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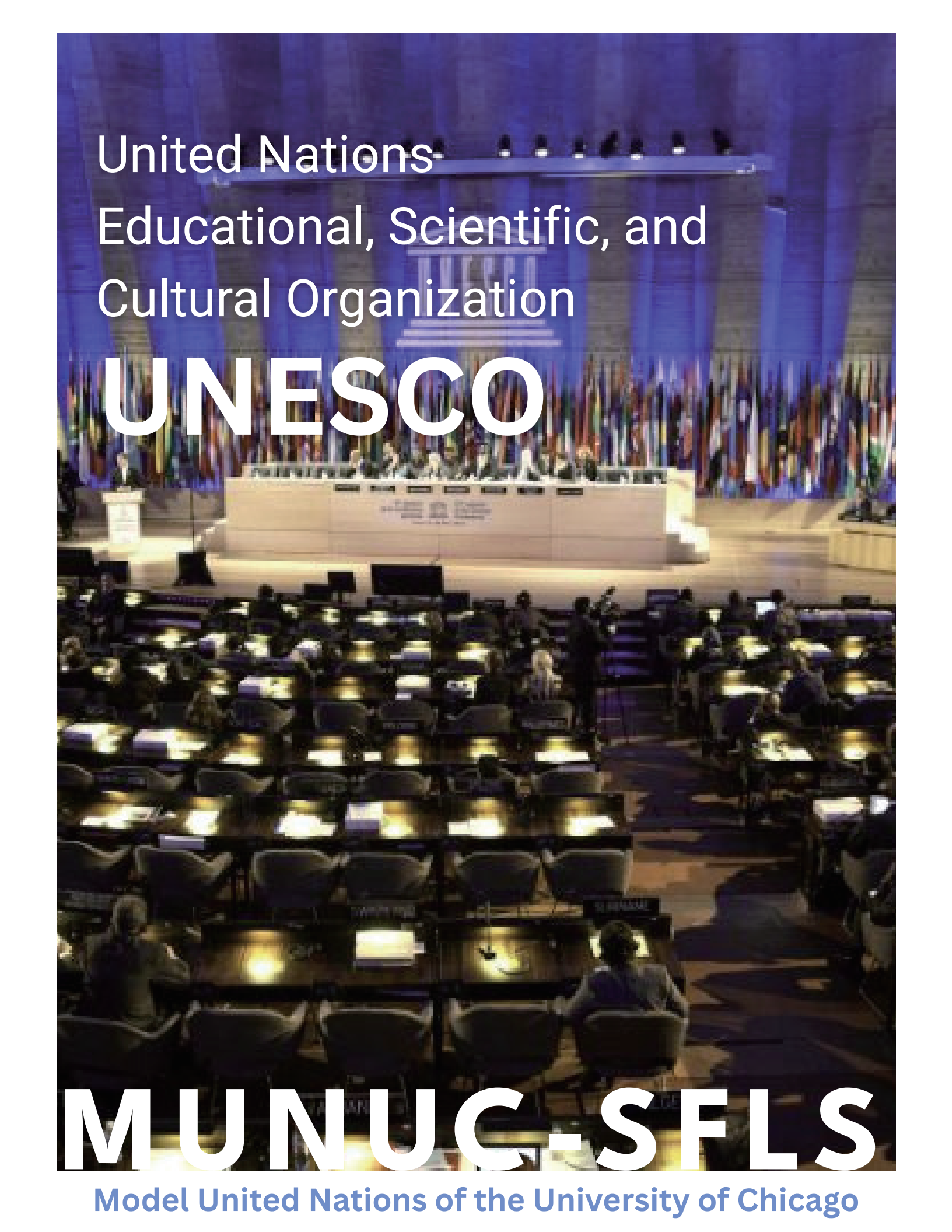
MUNUC-SFLS

Conference

上海外国语大学附属外国语学校
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United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization
(UNESCO)





United Nations
Educational, Scientific, and
Cultural Organization

UNESCO

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Model United Nations of the University of Chicago

HISTORY OF THE COMMITTEE

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) is one of the specialized agencies of the United Nations.¹ Founded in 1945, its mission is to strengthen the intellectual and moral capacity of humankind by facilitating dialogue between the arts, sciences and cultures of nations.² UNESCO also oversees educational systems and access to education around the world, as to ensure the ability of people worldwide to access quality education. The committee believes freedom of expression, democratic thought and cultural diversity are fundamental to ensuring the peaceful development of the world. UNESCO has 194 member states, and one of UNESCO's most important missions is to preserve world heritage sites. Currently, UNESCO has 1154 World Heritage Sites, preserved by the committee. In UNESCO's most recent meeting of the World Heritage Committee in July 2024, the committee will discuss the addition of 27 new sites to the World Heritage Sites list, as well as the state of conservation of 124 sites, which are already under UNESCO's protection.³ While UNESCO resolutions are not binding, they are powerful legal tools, which provide member states with frameworks as to how to protect cultural heritage and develop the fields of art, science and education.

¹ "History of UNESCO," UNESCO.org, accessed September 29, 2024, <https://www.unesco.org/en/history#>.

² "History of UNESCO."

³ "World Heritage Committee 2024," UNESCO.org, July 24, 2024, <https://www.unesco.org/en/world-heritage/committee-2024>.

EVALUATING INVOLVEMENT IN THE PRESERVATION OF INDIGENOUS AND ENDANGERED CULTURES

Statement of the Problem

Worldwide, it is estimated that there are 15,000 distinct cultures, with a mass majority of that number being represented by dwindling communities of several hundred people or less. Peoples belonging to Indigenous cultures comprise 6.2% of the world's population, speaking around 4,000 of the 7,000 global languages.⁴ Indigenous cultures are not confined to a single region of the Earth, rather, they are distributed across all habitable areas of the planet, each adapted to its unique environment and historical context. Indigenous cultures are social groups that share ancestral ties to their territories and local natural resources, with distinct systems of social, economic, political, and spiritual ways of life as compared to mainstream societies. Oftentimes stemming from ancient progenitors, these cultures are a reflection of traditional livelihoods prior to the ages of mass colonization and homogenization, preserving important knowledge and practices crucial to the world's diversity.⁵

Indigenous cultures are often referred to as "endangered" due to their increasingly smaller population sizes by factors of historical colonization, current globalization, and ecological loss. The endangerment of cultures can be largely attributed to the inadequate education or prevention of education imparted to younger generations about their heritage, leading to a significant decline in the intergenerational transmission of Indigenous knowledge and practices. Vital global legacies and their continuity are threatened as the connections between Indigenous past and present are eroded. Most of the 476 million peoples defined as belonging to Indigenous cultures can be categorized as historically or currently at risk of disappearing forever. A related problem to the devaluing and evaporation of native

⁴ "Endangered Cultures," The Encyclopedia of World Problems, November 23, 2020, <http://encyclopedia.uia.org/en/problem/135023>.

⁵ Amnesty International, "Indigenous Peoples Rights Are Human Rights," April 3, 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/what-we-do/indigenous-peoples/>.

languages is highly correlated with the ongoing global catastrophe of vanishing cultures; however, when a culture is eradicated, the social impacts are compounded.⁶

Importance

Traditional knowledge is the heart of a native identity, culture, language, and livelihood. It is important to note that the critical endangerment of indigenous cultures does not only impact their individual communities, but the world as a whole loses essential knowledge with their disappearance. Indigenous cultures serve as ancient repositories of crucial global knowledge that has profoundly shaped and enriched the wholesale development of human societies and our understanding of the world. Indigenous knowledge is rooted in millennia of observation and experience that encompass a wide array of human domains and activities, including topics like medicine, spirituality, ecology, and agriculture. Within each community, there exist distinctive interpretations and ideals related to human existence, ethics, and epistemology, shaped by unique cultural contexts and historical experiences. Each Indigenous culture contributes vital and nuanced information that deeply benefits humanity's collective knowledge, despite their perceived unimportance to an increasingly industrialized world.⁷

At the 2022 White House Tribal Nations Summit, Cheryl Andrews-Maltais, Chairwoman of the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head Aquinnah spoke to its necessity: "Had our traditional cultural practices and ceremony not been outlawed and had our information keepers been listened to over the centuries, we probably would not find ourselves in the position we are today—with the losses and extinction and contamination we face as our global community."⁸ Indigenous knowledge is intrinsically woven within the people itself, referred to as "living knowledge" that cannot be separated from its denizens, further

⁶ Hurst, William J., "Endangered Cultures and Languages," Wiley Online Library, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/9781118924396.wbiea2054#:~:text=The%20phrase%20%E2%80%9Ce%20ndangered%20cultures%20and,appeared%20in%20publications%20in%201990.>

⁷ UNESCO, Living Heritage and Indigenous Peoples, Accessed August 26, 2024, <https://ich.unesco.org/doc/src/Brochure-indigenous-people-201904-EN.pdf>.

⁸ The White House, "What Is 'Indigenous Knowledge' and Why Does It Matter? Integrating Ancestral Wisdom and Approaches into Federal Decision-Making," December 2, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/ostp/news-updates/2022/12/02/what-is-indigenous-knowledge-and-why-does-it-matter-integrating-ancestral-wisdom-and-approaches-into-federal-decision-making/>.

intensifying the issue of dwindling community sizes. In other words, the loss of a people signifies the loss of their entire body of collective knowledge. Beyond the scope of global importance in regards to knowledge diffusion, the preservation of endangered cultures is essential for sustaining the world's cultural diversity. 89% of active conflicts occur in countries defined as having low intercultural communication, highlighting the profound need to protect the richness of global diversity to forge peaceful cooperation and sustainable world development.⁹

The spread of all knowledge is dependent upon language, referring to a myriad of oral practices, written expression, and otherwise “unconventional” practices of transmission. Native cultures are unique in that they are connected to means of communication outside the homogenized methods of the modern world, relying on spoken word and ancient traditions to exchange information. Those who perform oral traditions in Indigenous cultures are highly specialized and are viewed as prestigious guardians of collective memory.¹⁰ Orally-spread information and stories are subject to many elements of reproduction, improvisation, and creation. As an inherently dynamic form of communication, the information they contain is volatile and dependent upon an unbroken chain of passing generational traditions down to the youth. Culture cannot be sustained through written documentation and databases; the transmission of oral expressions is a key safeguard to protecting a language, and culture lives through storytelling, song, poems, and other forms of dynamic communication.¹¹ Protecting native communities is the only solution to preserving their knowledge and language without diluting or permanently losing its vast history as champions of experimentation and diversity.

Unlike urbanized communities, Indigenous cultures are wholly dependent upon their territories and interactions with the natural environment. Historically and currently, they are often displaced from

⁹ United Nations, “World Day for Cultural Diversity for Dialogue and Development,” Accessed August 26, 2024, <https://www.un.org/en/observances/cultural-diversity-day>.

¹⁰ UNESCO, “Oral Traditions and Expressions,” Accessed August 26, 2024, <https://ich.unesco.org/en/oral-traditions-and-expressions-00053#:~:text=The%20oral%20traditions%20and%20expressions,songs%2C%20dramatic%20performances%20and%20more>.

¹¹ United Nations, “Indigenous Peoples’ Traditional Knowledge Must Be Preserved, Valued Globally, Speakers Stress as Permanent Forum Opens Annual Session,” April 22, 2019, <https://press.un.org/en/2019/hr5431.doc.htm>.

these ancestral lands as a result of exploitation for natural resources by industrial venues.¹² Their connections to ecological systems are essential, as they are estimated to protect and cultivate over 80% of the planet's biodiversity. Native cultures are found in diverse ecosystems, from tropical rainforests and arid deserts to mountainous regions and coastal areas, each behaving as defenders of their local environment. Recent studies into how these cultures interact with the biodiversity amidst the climate crisis reveal that forestlands under community ownership hold over a fourth of all tropical and subtropical forest above-ground carbon, nearly four times the total worldwide carbon emissions in 2014, indicating Indigenous protection and conservation is vital to sustaining the Earth's natural resources.¹³ The deep intersection between ecological sustainability and traditional culture is only increasingly visible as Indigenous language and rights decline. Nature-based solutions that battle ongoing climate change factors and general sustainability arise out of Indigenous knowledge born from a millennia of ecological practices. For example, the Bedouin tribe have over 160 words referring to camels, and the Sami have more than 200 words for snow accumulated over generations upon generations of livelihoods dependent on the flora and fauna of their territories. Thus, the loss of Indigenous cultures holds a twofold consequence, affecting both the peoples themselves and the sensitive biodiversity of a planet battling ecological disaster.

Issues Today

In contemporary society, Indigenous cultures face a multitude of complex challenges stemming from historical and current exploitation, undervaluing, and dispossession of traditional lands and knowledge. Ongoing globalization efforts continuously steal and prevent Indigenous peoples from continuing their historical ways of life. Over 50% of the world's land is claimed by Indigenous cultures

¹² "Indigenous Peoples." United Nations.

<https://www.un.org/en/fight-racism/vulnerable-groups/indigenous-peoples#:~:text=There%20are%20over%20476%20million,the%20world%27s%20estimated%207%2C000%20languages.>

¹³ "Toward a Global Baseline of Carbon Storage in Collective Lands: An Updated Analysis of Indigenous Peoples' and Local Communities' Contributions to Climate Change Mitigation - Rights + Resources - Supporting Forest Tenure, Policy, and Market Reforms." Rights + Resources - Supporting Forest Tenure, Policy, and Market Reforms (2020).

<https://rightsandresources.org/global-baseline-carbon-storage-collective-lands/>.

and communities; however, they only have legal ownership rights to around 10%. Endangered groups often live under customary ownership of their ancestral territory, but many governments only formally provide a fraction of the land and otherwise do not enforce adequate protection of boundaries and exploitation of natural resources. Even when recognized by a government, Indigenous people are usually the last to receive public investments into basic services that governments provide, such as infrastructure development, education support, political power, the ability to be full participants in the worldwide economy, and the ability to possess the full scope of basic human rights.¹⁴

Westernized communities are taught and exposed to traditional activities as “backwards,” “uninformed,” and “damaging,” in regards to their place in modern society and in ecological relations, when reality reflects an array of successful Indigenous practices. As a result, traditional practices are undervalued in the global perspective, despite their origin from thousands of years of knowledge and experience. In the case of the United States of America, colonial history and current policy frameworks have disempowered Indigenous cultures and seek to physically and intellectually separate native tribes from their historical lands, which are intrinsically tied to Indigenous identity. Border conflicts and insecure land tenure caused by Indigenous interactions with the broader urbanized world result in heightened conflicts, environmental disasters, and weak economic and social development both within a community and globally. The preservation of endangered cultures leads to social cohesion and the spread of their ancestral knowledge, invaluable in addressing current global issues to a greater extent.

The lack of educational support for endangered cultures further compounds their impending extinction if swift action is not taken. The children and youth of Indigenous peoples are increasingly not being taught their native languages, thus devastating societies developed on oral transmission of knowledge. As native languages fade into obscurity through the societal devaluation of their necessity, traditional knowledge is permanently lost. Furthermore, Indigenous peoples are removed from education and technology to support their development. Historically and currently, these cultures are unprepared for

¹⁴ “Indigenous Peoples.” World Bank. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/indigenouspeoples>.

medical catastrophes like COVID-19 and still suffer from diseases largely eradicated from Western societies like tuberculosis. This lack of access to educational and technological advancements from the rest of the world limits their ability to have adequate defense from illegal poachers, loggers, and drug smugglers in their territory, as well as benefit from the age of mass information spread with computers and other commonly enjoyed resources of the modern world. Without the knowledge of the rest of the world, and being denied a voice in national politics, Indigenous people are limited in their ability to foster change for themselves at the scale necessary to preserve these cultures.

History of the Problem

Introduction

Indigenous cultures are legacies of the world's earliest civilizations and development, living relics of humanity's foundational knowledge and traditions that shaped the course of history. Interactions with the industrializing world through the process of colonization and culture conflict have been the primary driver of the eradication of these communities. To clarify, colonization refers to the process of one nation subjugating another to exploit its land and impose their home cultural values on the victims. Furthermore, it is the practical implementation of the philosophies of imperialism, an ideological ethos of using forcefully controlling another nation, transforming the conquered land in a vision of reflecting the dominating country or group.¹⁵ Most, if not all, modernized nations host an extensive and violent history with Indigenous cultures, originating in ancient times and intensifying with the explosion of industrialized nations' expansion and imperialism. The imposition of assimilation policies, cultural erasure, and resource exploitation disrupted and marginalized Indigenous ways of life, leading to diminished or outright elimination of once prosperous Indigenous communities.¹⁶

One of the earliest instances of modern colonization occurred in Puerto Rico, with the Taíno native culture. The Taíno population was documented to exceed 30,000 individuals in the year 1508. However, by 1565, they had been largely decimated and effectively declared extinct due to the impacts of Spanish occupation, including, but not limited to, forced servitude, involuntary religious conversion to Christianity, lack of immunity to European diseases, and intentional separation of families and community leaders.¹⁷

¹⁵ Blakemore, Erin. "Colonialism Facts and Information." Culture, August 16, 2024.
<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/article/colonialism>.

¹⁶ "Indigenous Languages." The United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues.
<https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/04/Indigenous-Languages.pdf>.

¹⁷ "Genocide Studies Program." MacMillan Center for International and Area Studies at Yale (2024).
<https://gsp.yale.edu/case-studies/colonial-genocides-project/puerto-rico#:~:text=Puerto%20Rico%20is%20one%20of,Ta%C3%ADno%20culture%20dominated%20the%20island>.

The systematic removal of Indigenous tribes and the acquisition of native lands have been a remarkable stain on the preservation of cultural diversity throughout a majority of historical eras, tracing roots back to the ancient empires of Greece, Rome, Egypt, and Phoenicia. However, two primary modern eras are the fundamental causes for the looming extinctions of the world's remaining tribes—the Age of Discovery commencing in the 15th century and the Scramble for Africa in the 19th–20th century. These eras can be pinpointed as periods of heightened imperialist values in European countries that resulted in devastating effects on Indigenous peoples, primarily in the Americas, Western Hemisphere island settlements, and African territories, although India and Asia were also affected.

Age of Discovery + Americas Colonization

Europe's Age of Discovery in the 15th–17th century was a transformative era that significantly accelerated the process of colonization across the Americas. The Age of Discovery refers to the surge of maritime expeditions of European nations to previously unexplored expanses of the Americas and Atlantic islands, spurred by economic ambitions and the pursuit of increased political power.¹⁸ The growing extent of European influence as they pursued new trade routes, resources, and territorial expansion—indiscriminately destroying and reshaping Indigenous cultures in the process—resulted in global ramifications, with Japan, Korea, and Thailand being the only nations untouched by European colonization. The compoundment of new maritime technology and reliable navigation, the allure of developing trade routes outside of those controlled by the Middle Eastern and Mediterranean powers, and political rivalries of closely-quartered European nations yielded the successful international frenzy for the resources of native communities. Governments utilized oppressive laws to create barriers between Indigenous peoples and their culture, unintentional disease spread, direct warfare and violence, and the forced removal of peoples from their lands to impose their perceived superiority onto the natives. Indigenous people had no prior exposure to diseases like smallpox, influenza, measles, pneumonia, and other ailments, and were thus devastated by their significant susceptibility to commonplace Western

¹⁸ Mamchii, Oleksandra. "Age of Discovery: Its Impact on the Past and Present." Best Diplomats | Diplomatic Conferences | New York, February 6, 2024. <https://bestdiplomats.org/age-of-discovery/>.

illnesses. The issues of disease and deliberate genocide were interdependent forces in contributing to what can be referred to as “the worst human holocaust the world had ever witnessed.”¹⁹

Beyond the initial confrontations of European settlements, during the first half of the 19th century, American government policy resulted in the Trail of Tears—the forced removal of over 100,000 Indigenous people to areas west of the Mississippi River. The Trail of Tears and other involuntary removals destroyed Indigenous ways of life, generating additional loss of life and desecration of culture. Later American expansion and European interactions led to religious overhauls—with the Spanish missions in California, Florida, and Texas—governmental undermining of Indigenous governmental and religious systems, transformation and destruction of the plains habitat and animals for cattle ranching, critical loss of the buffalo population, and forced labor of Indigenous populations. All together, the Indigenous population in the continental United States severely plummeted, falling from an estimated 7 million to a low of only 200,000 individuals.²⁰

Scramble For Africa

The European colonization of the Americas slowed down in the middle of the 17th century due to dwindling unclaimed lands and the sustained development of the American colonies. Industrialized countries continued to infiltrate and eradicate Indigenous peoples in other regions of the world on a smaller scale as more of the world became known and mapped. However, in the late 19th century, the Scramble for Africa commenced, marking a renewed intense period of colonization and exploitation. Europeans referred to Africa as the “Dark Continent,” a term referencing their perspective of Africa as an unexplored domain. The “Dark Continent” later became conflated with the idea that African natives were

¹⁹ “Government Policy toward Native Americans: The New Nation, 1783 - 1815: U.S. History Primary Source Timeline: Classroom Materials at the Library of Congress: Library of Congress.” The Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/united-states-history-primary-source-timeline/new-nation-1783-1815/government-policy-toward-native-americans/>.

²⁰ Smith, M. David. “Counting the Dead: Estimating the Loss of Life in the Indigenous Holocaust, 1492-Present”. *University of Houston-Downtown*. <https://www.se.edu/native-american/wp-content/uploads/sites/49/2019/09/A-NAS-2017-Proceedings-Smith.pdf>

backwards and savage, a rhetoric pre-existing as rationale for the transatlantic slave trade.²¹ The new United States and thirteen other European countries—including, but not limited to, Britain, France, Spain, Portugal, and Germany—met and partitioned Africa into colonies and spheres of influence, essentially dividing the continent into chunks of Western ownership. The border design was made from Eurocentric ideals, lacking knowledge and concern for historic African geography and ethnic composition.²² With the Berlin Conference legitimizing the European claims to Africa in the eyes of Western cooperating powers, colonists created their partitions without notifying the local African rulers. Thus, many ethnic populations became split due to the Westerners' newly-decided borders, which is a large source of strife and conflict on the continent to this day.²³

The haphazardly-created artificial borders imposed on Africa dramatically affected the lifestyles and structural systems of Indigenous peoples, dismantling their traditional life, political systems, and incited economic and social hardship. Many African communities followed a nomadic lifestyle; however, the new borders forced them into resource competition and a livelihood without full access to water, their traditional medium of mobility, and land. In the Scramble for Africa, Eurocentric policies devastated traditional practices and further instigated conflicts amongst peoples, even within the same culture. The methods of governing each power's "new land" differed, with some countries preferring direct rule, some indirect rule, and others preferring a mix of strategies. Each method resulted in similar degrees of Indigenous culture overhaul and the longlasting loss of life and liberty of each nomadic group. The imposed ethnic divisions and limitations of traditional life persist into the modern era, where political

²¹ "The Scramble for Africa: St John's College, University of Cambridge." The Scramble for Africa | St John's College, University of Cambridge.

https://www.joh.cam.ac.uk/library/library_exhibitions/schoolresources/exploration/scramble_for_africa.

²² The long-run effects of the Scramble for africa | CEPR.

<https://cepr.org/voxeu/columns/long-run-effects-scramble-africa-0>.

²³ "Colonial Borders in Africa: Improper Design and Its Impact on African Borderland Communities." Wilson Center.

<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/colonial-borders-in-africa-improper-design-and-its-impact-on-african-border-land-communities>.

corruption and conflict, lack of resources, exploitation by Westerners, and loss of life are still major issues faced in Africa today.²⁴

²⁴ “Imperialism and Socialism in the Context of Africa.” South African History Online.
<https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/imperialism-and-socialism-context-africa>.

Past Actions and Possible Solutions

The United Nations and UNESCO, as well as other organizations, have made efforts to ensure the preservation of Indigenous and endangered cultures. Much like the extinction of plant and animal species, the extinction or eradication of culture has significant consequences for humankind, and even more so for the smaller communities by whom these cultures have been created. Therefore, to maintain a diverse and just world, the United Nations and UNESCO have created various frameworks and mechanisms to prevent the extinction of culture.

First, the United Nations adopted the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP) on September 13, 2007.²⁵ As part of the declaration, the UNDRIP recognizes the equal status of Indigenous people to all others, as well as their right to freely enjoy and have access to their cultural heritage.²⁶ The UNDRIP also prompts the UN and its members to ensure the protection and unhindered access of Indigenous people to their culture and heritage. The declaration is a cornerstone for member states to develop further campaigns and policies—on a national and international level—which assist the goal of preserving Indigenous cultures.

Furthermore, the United Nations established the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) in 2000.²⁷ The forum discusses a wide range of issues related to Indigenous people and populations, including the preservation of cultural heritage, particularly in regards to language.

Another important aspect in the preservation of Indigenous cultures is the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage. UNESCO defines intangible cultural heritage as “traditions or living expressions inherited from our ancestors and passed on to our descendants, such as oral traditions,

²⁵ United Nations. *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.* 2018.

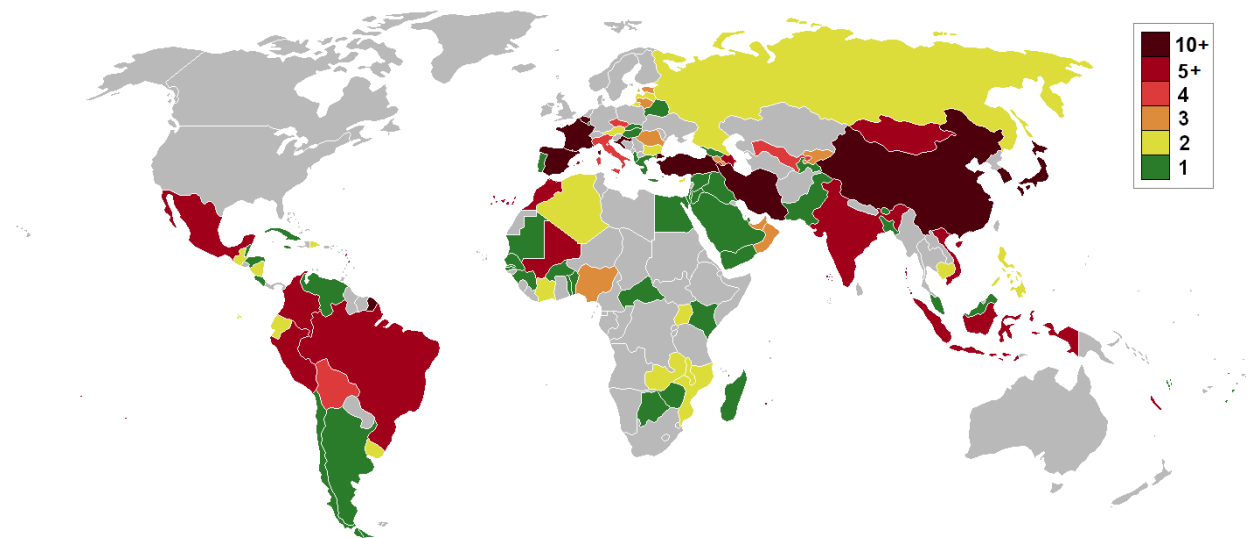
https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP_E_web.pdf

²⁶ United Nations. *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.*

²⁷ International Labour Organization (ILO). "Eighteenth Session of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII)." 2024.

[https://www.ilo.org/meetings-and-events/ilo-eighteenth-session-united-nations-permanent-forum-indigenous-issues#:~:text=The%20United%20Nations%20Permanent%20Forum%20on%20Indigenous%20Issues%20\(UNPFII\)%20is,education%2C%20health%20and%20human%20rights.](https://www.ilo.org/meetings-and-events/ilo-eighteenth-session-united-nations-permanent-forum-indigenous-issues#:~:text=The%20United%20Nations%20Permanent%20Forum%20on%20Indigenous%20Issues%20(UNPFII)%20is,education%2C%20health%20and%20human%20rights.)

performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe or the knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts.”²⁸



A map showing the density of UNESCO-designated Masterpieces of Oral and Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.²⁹

Intangible cultural heritage is vital to Indigenous and minority communities in many ways. For example, the preservation of intangible heritage is a necessary component to the preservation of Indigenous cultures. Moreover, preservation of intangible heritage is integral to the social development of both Indigenous communities and member states.³⁰ Intangible cultural heritage is often founded on tradition, yet reflects changes caused by current practices, which means that heritage itself isn't static. Therefore, its safeguarding is crucial to documenting and understanding human history.

Furthermore, intangible cultural heritage can span across communities, including bits and pieces from different cultures, which can often overlap. Its value then becomes even higher, as intangible

²⁸ UNESCO. "What Is Intangible Heritage?" 2024. <https://ich.unesco.org/en/what-is-intangible-heritage-00003>.

²⁹ enUser:Joey. File:Map of UNESCO Masterpieces of Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity.png. 2018.

Graphic. Wikimedia Commons.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map_of_UNESCO_Masterpieces_of_Oral_and_Intangible_Heritage_of_Humanity.png.

³⁰ UNESCO. "Frequently Asked Questions: Intangible Cultural Heritage." 2024. <https://ich.unesco.org/en/faq-00021>.

cultural heritage is representative of the many changes and characteristics within and between Indigenous cultures. Lastly, since intangible cultural heritage—such as oral traditions or rituals—is emblematic to communities, its preservation is important in terms of giving people the freedom to be connected with their community and its history, as well as to continue the traditions they've inherited if they wish to do so.

The preservation of intangible cultural heritage is overseen by UNESCO's 2003 Convention for Intangible Cultural Heritage. The Convention meets every six years, so member states can report efforts and their effectiveness in terms of preserving intangible cultural heritage and assess any cases in need of urgent preservation. To do this, UNESCO maintains two lists: the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity and the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding.

The Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity includes all elements which are considered an integral part of the intangible cultural heritage of humanity. If a member state contains elements on the list, they are required to report on the elements' state in terms of safeguarding practices and their effectiveness. It is important to note that elements on the list are not added based on superiority over elements not on the list, but rather based on their value to the community which practices those elements.

Although the list is created as a way to keep track of the state of intangible cultural heritage, there are unfortunately threats and risks to inscribed items. Although unintentional, inscription may sometimes lead to decontextualization or simplification of certain elements, in an effort to translate them or make them more accessible. There is also the threat of overcommercializing a certain element due to recognition and popularization, which negatively affects the respectful preservation of intangible cultural heritage. UNESCO works towards preventing and resolving such risks to ensure heritage is safeguarded in a way that aligns with the best interests of the cultures, which UNESCO aims to preserve.

When it comes to controversial elements, UNESCO's policy is still subjected to International Human Rights law, meaning practices, rituals, or other elements that go against these laws are not included on the list.

The List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding consists of elements which are in more immediate danger of disappearing and therefore require more monitoring. Member states which have reported elements on the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding convene every four years. At their conventions, member states are required to report on not only the state of these elements, but also the plans for safeguarding measures, as well as the extent of involvement of Indigenous communities in implementing said measures. States are also required to report additional involvement from other communities or parties.

In addition—and as a part of the Convention for Intangible Cultural Heritage—UNESCO also created the Intangible Cultural Heritage Fund.³¹ Every member state that ratified the convention is required to make an annual contribution to the fund, which should be at least 1% of what member states contribute to UNESCO as a whole. However, member states and other private or public entities are welcome and encouraged to contribute to the fund, as well.

The fund is used as a means of assistance to member states in their efforts to preserve intangible cultural heritage. Members can request assistance, either technical or financial, with financial assistance from the Intangible Cultural Heritage Fund being granted by the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.³² Assistance can be either urgent or regular, with urgent applications being prioritized. Otherwise, applications by developing countries gain priority. Member states are also welcome to make joint applications, if such would be more effective.

³¹ UNESCO. "Intangible Cultural Heritage Fund." 2024.
<https://ich.unesco.org/en/intangible-cultural-heritage-fund-00816>.

³² UNESCO. "Requesting Assistance: What Constitutes an Emergency?" 2024.
<https://ich.unesco.org/en/requesting-assistance-00039#definition-of-what-constitutes-an-emergency>.

Another major avenue where UNESCO has put a lot of effort is the preservation of Indigenous and endangered languages, as they are integral to the culture of any community. In 1993, UNESCO established the Endangered Languages Programme, which aimed to achieve exactly this goal.³³ As part of the programme, UNESCO published the first Atlas of the World's Endangered Languages (WAL) in 1996. Ever since, UNESCO has maintained the Atlas, including an interactive, digital version, which documents endangered languages across the world. The information ranges from grammar and structure to usage and history, with information on how at risk the language is to disappear included, as well. Furthermore, the Atlas contains methodologies used to examine language diversity and endangerment, which are effective tools in crafting more effective policies and methods to ensure the preservation of endangered languages. Although UNESCO has demonstrated active involvement in the issue of preserving Indigenous and endangered cultures, there are still issues that need to be addressed better.

Digitalization

As information storage and exchange is becoming increasingly more dependent on technology, it is important to ensure that oral traditions, rituals and other Indigenous and endangered cultural heritage are preserved and documented virtually. This way, the information will be more accessible for generations to come, as demonstrated with the Atlas of the World's Endangered Languages. UNESCO has the task to come up with a procedure for digitizing cultural heritage, while keeping in mind the risks under which inscribed heritage of any sort lies. Particularly, while access is important, it is also vital to prevent the misrepresentation, overcommercialization, and appropriation of Indigenous cultures.

Community Involvement

While gathering information about cultural practices of Indigenous people is important, UNESCO needs to address the involvement of Indigenous communities in any efforts to preserve their culture. In

³³ UNESCO. "Introduction to the UNESCO World Atlas of Languages." 2024.
<https://en.wal.unesco.org/about-unesco-wal/introduction>.

order to collect and inscribe information in a respectful and sensitive manner, any information-gathering or interpretation efforts have to be overseen by members of the corresponding communities. While UNESCO has addressed the need for this oversight, concrete action is still needed. Potential avenues to ensure this goal is achieved include involvement of experts with Indigenous communities directly, mechanisms for legal and copyright protection to ensure Indigenous communities aren't being exploited or misled—and that they will have access to documentation of their cultural practices—as well as ensuring proper translations between community members, UNESCO and state representatives, and the general public.

Respectful Collaboration

Furthermore, in terms of collaborative efforts, a major aspect of ensuring the proper preservation of Indigenous and endangered cultures is creating a safe space on the regional and international level for community members to share their cultures. This represents a two-fold issue:

First, UNESCO needs to ensure that experts, representatives, and government figures are adequately prepared and respectful to the dignity of the communities whose cultures they are trying to preserve. This goal may require various capacity-building efforts, including training for international and government representatives about sensitivity, respect, and ethical information-gathering practices. Additionally, oversight and accountability systems, as well as legal protection for Indigenous communities, are also possible ways to tackle this issue.

Second, inscription practices should be firmly regulated to ensure biases are not preventing the preservation of cultural heritage. Examples include the Representatives List and the List for Urgent Safeguarding. To ensure the lists are maintained in a non-discriminatory, just, and equitable manner, UNESCO needs to work to implement regulation policies, both at the international and regional level to ensure different voices from across the world are being heard.

Cultural Exploration

To preserve Indigenous and endangered cultures, it is important for UNESCO to craft effective strategies which member states can implement to involve the general community with endangered and Indigenous cultures. Through measures such as cultural exchanges, incentives for creating cultural centers or museums dedicated to Indigenous cultures, or integrating lessons connected to Indigenous culture and the importance of its preservation in school curriculums, preservation becomes a common goal with a common solution.

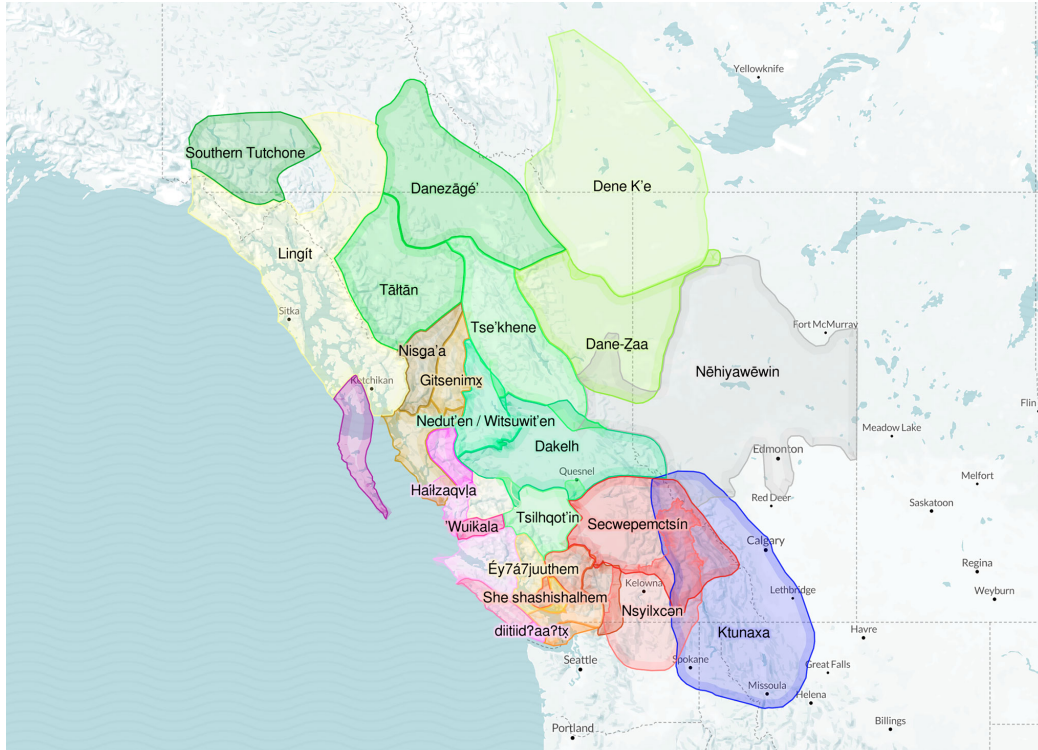
Case Study – First People’s Cultural Council in British Columbia

The First People’s Cultural Council (FPCC) is a provincial government institution in Canada which delivers a multitude of heritage, language, and cultural programmes related to the Indigenous populations in British Columbia.³⁴ The council is run by members of British Columbia’s Indigenous communities, as well as representatives from other organizations focused on uplifting Indigenous voices.³⁵ The FPCC provides various resources, such as heritage grants to fund the exploration and preservation of Indigenous cultures, culture and language immersion programmes, and the First People’s Map, which is an interactive map demonstrating the art, heritage, and culture of different Indigenous communities in British Columbia. The FPCC has done extensive work in terms of community outreach and collaboration, which has simultaneously helped preserve a lot of British Columbia’s Indigenous communities’ heritage while also promoting it on a larger scale.³⁶ Similarly, in their preservation efforts, UNESCO should strive to work with and for the people whose cultural heritage is endangered.

³⁴ UNESCO. "World Atlas Demonstrating the Endangered State of the Languages of the World." 2017. https://www.researchgate.net/figure/UNESCO-2017-World-Atlas-Demonstrating-the-endangered-state-of-the-languages-of-the-world_fig1_365849589.

³⁵ UNESCO. "World Atlas Demonstrating the Endangered State of the Languages of the World."

³⁶ UNESCO. "World Atlas Demonstrating the Endangered State of the Languages of the World."



*FPCC's Map of First Nations' Language Regions.*³⁷

³⁷ First Peoples' Cultural Council (FPCC). "Overview." 2024. <https://fpcc.ca/about-us/overview/>.

Bloc Positions

Member states of UNESCO are all committed to upholding and promoting international peace and cooperation in the realms of education, sciences, and culture; however, each nation's individual relationship to the concept of Indigenous culture preservation is painted by its own historical background with colonization. UNESCO members contain countries who have perpetrated mass colonization and Indigenous eradication efforts in their respective histories, and those who have been almost exclusively on the receiving end, impacting their individual decision-making and stances on preservation efforts. There are three main categories of countries involved in UNESCO that each hold their individual goals and priorities regarding endangered cultures.³⁸

Proactive Countries

Countries defined as “proactive” are often seen at the forefront of promoting Indigenous culture preservation and protecting their already-existing rights, both on national and international levels. These countries are often newer and smaller, missing out on becoming a superpower during the age of heightened colonialism and exploration—including Canada, Bolivia, and Norway. They have previously established thorough legal frameworks to protect Indigenous cultures and lands, and endorse international standards like the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), a comprehensive declaration of the rights of Indigenous peoples that establishes a bare minimum of recognition and protection for all Indigenous peoples.³⁹ These countries are active members in UNESCO and similarly work to protect endangered cultures over the development and expansion of their own nation. For example, the Bolivian constitution recognizes 36 official Indigenous languages and has restructured it to aim to build a cohesive state that puts Indigenous values at the forefront. These nations are truly focused

³⁸ “Cutting Edge: Indigenous Languages: Gateways to the World’s Cultural Diversity.” UNESCO, 2022. <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/cutting-edge-indigenous-languages-gateways-worlds-cultural-diversity>.

³⁹ Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. “UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples | Ohchr.” UNHR: Office of the High Commissioner, 2007. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/indigenous-peoples/un-declaration-rights-indigenous-peoples>.

on taking measures that would potentially stall growth of industrialized national efforts and thus view the preservation of Indigenous cultures as integral to national identity and cultural diversity.

Moderate Countries

This group of “moderate” countries are countries that place emphasis on the importance of Indigenous rights but often balance these issues with economic development—specifically resource use and tourism—as well as other matters of an industrialized state. For instance, Australia has been involved in significant legal battles over land rights, and while it has taken steps to recognize Indigenous cultural heritage, economic pressures sometimes lead to less than ideal compromises.⁴⁰ Brazil faces similar challenges, where the need to protect the Amazon and Indigenous lands conflicts with current agricultural and mining interests. Generally, these nations are not as “strong” of worldwide powers and devote a lot of their governmental manpower towards developing as a nation while listening to Indigenous concerns. These countries generally support Indigenous rights in international forums like UNESCO but may struggle with internal pressures that complicate full adherence to international norms.⁴¹

Conditional Countries

Countries are defined as “conditional” in their commitment to Indigenous culture preservation when they exhibit a more cautious approach to their legislation and international activity. While they may express support for Indigenous issues in international settings, their domestic policies sometimes reflect a reluctance to fully implement protective measures, especially when they perceive said measures as conflicting with national sovereignty or economic development goals. For example, the approach certain nations take regarding their ethnic minorities involves a complex balance of cultural recognition and strict governmental control, often prioritizing national unity over Indigenous autonomy. Similarly, a nation may recognize the rights of its tribal populations but face significant challenges in balancing these rights with

⁴⁰ Commonwealth of Australia, “A Charter: Promoting the Economic Interests of Indigenous Australian Businesses Overseas”, May 2017. ISBN 978-1-74322-392-5

⁴¹ Wiessner, Siegfried. “The Cultural Rights of Indigenous Peoples: Achievements and Continuing Challenges.” OUP Academic, February 1, 2011. <https://academic.oup.com/ejil/article/22/1/121/436597>.

developmental projects. The case of India provides an example of the latter issue. Thus, these countries' engagement with UNESCO and other international bodies on Indigenous issues may often be seen as more symbolic, reflecting a conditional support that is heavily influenced by internal priorities and concerns.⁴²

⁴² Wiessner, Siegfried. "The Cultural Rights of Indigenous Peoples: Achievements and Continuing Challenges." OUP Academic, February 1, 2011. <https://academic.oup.com/ejil/article/22/1/121/436597>.

Glossary

Globalization: The process in which peoples and governments interact on a worldwide scale, with aid of modern inventions like fast paced information transmission.

Epistemology: The theory of knowledge and the connection between the mind and reality.

Traditional knowledge: The skills and practices that are developed and sustained through many generations in a community that are vital to its cultural identity.

Age of Discovery: The period of time where Europeans put heightened efforts into exploring previously unknown lands from the 15th century to 17th century, also known as the Age of Exploration.

Trail of Tears: The forced removal and ethnic cleansing of 60,000 Native Americans between 1830 and 1850 spearheaded by then-President Andrew Jackson and the American government.

Berlin Conference: A meeting from 1884–1885 during which European powers and the United States negotiated and mapped their claims to African territory to avoid conflict among themselves. Notably done without any input from African leaders.

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