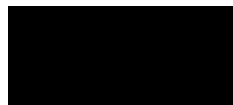


# *Making the Invisible Visible*

Valentina



*My name is Valentina. I was born and grew up in China with my three sisters, my American father and Argentine mother. Living in a country where the culture is totally different from what your parents are used to, where you look like a foreigner wherever you go even if you speak the language, where you are just different because of where you were born and which family you were born into, gives you a different perspective on life. I used to wonder what it would be like to live in a country where I looked like the people who surrounded me, where the traditions I had at home would be the same as my friends', and where I would "feel" like I really belonged. I later figured out that there was no real answer to that.*

*Growing up in a household where we celebrated the holidays of three different cultures made it easy for me to adapt and appreciate other people's traditions. I realized that I didn't have to belong to one specific part of the world, but I could instead adapt to multiple cultures. I have realized that there is beauty in traditions and cultures that may seem different and weird to some, but are symbols of life and continuity to others. Life is diverse. One should appreciate being unique and having traditions and a language that may or may not be the same as others. I feel lucky to be connected to the three cultures and lifestyles that I grew up around.*

*Having this background, I developed an interest in people (species) who have become endangered. According to Dictionary.com, an Endangered Species is defined as: "A species at risk of extinction because of human activity, changes in climate, changes in predator-prey ratios, etc..." Endangered people are often indigenous tribes whose people and ethnic traditions are in danger of disappearing. To know that cultures may and have been lost forever is dispiriting. Here, I want to share some brief snapshots of indigenous peoples across continents and show the importance of preserving these cultures.*

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The Natural History Museum in London claims to have fossil evidence of human existence in East Africa between 1.9 million and 2.4 million years ago.<sup>1</sup> There have been records of explorers starting as early as the second century BC, when Zhang Qian traveled from China to Central Asia.<sup>2</sup> It seems fair to say that explorers were the first people to come in contact with culturally different populations as distinct cultures formed within tribes and populations in different geological areas. As specified by geography.about.com, the Age of Exploration was characterized by the Europeans that went in search for land and people through the 15<sup>th</sup> century to the 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup> During that time the Spanish invaded and colonized South America. This is why my mother who is from Argentina speaks Spanish. Even though the Spanish came and took over most of the continent, there were still some cultures that survived on their own. In a continent bordering 400 million people, there are still

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<sup>1</sup> "How long have we been here?" *Natural History Museum*. N.p., n.d. Web. 28 Apr. 2014. <<http://www.nhm.ac.uk/nature-online/life/human-origins/modern-human-evolution/when/index.html>>.

<sup>2</sup> Boulnois, Luce (2005). *Silk Road: Monks, Warriors & Merchants*. Hong Kong: Odyssey Books. p. 66. ISBN 962-217-721-2.

<sup>3</sup> "Begin Exploring the Age of Exploration with This Handy Overview." *About.com Geography*. N.p., n.d. Web. 28 Apr. 2014. <<http://geography.about.com/od/historyofge>

approximately 40,000,000 people in South America and the Caribbean that belong to roughly 600 indigenous groups.<sup>4</sup>

It has gotten to the point where the number of remaining indigenous peoples has dropped down to five percent of the total world population.<sup>5</sup> Some examples of these endangered peoples are the Alaskan Lakotas, the Lancandon of Mexico, the Kuna Indians of Panama, the Tuareg of Mali, the Tibetans, the Wiegers of China, the Ainu of Japan and the Tokelauan of New Zealand. Cultural and lifestyle differences have created linguistic, political and economic barriers between the above-mentioned tribes and modern man. Today the five percent of indigenous people make up fifteen percent of the world's poor.<sup>6</sup> The degree of different points of view the modern day person and indigenous people have is causing a separation that has made it hard to find a healthy bridge between.

There are indigenous groups that are becoming too small that choose to branch out and assimilate into other groups. The Asan people of Siberia were assimilated in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century by the Evenks who spoke the Asan language. The language of Yeniseian, which was spoken by the Asan, now only has 200 speakers left. Why would losing a language be that harmful to the world? Many people believe that if a language is lost, then a culture is lost. The cultures where languages and ideas and thoughts are unique are what give the world interesting sides to it. People speak languages for pride, identity and love for the area they are from. Having a widely known language like English is causing other languages, and even English vernaculars, to become extinct. Tom Colls explains in his article *The Death Of Languages?* "If we are not cautious about the way English is progressing it may eventually kill most other languages."<sup>7</sup> Kids are being threatened to not speak a language, either to fit in to their environment, or to increase chances of having a wider range of job choices. But what if people want to stay in their own city or region where they have to speak that language? A language is kept if people are proud of it.

Words are artistic units that are different in each language, dialect and vernacular. It is important to be able to keep those and have an identity. Colls also states "by the year 2100, 90% of the world's languages would have ceased to exist."<sup>8</sup> There is a reason why people are different, why languages and cultures have a twist on their perspective to a situation and idea. "What we lose is essentially an enormous cultural heritage, the way of expressing the relationship with nature, with the world, between themselves in the framework of their families, their kin people. It's also the way they express their humor, their love, and their life. It is a testimony of human communities which is extremely precious, because it expresses what other communities than ours in the modern industrialized world are able to express," says linguist Claude Hagege.<sup>9</sup> An extreme example is the Awa people in Brazil. The tribe only has approximately 350 people left who speak Awapit, which is now classified as

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<sup>4</sup> "Indigenous Peoples in Latin America - a general overview." *Indigenous peoples in Latin America*. N.p., n.d. Web. 29 Apr. 2014. <<http://www.iwgia.org/regions/latin-america/indigenous-peoples-in-latin-america>>.

<sup>5</sup> Doll, Sharon, and Mary Anne Saul. "Cultural Survival | Partnering with Indigenous Peoples to Defend their Lands, Languages, and Cultures." *Cultural Survival | Partnering with Indigenous Peoples to Defend their Lands, Languages, and Cultures*. N.p., n.d. Web. 23 Apr. 2014. <<http://www.culturalsurvival.org/>>.

<sup>6</sup> Doll, Saul, Cultural Survival Indigenous Peoples General Info.

<sup>7</sup> Colls, Tom. "The Death of Language." *BBC News*. BBC, 19 Oct. 2009. Web. 30 Apr. 2014. <[http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid\\_8311000/8311069.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid_8311000/8311069.stm)>

<sup>8</sup> Colls, First Paragraph

<sup>9</sup> Colls, *What is lost?*

a severely endangered language by UNESCO.<sup>10</sup> The Awas' home in the Amazon is being destroyed for timber, and in many cases many Awa people are losing their lives in the process.<sup>11</sup> If the Awa disappear, their language will go with them. Pete Catches, a medicine man from the Lakota tribe in Alaska, confirms this dilemma. "People who lose their language lose part of themselves, for not just words are lost; so are the stories, songs and ceremonies that once gave young people a shared sense of who they were."<sup>12</sup>

Endangered people often feel invisible, misunderstood and stuck. They are masters of their land but no one wants to see and acknowledge that anymore. A Majoruna woman of the Yavari Rivers in South America tells the story of how her people have seen scientists go into the village and speak to elders in order to learn as much as they can about the herbs and natural medicines. The scientists would then take this knowledge and plant samples back to their laboratories. They apply for a patent, and then they "own" this knowledge. The companies the scientists worked for would then sell products made from the knowledge acquired from the indigenous people. The companies would get rich but the indigenous people usually received no benefits from their contribution – which they probably didn't know they made.<sup>13</sup> There is a lack of defense for the knowledge and land of the indigenous people.

These are the kind of rights and freedoms that many indigenous people seek—to be recognized as who they are—distinct groups with their own unique cultures. Indigenous peoples want to enjoy and pass onto their children their histories, languages, traditions, modes of internal governance and spiritual practices while being able to live a dignified life.<sup>14</sup> The Majoruna woman also shares that she has eight children and refuses to send them to school because Spanish is the only spoken language.<sup>15</sup> Not only is language banned, but their freedom to pray. For more than nineteen generations, the Sun Dance has been one of the most sacred rites of the Lakota. It involves fasting for four days, and praying for other people and the earth. However, the U.S. government banned it for most of the twentieth century. Although the Sun Dance is legal once again, this is an example of how the Constitution is not equally applied to America's Indigenous people.<sup>16</sup>

Every year, half a million acres of forest go up in smoke in the Peruvian Amazon alone. To the Peruvian government this means success by earning money from the use of the forest. To the Indians it is said to be "a disaster that is impoverishing our people," by Evaristo Nugkuag, the president of COICA, the Coordinating Organization for Indigenous Groups of the Amazon Basin. People are just trying to live on their land safely and have the same rights as anyone else.

Indigenous people sometimes find it hard to be proud of the race they were born into because they know it is a hard cycle to get out of. In the 23 provinces of Argentina, the Additional Survey on Indigenous Populations in 2001 concluded that there were still 18 existent indigenous groups alive. Strangely, however, when the

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<sup>10</sup> Haboud, Marleen; Adelaarurl, Willem (2008). "Awapit" In: Moseley, Christopher, ed (2010). *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger*, 3rd edn, Paris. UNESCO Publishing (online version). Retrieved 23 April 2012

<sup>11</sup> "Earth's most threatened tribe." - *Survival International*. N.p., n.d. Web. 29 Apr. 2014. <<http://www.survivalinternational.org/awa>>.

<sup>12</sup> Davidson, page 43

<sup>13</sup> Davidson, page 74 - 75

<sup>14</sup> Davidson, page 16 - 17

<sup>15</sup> Davidson, page 74

<sup>16</sup> Davidson, Art. *Endangered peoples*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1993. Print.

survey was done once more a decade later, it surprisingly stated that there were more than 31 indigenous groups still around!<sup>17</sup> How did this happen? This possibly shows that there has been a noticeable increase in tolerance and awareness of indigenous peoples, and that these people are now not as worried about racial discrimination and therefore were less afraid to speak out about who they actually are.

Patricia Locke, a Lakota Indian, says “I am a dark-skinned, white haired Indian grandmother, and sometimes I begin to feel that I am invisible, people see through me at airports, on the street, and at the meat market. When I mention this eerier feeling to Indian friends, they tell me it happen to them, too. I’m afraid to ask Indian children about it. I know this invisibility must hurt them. What is it that so clouds people’s vision that they cannot see us?”<sup>18</sup> All around the world people are eager to project the fate of sea turtles and spotted owls, but people don’t realize that their own species are vanishing too. It is the drive of globalization, where if you do not speak English or a common language then you are trapped in the circle of your community; many people see this as a negative. But the world needs cultural differences to flourish; we can achieve this through exchanging innovative ideas because of the unique perspective people would have, by increasing adaptability and having a variety of viewpoints. Your box of knowledge grows with human diversity. We now need to strengthen the link between the Indigenous peoples and the modern day twenty first century person. Appreciation and respect is an important aspect that needs to exist as a basic requirement.

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<sup>17</sup> "Indigenous peoples in Argentina." *Argentina*. N.p., n.d. Web. 29 Apr. 2014. <<http://www.iwgia.org/regions/latin-america/argentina>>.

<sup>18</sup> Davidson, page 2