.

Several hundred million men and women (perhaps 10 percent of humanity) think of themselves as indigenous people. But few remain culturally pristine, that is, free from the influence of outsiders. Even a decade ago, some 100 million isolated hunters and gatherers thrived across the Americas, Africa, and Asia. Now, as the beginning of the next century approaches, the last of the indigenous peoples untouched by the materialism and high technology of industrial societies may soon disappear.

What is becoming of tribal peoples? Their cultural integrity is being undermined by the emergence of a global economy and worldwide system of mass media and travel. As outsiders encroach, some indigenous people fall victim to foreign diseases. Others are driven from traditional lands by outside economic interests and subjected to forced acculturation. Brazil's Yanomamö, described in Chapter 2 ("Culture"), continue to fend off mining companies, but the Gogol of New Guinea are under assault by timber interests, and outsider teachers are encouraging the East African Masai and Borneo's Dayaks to wear shirts and trousers, to learn English or another foreign language, and to look for nine-to-five jobs.

Willingly or not, most tribal people are giving up their traditional ways in favour of what the proliferating mass media trumpet as a better way of life. But is aspiring to a life based on automobiles, refrigerators, and televisions necessarily "better"? To many of the poor people of the world, Western materialism is synonymous with prosperity. To critics of this process, however, "McCulture" amounts to the loss of the invaluable human texture of this planet.

But more than our sense of beauty is involved. Environmentalists point out that tribal people have amassed knowledge banks that can never be replaced. They grow and utilize the medicinal powers of hundreds of species of plants unknown to Westerners. Such so-called primitive people have discovered natural ways to fertilize their crops, to control pests, and to nurture animal life. In many cases, their diets are more healthful than that of the typical North American. Perhaps most important, most tribal people of the world have a remarkable record of living in tune with the natural environment rather than overpowering nature. Perhaps, then, we should be studying, rather than helping to eradicate, the tribal cultures that remain.

### **Sources**

Durning (1993) and Myers (1984c) as cited in the text's bibliography.