

*Also by Ken S. Coates*

JAPAN AND THE INTERNET REVOLUTION *(with Carin Holroyd)*

# A GLOBAL HISTORY OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES STRUGGLE AND SURVIVAL

KEN S. COATES

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# INTRODUCTION: INDIGENOUS PEOPLES IN THE AGE OF GLOBALIZATION

## Definitions

Among the many challenging aspects of understanding indigenous peoples is the fundamental difficulty of defining just who is an indigenous person. The concept has been widely used and there is no consensus as to the precise meaning of the term. The United Nations Working Group on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, for example, could not agree on a formal definition. They opted (or opted out) to leave the issue unresolved; each group could, they decided, self-identify as indigenous. The attempt at inclusiveness left the central question unresolved, particularly when groups as diverse as Orkney Islanders (Scotland), Boers (South Africans of European ancestry), and Welshmen asserted their indigeneity. There is almost uniform agreement about certain cultural groups – First Nations/Native Americans of North America, the residents of the Amazon jungles, Inuit from the far North, and the indigenous peoples of Papua New Guinea. Scholars, activists and politicians disagree about many others. Are the small societies of the mountainous regions of India, Thailand, the Philippines, and Vietnam indigenous? While the reindeer herders of Siberia seemingly qualify in the minds of most, there is less unanimity about the island societies of the South Pacific and Micronesia. Is the size, as in smallness of population, the main criteria for indigeneity, or is it some other factor, such as attachment to the land, longevity in place, or commitment to traditional non-industrial lifeways? Or is it perhaps the product of more recent historical processes? Is being indigenous simply to have been the victim of colonization?

To complicate matters further, there are difficulties identifying the unique identities of specific cultural groups. Some identified as indigenous are, others argue, really subsets of another culture. And the difficulty of identifying and describing small hunting-gathering societies has resulted, on occasions such as that involving the alleged Tasaday culture of the Philippines, in debates about the inclusion of a specific people as indigenous.

The debate over definition is, at one level, one of those arcane discussions which preoccupy lawyers, excite academics, and bore most observers. At one level, the issue generates tremendous passions. To be defined as aboriginal in Canada carries special legal, harvesting, and political rights. To fall outside the definition in Australia has considerable individual and community implications. The creation of a global movement of indigenous peoples has had profound effects on long-ignored and marginalized peoples, who have found common cause and political voice with comparable societies around the world. Many non-aboriginal people shake their heads in astonishment, and often dismay, with the expanding definitions of indigenous and the growing assertiveness of indigenous groups. The debate rages within indigenous populations as well. Many indigenous peoples recoil at the increasing reliance on legal definitions, established under national laws or court interpretations of treaties, and argue that mindset, spiritual orientation, and attachment to traditional values matter more than bloodlines and fit with externally imposed legal descriptions.

But the question is, at many levels, important. There are several major international organizations of indigenous peoples. Their membership defines, for that organization, the meaning of indigenous. There are numerous international groups with the self-appointed task of supporting indigenous communities in their political, legal, and other struggles. But here again the definitions vary widely. Survival International focuses on groups following what they define as a traditional lifestyle. The International Work Group on Indigenous Affairs adopts a much broader model, including societies in transition and many groups that are defined elsewhere as ethnic minorities.

Consider some practical examples. Every definition of indigenous would include the Yanomami of the Amazon River basin. They live in a traditional way and face enormous challenges based on major resource developments on their lands. But what about the Ainu? The original inhabitants of Japan's Hokkaido Island live, for the most part, amongst the Japanese people of the region and are indistinguishable to most

outsiders. The Mayan and Inca peoples of Central and South America are the ancestors of large and complex societies that, at the time of European contact, dominated the region. Subsequent depopulation and Spanish conquest transformed these peoples into impoverished and colonized societies, sharing many economic and political characteristics with the so-called traditional indigenous cultures. Africa presents comparable problems of definition, particularly in the postcolonial era. In Africa, is indigenous status a function of population size, land use systems, or access to political power? The Hutu and Tutsi of Rwanda are large, complex, and mutually antagonistic peoples. Are they indigenous? They are rarely seen as such, by dint of their role within modern political structures in the region. In contrast, the !Kung of Botswana, a small, mobile population who live in the Kalahari desert, are typically seen as indigenous and attract a great deal of international attention. And what about China, a modern state that denies the existence of indigenous peoples within its borders? In the case of Mongolia, the dominant population is rooted in a mobile, pastoral lifestyle. Can an entire country be considered indigenous? And, in a similar vein, are the now (largely) independent island nations of the South Pacific indigenous peoples?

One of the most intriguing groups, often active participants in international indigenous activities, are the Mapuche people of southern Chile. The Mapuche had a large, agricultural society for generations before the arrival of the Spaniards. While their communities did not have the dramatic cities and architecture of the Inca and Aztec, they had a complex social and administration system which, in fact, helped them keep the colonial authorities at bay for quite some time. After the Spaniards arrived in 1541, they moved aggressively against the Mapuche, attacking the people and often engaging in brutal raids. But the Mapuche retained their independence and, in fact, maintained an independent state. A comprehensive "War of the Pacification of Araucanía" saw the government, enriched by mineral discoveries and much better armed, move against the Mapuche settlements and culture and, by 1883, force them off their lands and onto a government reservation. The size of the population – over one million in the 1990s – protected the people against the government's actions, which escalated through a series of land dispossessions, the use of *colonias* or *reducciones* to replace collective landholdings with individual property rights, restrictions on their rights, and various assimilationist efforts. The Mapuche faced even greater dislocations under the Allende regime and organized

domestically and internationally for greater recognition of their rights and needs, declaring:

We have a heavy responsibility before our people, a responsibility which cannot only be turned into solidarity support from exiles. We should consider that our Chilean brothers are providing new examples of daily combat against Fascism. The tyrannical regime is already showing signs of exhaustion and weakness as the present economic and political crisis shows us. The conditions for its destruction are presenting themselves. Let us support our brothers in order to finish once and for all with the murderer of our people. The alliance and unity with the working class ought to manifest itself in all its forms. Only unity offers a guaranteed success in our struggle. With all our strength we shall overcome ten times over!<sup>1</sup>

While very few dispute the intensity and seriousness of the Mapuche struggle, the question remains: are they an indigenous people? Because of their large population, largely sedentary existence, and state of agricultural and political development in the years before the expansion of Europe, it would seem doubtful – although the Mapuche clearly have found common cause with indigenous peoples facing attacks on their culture, land, and political rights.

Guatemala presents similar questions. The Mayan people, who have endured shocking oppression throughout a period of military rule and civil conflict, often attend political gatherings of indigenous peoples. They are not a mobile population, but rather live as peasants in a society dominated by a small elite of landowners. The issue for the Mayan, much like the Mapuche, is that they had developed an extensive agriculture society before being overrun by the Spaniards. Subsequent to the invasion by newcomers, they have been stripped of their lands, subject to missionization, and forced to endure generations of marginalization, brutal attacks, and genocide. Beginning with the interventionist measures of the Barrios regime in the 1870s, the Mayans were forced to serve as laborers for rich landowners and had few social, cultural, or political rights. Poverty became endemic, and throughout the twentieth century, the state routinely used its military authority and police powers to overwhelm Mayan aspirations. There is no doubt but that the Guatemalan peasants have had a difficult and often painful history; it is debatable whether they fit into the various definitions of indigenous, save for those that focus almost exclusively on the relationship of colonized to colonizer.

In India, indigenous populations have been described under a variety of titles: Adivasis (original inhabitants), Aborigines, Adim Jati (ancient

tribes) or Vanavasi (forest dwellers). The government of India refers to them as “Scheduled Tribes” and their territories as “Scheduled Areas.” India offered no official definition of how a group became indigenous, but an official suggested that such peoples had “‘primitive’ traits, distinctive culture, geographical isolation, shyness of contact with the community at large and backwardness.” Under this definition, the groups ranged in size from the Gondas and Bhils, with millions of people, to the Great Andamanese, with less than two dozen, and according to government records counted for over 51 million people in 1981. As one observer wrote of the peoples:

The indigenous tribal peoples of India have lost most of their tranquil habitats; they have also lost some of their confidence and identity. Forces of oppression and exploitation have encroached upon tribal life and have reduced many of them to sub-human conditions. The laws meant for their protection have remained largely ineffective. However, efforts made for the spread of education and development of tribal areas have made some impact in raising their standard of living. Social activists have contributed to mobilizing them for the protection of their rights. The picture is rather gloomy and unclear but there are rays of hope on the horizon.<sup>2</sup>

Viewed through the lens of colonial victimization, interesting definitions of otherness have emerged in recent decades. Fijians, for example, are rarely considered to be indigenous peoples, because they control their country. Other, larger populations such as Mayans in Central America, which had a substantial and complex agrarian society before the age of European expansion, are deemed to be indigenous because of their political powerlessness and exploitation by government and military elites. Over time, the concepts of indigenous and aboriginal have become increasingly synonymous with powerlessness, marginality, and social distress – approaches which are Eurocentric in origin and crisis-based.

Julian Berger, a long-time United Nations official and international political advocate, determined that:

The notion of belonging to a separate culture with all its various elements – language, religion, social and political systems, moral values, scientific and philosophical knowledge, beliefs, legends, laws, economic systems, technology, art, clothing, music, dance, architecture, and so on – is central to indigenous peoples' own definition.<sup>3</sup>

The same definition, of course, could apply to being "ethnic," a much more inclusive category than indigenous. He then continued to argue that

An indigenous people may contain all of the following elements or just some. Indigenous peoples:

- i) are the descendants of the original inhabitants of a territory which has been overcome by conquest;
- ii) are nomadic and semi-nomadic peoples, such as shifting cultivators, herders and hunters and gatherers, and practice a labour-intensive form of agriculture which produces little surplus and has low energy needs;
- iii) do not have centralized political institutions and organize at the level of the community and make decisions on a consensus basis;
- iv) have all the characteristics of a national minority: they share a common language, religion, culture, and other identifying characteristics and a relationship to a particular territory but are subjugated by a dominant culture and society;
- v) have a different world view, consisting of a custodial and non-materialist attitude to land and natural resources, and want to pursue a separate development to that proffered by the dominant society;
- vi) consist of individuals who subjectively consider themselves to be indigenous, and are accepted by the group as such.

Perhaps the most widely cited definition is that of José Martínez Cobo, an Ecuadorian diplomat, written when he was working for a United Nations subcommittee on the rights of indigenous peoples in the early 1970s.

Indigenous communities, peoples and nations are those which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing in those territories, or parts of them. They form at present non-dominant sectors of society and are determined to preserve, develop and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories, and their ethnic identity, as the basis of their continued existence as peoples, in accordance with their own cultural patterns, social institutions and legal systems.<sup>4</sup>

In expanding on this basic definition, Martínez Cobo highlighted the importance of the continued occupation of traditional lands, a direct link with the original inhabitants of these lands, and a unique and identifiable culture and language. He also emphasized the importance of the definition of indigenous resting with the group and the self-identification

by the individuals involved:

On an individual basis, an indigenous person is one who belongs to these indigenous peoples through self-identification as indigenous (group consciousness) and is recognized and accepted by the group as one of its members (acceptance by the group). This preserves for these communities the sovereign right and power to decide who belongs to them, without external interference.

Another important definition of indigenous comes from the Commission on Human Rights, United Nations Economic and Social Council. They have stated it thus:

Indigenous Populations are composed of the existing descendants of the peoples who inhabited the present territory of a country wholly or partially at the time when persons of a different culture or ethnic origin arrived there from other parts of the world, overcame them and, by conquest, settlement or other means, reduced them to a non-dominant or colonial situation; who today live more in conformity with their particular social, economic and cultural customs and traditions than the institutions of the country of which they now form a part, under a state structure that incorporates mainly the national, social and cultural characteristics of other segments of the population that are predominant.

Although they have not suffered conquest or colonization, isolated or marginal groups existing in the country should be regarded as covered by the notion of "Indigenous Populations" for the following reasons:

- a) they are descendants of groups which were in the territory of the country at the time when other groups of different cultures or ethnic origins arrived there;
- b) precisely because of their isolation from other segments of the country's population they have preserved almost intact the customs and traditions of their ancestors which are similar to those characterized as indigenous;
- c) they are, even if only formally, placed under a state structure which incorporates national, social and cultural characteristics alien to theirs.

As one observer wrote of this attempt.

This complex and somewhat legalistic definition has been adopted by the United Nations, and is now generally accepted worldwide. In its simplest sense, it serves to identify pre-existing societies that have been overrun by global capitalism, and who have previously had a long identification with a land they considered their source of life and their birthright.<sup>5</sup>

Despite its obvious strengths and comprehensive nature, this definition was not picked up by other UN agencies, and has not formed the basis of the work of the most important UN initiative in this area, the Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

The draft Universal Declaration on the Rights of the Indigenous Peoples prepared by the Working Group does not include a definition of indigenous peoples or populations. In an effort designed to ensure that no groups were excluded, by way of technical definitions, from participating in the discussions of the Working Group, they opted to rely on self-definition. The refusal to codify questions of membership has had the effect of weakening the efforts of the Working Group and has muddied the waters in the international political community about the very nature of the indigenous population and hence their claims to international attention. Despite these shortcomings, and because of the complexity of the indigenous experience around the world, there has been little urgency attached to creating a working and sustainable definition of indigenous peoples.

The problem with definitions rooted in contemporary political circumstances is that they ignore the ebb and flow of human history. That is to say, while being sensitive to political realities they fail to account for historical context and developments. Much of the political agitation has focused on the activities of European colonial powers and on the small, indigenous societies displaced by intrusions associated with the transplanting of European settlements. This emphasis ignores equally disruptive and authoritarian invasions of indigenous territories by Asian, African, and other societies and skips over the experience of indigenous societies separate from their contact with and conquest by outsiders. The standard definition, seeking to capitalize on public support and motivated by political movements on a national, regional, and global scale, highlights weaknesses and freezes indigenous cultures in a specific time, space, and relationship to other peoples. It is, ironically, a strikingly eurocentric approach, in that it times and orients indigenous cultures to the actions of outsiders. Put another way, such definitions tend to be driven by non-indigenous, liberal agendas that set indigenous peoples up as foils for the excesses and shortcomings of western industrial society.

As Tapan Bose, a leading activist on indigenous rights, observes,

Among other things, this approach also fails to explain the phenomena of survival of the "indigenous" identity in the face of adversity. Moreover, ethnic identities have also survived. But not all ethnic communities have lived in

isolation. Many ethnic communities have completely lost control over their "homeland" or the terrain which was the cradle of their culture. Yet their identities have survived. What then are the differences between the ethnic groups and the indigenous peoples?

This does raise a rather ticklish issue. The white Afrikaners from South Africa, after the abolition of apartheid, went to the Working Group as an indigenous people. Likewise, the Kashmiri Pundits community of India has been attending the sessions of the Working Group with the blessings of the Indian Government. Both these ethnic communities did not suffer from isolation or discrimination. On the contrary, until recently they were in power and were practising discrimination against others.

Historical context is clearly important. At different points in time, indigenous peoples have warred with and displaced other indigenous peoples, such as the Iroquois moves on the Huron, the Blackfoot intrusions into Cree territory and Kwakwilt incursions into Coast Salish lands. To put it more simply, indigenous peoples have not all been marginalized, discriminated against, or conquered. Indigenous peoples have exploited, defeated, ruled over, and dislocated other indigenous societies. Indigenous cultures flourished in most parts of the world, before and after the age of European expansionism, and the struggle for survival in the contemporary world continues in Africa, Asia, South America, South East Asia, the Pacific Islands, and many other regions of the world. Definitions of indigenous in most common usage arise out of the European colonial experience, originated in western industrial nations, and reflect the historical and contemporary realities of these social relationships.

Even a brief consideration of the complexity of the indigenous situation reveals the difficulty of finding a precise and uniformly acceptable definition. Who, for example, qualifies as indigenous in Africa, the Middle East, or South Asia? If the hill tribes of India and Southeast Asia are included in the definition, in recognition of their relative powerlessness within contemporary nation-states, does the concept of indigenous invariably relate to weaknesses and inability to control one's territory, resources, and economic independence? For many observers, indigenous peoples are invariably mobile, hunter-gatherer societies; are agricultural cultures automatically excluded from inclusion? Colonialism, seen as the defining characteristic of many indigenous peoples in North America and Australasia and other districts, cannot be a central determinant

without including the peoples of India/South Asia, Indonesia, and other such locations. How, under these confusing situations, does one differentiate between ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples? This line has been difficult to draw at the political level within the United Nations, where indigenous societies are viewed as a sub-group of minorities. In Canada, to be indigenous is to qualify for aboriginal rights as an Indian, Inuit, or Métis person under the constitution and British common law. Indigenous, in this context, equates to being a descendant from original occupants. By this definition and by the application of the law, this means that aboriginal people from Australia are not indigenous if they take up residence in Canada.

The issue of definition is of crucial political importance in the contemporary world, and has shaped both government policy and public reaction. Since the 1970s, supporters of "indigenous" societies in crisis have generally been better able to attract attention than ethnic minorities facing discrimination and hostility within a nation-state. Western governments, capitalizing on the flexibility provided by national wealth, have taken comparatively generous approaches to indigenous peoples, tackling long-festered legal issues and seeking to provide a greater measure of social justice. Poorer nations in Asia and Africa, in contrast, have paid much less attention to the "special" status of indigenous societies and have been loath to slow development, land reclamation or other policies deemed in the interest of the broader population. When supporters of indigenous peoples have been able to link the indigenous label with contemporary struggles – as they have done in Sarawak, the hills of Bangladesh, and Papua New Guinea – they have enjoyed considerable success in drawing media attention. Language, labels and definitions do matter.<sup>6</sup>

The complexity of the situation is outlined in a key statement by Survival International, one of the most active global support groups in this field. Declaring itself to be devoted to the support of "indigenous peoples," Survival International provides the following definition:

Tribal peoples are those who have lived in tribal societies for many generations; they are usually the original inhabitants of the places they live in, or have at least lived there for hundreds if not thousands of years. They usually provide for themselves, living off the land by hunting, fishing, gathering or growing vegetables or keeping their own animals. They usually also have an extremely strong cultural, emotional and spiritual attachment to their land.

Indigenous peoples tend to be "minorities": fewer in number than the other (non-indigenous) peoples who are often their neighbours. Their societies are distinct from those of non-indigenous peoples – they often have a different language, customs and culture inherited from their ancestors, and think of themselves as being different from neighbouring peoples.

Tribal peoples are not necessarily the same as indigenous peoples. "Indigenous peoples" are all the original inhabitants of a country, but "indigenous peoples" are only those who live in distinct indigenous societies. For instance, all Aborigines in Australia are "indigenous", but only some still live in indigenous societies and see themselves as indigenous people.<sup>7</sup>

Survival International, therefore, defines indigenous in terms of current lifestyle; an indigenous person living in a city and pursuing a professional career would not conform to the organization's concept of indigenous.

The International Work Group on Indigenous Affairs, adopting a broader, more comprehensive approach, defines indigenous as follows:

Indigenous peoples are the disadvantaged descendants of those peoples that inhabited a territory prior to the formation of a state. The term indigenous may be defined as a characteristic relating the identity of a particular people to a particular area and distinguishing them culturally from other people or peoples. When, for example, immigrants from Europe settled in the Americas and Oceania, or when new states were created after colonialism was abolished in Africa and Asia, certain peoples became marginalised and discriminated against, because their language, their religion, their culture and their whole way of life were different and perceived by the dominant society as being inferior. Insisting on their right to self-determination is indigenous peoples' way of overcoming these obstacles.

Today many indigenous peoples are still excluded from society and often even deprived of their rights as equal citizens of a state. Nevertheless they are determined to preserve, develop and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories and their ethnic identity. Self-identification as an indigenous individual and acceptance as such by the group is an essential component of indigenous peoples' sense of identity. Their continued existence as peoples is closely connected to their possibility to influence their own fate and to live in accordance with their own cultural patterns, social institutions and legal systems.

Indigenous peoples face other serious difficulties such as the constant threat of territorial invasion and murder, the plundering of their resources, cultural and legal discrimination, as well as a lack of recognition suffered by indigenous institutions.



At least 350 million people worldwide are considered to be indigenous. Most of them live in remote areas in the world. Indigenous peoples are divided into at least 5000 peoples ranging from the forest peoples of the Amazon to the indigenous peoples of India and from the Inuit of the Arctic to the Aborigines in Australia. Very often they inhabit land which is rich in minerals and natural resources.

Indigenous peoples have prior rights to their territories, lands and resources, but often these have been taken from them or are threatened. They have distinct cultures and economies compared to those of the dominant society. The importance of indigenous peoples' self-identification is crucial and a part of their identity.

Indigenous peoples face serious difficulties such as the constant threat of territorial invasion and murder; the plundering of their resources, cultural and legal discrimination, as well as a lack of recognition of their own institutions.<sup>8</sup>

The IWGIA definition retains the now-standard emphasis on marginalization, loss of autonomy and control over resources, and the prospect and reality of cultural decline. It highlights, in a variety of ways, the idea of indigenous peoples as being victims of broader processes, buffeted by the forces of development and rendered largely powerless within the nation state.

The issue at hand is clearly a complicated one. Depending on the approach taken, the concepts of indigenous, tribal and ethnic minority could be interchangeable or, at the minimum, substantially overlapping. The challenge is to find a definition that works historically. It cannot or should not be framed entirely within contemporary terms, like that of Survival International, for to do so would obscure important historical transitions. Ideally, it would not be Eurocentric and would not define an entire category of people solely on the basis of their relationship to an external group/force. It would incorporate the experiences of small societies in Asia, Africa and other regions and would not be influenced by the contemporary efforts of Asian governments to exclude their indigenous and small societies from inclusion within the indigenous political world. To be meaningful, a workable definition needs to focus on historical processes and relationships while remaining sensitive to the circumstances of local indigenous societies. At the same time, efforts to be comprehensive and inclusion in terms of definition, as with various United Nations' efforts, can strip the concept of its meaning. Equally, defining indigenous peoples in oppositional terms, principally in conflict with western, industrial societies, has its attractions.

The standard definitions of indigenous peoples suggest that colonization – the unwelcome domination of a people by an external political, economic and military power – is the key factor in determining the historical evolution of the society. In many definitions, the colonial relationship is typically highlighted as the most important determination of indigeneity. This approach is not advocated here, although colonial status is clearly a central element in the history of most indigenous peoples. For the purposes of this book, indigenous peoples have been defined as having the following characteristics:

1. Indigenous peoples, in the contemporary world, lack political power and autonomy and exist under the control of an immigrant or ethnic group-dominated state. It is the argument of this book that indigeneity does not spring from the lack of political power but, instead and crucially, that the absence of political power springs from their indigeneity. Adherence to indigenous values and traditions, it will be argued, ensured that the indigenous peoples remained outside evolving economic, social and political systems and, in fact, were generally seen as posing a threat to the evolving or imposed order.
2. They live in small scale societies, and have comparatively small populations. There should be no precise population cut-off.
3. Indigenous societies derive a profound sense of identity from place, and are strongly connected to their traditional territories and resources. As such, the alienation of their land or the lack of control over resources is often viewed as a critical element in ongoing definitions of the collective identity. Indigenous peoples have strong, multi-generational attachments to the land.
4. Historically, and in some instances at present, they are mobile peoples, ranging fairly widely over ancestral territories in a complex seasonal cycle tied to the rhythms of the year. Indigenous peoples tend to relocate throughout the year to take advantage of seasonal resources. Often they retain a major settlement where critical cultural and social activities are anchored.
5. Indigenous peoples are not socially static or unchanging, but they have tended to be conservative, in the sense that they did not respond quickly to social trends and cultural influences.
6. Indigenous societies did not adhere to western/industrial notions of individual wealth and generally approached the concept of a surplus economy with caution. The older definitions emphasized, implicitly

and formerly explicitly, the primitive/modern, subsistence/industrial dichotomy, and suggest, often incorrectly, that these societies lacked material wealth. The long-standing notion of indigenous societies as poor and marginal is not useful. Many indigenous populations were stable, well-fed and comfortable, often more so than many of the non-elite members of European societies until the twentieth century.

7. Adaptations away from traditional land use patterns, lifestyles and material culture do not, by definition, signal the abandonment of ancestral affiliations or values, and therefore do not cause these people to cease being indigenous.
8. Indigenous peoples are historical societies with a strong understanding of the past, often passed on through oral testimony, ceremonies and cultural activities. They view their experience from a very long perspective, celebrating their ancient attachment to specific territories and devoting a great deal of community time to the remembrance of ancestors and important events and processes. The sense of rootedness in the past is highlighted by the attachment of stories and legends to traditional lands and to the richness and texture of indigenous languages, both of which play a vital role in preserving the indigenous understanding of history.
9. Most indigenous societies are engaged in the decolonization and re-indigenization processes. They are participating in protests organized against colonial powers, global influences, environmental degradation and the like. They are seeking to maintain and protect their cultural independence in the face of formidable economic and political pressures to adapt to the national or global mainstream.

This is a lengthy and cumbersome definition. It draws heavily on Julian Berger's interpretation, but avoids relying on contemporary political power or powerlessness as the prime determinant of inclusion. It is important that indigenous peoples be defined by who they are, not who they are not. The role of outsiders/colonizing powers is obviously critical, but it is not the prime determinant of indigeneity. Indigenous peoples share some central characteristics: small size, attachment to the land, value system and culture rooted in the environment, commitment to a sustainable lifestyle, mobility, and cultural conservatism. With the inevitable regional and historical variations, they also share several key historical circumstances: economic and political domination by outsiders, selected integration/participation with non-indigenous societies, limited or non-existent power within the nation state, emerging involvement in a local or international process of decolonization. The definition,

appropriately, reflects the pre-expansion realities of indigenous peoples, conditions which defined these societies for numerous generations. It also acknowledges the shared experience of the post-expansion and contemporary world, where indigenous peoples seek unity and collective action in the face of powerful forces for change.

### The Contemporary Situation

The contemporary situation of indigenous peoples around the world is complex, to say the least. In the outback of Australia, young Aborigines wear "Air Jordan" t-shirts. Inuit in northern Canada watch "Sex in the City" on televisions connected to the 100-channel universe. Maori in New Zealand attend the best business schools in the country and, buttressed with professional credentials, find work with aggressive finance companies. The Ainu of Japan, struggling to hold onto the vestiges of language and culture in the face of an officially monocultural state, are at ease with the technology of the mobile internet. Aboriginal people in Brazil, although typically trapped at the bottom end of a poor society, ride to work on articulated buses and occasionally eat at McDonald's. American Indians across the United States work in luxurious casinos, drawing in millions of dollars from free-spending non-aboriginal patrons. Sami in Scandinavia drive Volvos to homes in modern northern cities. In an age of rampant globalization, as corporate influences and the dominance of free market forces link peoples around the world, indigenous societies find themselves torn between the localizing power of their cultures and the unifying forces of the contemporary world.

Outsiders have simple notions about indigenous peoples. Those who maintain clear aboriginal traditions – living off the land, speaking their language, adhering to ancient customs and rituals, following the dictates of established social and political structures – are clearly defined as aboriginal. Those who have shifted off the land, even if not by choice, who live amongst non-aboriginals, and who speak the language of the newcomer society and participate in the lifestyle of the majority, are viewed as peoples in crisis, or without identity, or as assimilated into the social mainstream. In most countries, so long as they do not cost taxpayers money or get in the way of development, indigenous peoples tend to be regarded as quaint, if anachronistic, reminders of an earlier time. To the extent that they are seen as impeding development or chronically drawing on government resources, indigenous peoples are

seen as a problem or, at best, as societies with problems. Reduced in the minds of most to caricatures, stereotypes, and museum exhibits, indigenous peoples find themselves fighting for acceptance and survival in a rapidly changing world that shows little respect for their rights or unique histories.

For non-aboriginal peoples the situation was easier a century ago. Nineteenth-century analysts of indigenous peoples knew who they were studying. The European world was awash in simplistic descriptions of indigenous peoples. Words like primitive, savage, pre-industrial, and heathen stood opposite Eurocentric self-descriptions of their cultures as modern, civilized, industrial, and Christian. This was a simple world, of nations destined by God to win and dominate, and of cultures doomed by history to wither and die. Notions of cultural supremacy characterized the entire colonial enterprise, and determined the manner in which generations of readers, students, and scholars understood the lifeways and cultures of indigenous peoples.

It is important to remember how much western understanding of indigenous societies has changed over the past centuries. Well into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, many intellectuals, politicians, government officials, and religious leaders held to a very simple concept of civilization. There was, under this longstanding construct, a single definition of civilization into which all cultures were supposed to fit. The British, French, Germans, and Italians – the ones who, in the main, wrote and defended the concept – held that they were “civilized” people, having separated themselves through their industry, innovation, and God’s blessings from “lesser” societies. At the opposite end of the civilized–uncivilized continuum, a simple way of presenting the relative merits of different peoples, rested Native Americans, Africans, and others. This paradigm held sway for a very long time, and fueled and justified much of the aggressiveness of the age of European expansion. Intellectually, these ideas were expressed in studies by scholars like Louis Henry Morgan and Edward Tylor. They and others argued that societies evolved from the lower stages of the ladder of civilization, moving steadily toward the better cultures of northern Europe and its settler colonies.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, new assumptions came into play. Led by the work of German anthropologist Franz Boas, a greater appreciation for cultural diversity and uniqueness found a strong academic following. Boas’s approach rejected the idea that all societies followed a common evolutionary path and instead focused on

the manner in which each culture reflected its historical and geographical context. Boas rejected the idea of one society being superior to another in intellectual or evolutionary terms, and emphasized that each culture had to be respected and understood on its own. Under this paradigm, cultures were unique, sharing some common influences and characteristics but reflecting a complex combination of economic, historical, geographic and social factors. The academic interpretations advanced by Boas and his contemporaries took many generations to filter into the public consciousness, and indeed assumptions about the primitiveness and backwardness of indigenous peoples continue to enjoy considerable currency in many countries.

Boas provided descriptions of indigenous societies which clearly differentiated them from western industrial societies. He wrote of the

general lack of differentiation of mental activities. In primitive life, religion and science; music, poetry and dance; myth and history; fashion and ethics, – appear to us inextricably interwoven. We may express this general observation also by saying that primitive man views each action not only as adapted to its main object, each thought as related to its main end, as we should perceive them, but that he associates them with other ideas, often of a religious or at least of a symbolic nature.

Boas described inherently conservative peoples, “so among primitive tribes, the resistance to a deviation from firmly established customs is due to an emotional reaction, not to conscious reasoning.” He highlighted the importance of ritual and ceremony, the deep spirituality of indigenous peoples, and the fundamental importance of relationships to land and animals.<sup>9</sup> By describing indigenous peoples in a positive, if distinctive, manner, Boas provided a foundation for a more comprehensive search for understanding of the diverse and very different original peoples of the world.

For very good reasons, then, simplistic evolutionary descriptions no longer hold. There is much greater appreciation of the cultural richness and social integrity of the small indigenous populations that have emerged around the world. Sparked by the assertion of cultural autonomy and political self-determination by and for the indigenous peoples, the new interpretation has found considerable favor around the world. But words on pages make for fine rhetoric and do not necessarily translate into a restructuring of relationships between indigenous societies and expansionist newcomers. And so, although holding their own, and

sometimes even winning the battle over language, description, and characterization, many indigenous peoples are losing the struggles over land, resources, political autonomy, and environmental security.

### Struggle and Survival

Perhaps unwittingly, advocates of indigenous rights have strengthened the impression that indigenous societies are powerless in the face of the unrelenting force of non-indigenous expansion. The adoption of the rhetoric of anti-colonialism and postmodernism has emphasized the various means that dominant societies, almost always European, used to dominate and destroy the indigenous world. The postcolonial struggle, one of the last half century's most critical political movements, has become the central feature of the analysis of indigenous cultures in transition. Not without justification, analysts from India to the American West, from New Zealand to Scandinavia, have highlighted the manner in which the actions, values, assumptions, and biases of the western capitalist and industrialist world undermined indigenous cultures. The sentiment is vividly expressed in the title of John Bodley's important work on indigenous societies in transition: *Victims of Progress*. These three words carry a succinct message: indigenous peoples were and are victims, the implication being that they were powerless in the face of European expansion. Progress, of course, represents European material and industrial values and ideology, with Bodley implying that the Europeans would not let indigenous peoples stand in the way of the pursuit of land, wealth, and strategic opportunity.

There is obviously a great deal of merit in this approach. Indigenous peoples have been pushed, prodded, administered, and otherwise dominated by external powers (as, it should be noted, have many European societies, from the Celts onward). The disruptions, on occasion, resulted in annihilation or decimation, intentional or otherwise. The mechanisms of non-indigenous control were many, and were often cruelly effective. It would be absurd and disingenuous to suggest that the advance of industrial, materialist, and politically expansionist states did not cause enormous pain and hardship for indigenous peoples around the world. But there is something simplistic in a mono-casual explanation, in which complex human relationships are attributed entirely to the influences of colonialism. If nothing else, this approach strips indigenous societies of agency and, ironically, builds an explanatory framework which is

dramatically Eurocentric in nature. Moreover, and more importantly, it fails to account for the survival of indigenous people and societies. If anything, indigenous people have found new and innovative ways to remain distinctive despite the power of global economies, western ideologies, and colonial militaries, as is fairly common in Third World and decolonization situations. Europe is blamed for the historical and contemporary problems of former colonies, a process which is emotionally appealing and politically safe. It does not, however, necessarily help explain as much about the indigenous-expansionist contact experience as many writers and advocates believe.

The fault, in part, lies with the very nature of scholarship. Academics, historians most notably among them, are preoccupied with identifying and explaining change. Researchers are drawn to conflicts and to the assessment of the impact and implications of social, economic, cultural, and political tensions. While scholars are very good at explaining these elements, they are significantly less successful at explaining continuity. The absence of change is, however, often as critical to understanding the past as are a series of specific transformations. This is nowhere more true than with the study of indigenous peoples. Because of the array of forces marshaled against them, the mere fact of cultural and social survival by indigenous peoples is a critical part of the story. Visit an *iwi* (meeting) among the Tainui people of New Zealand and convince yourself that indigenous cultures are dead and dying. Spend time in the Kalahari desert among the San, long believed to have been a dying culture, and convince yourself that the traditional ways are gone. Talk to a Mohawk matriarch and then argue that traditional social structures have been destroyed among First Nations who have lived closely with the newcomers. Follow an Inuit elder out onto the ice and try to sustain the idea that indigenous environmental knowledge is little more than superstition. Observe Aboriginal indigenous rituals in Australia's Northern Territory and assert that western culture dominates and obliterates all in its path. And so it goes around the globe, with Sami reindeer herders in Norway, Yanomami hunters in Brazil, Ilongots in the Philippines, the hill tribes of northern Thailand. These societies may be struggling, but they are also surviving and indeed many continue to thrive. Yet, surprisingly, this crucial element in the story is typically ignored or accorded very little attention.

The contemporary media and many scholars appear attracted by the prospect of cultural demise – a phenomena which has been around since the nineteenth century. Indigenous languages are a good case in point. The death, dispossession, and suffering of indigenous peoples generate

only occasional media coverage. Major construction projects, the expansion of logging activity or military occupations generate short-term sympathy for a displaced people, but focus quickly shifts to other world crises. This is particularly the case when indigenous interests parallel environmentalists' concerns; at such a time, indigenous values can be presented as a foil against western power structures and material excesses. The indigenous protesters and survivors fade to the back pages and eventually out of the public's view. But people react to the death of a language, a distressingly common occurrence in the post-World War II era.

The scene unfolds in a standard way. The media latch onto the fact that only one or a small handful of speakers of an indigenous language remain alive. In a manner that James Fenimore Cooper captured in his long-famous and still influential novel, *The Last of the Mohicans*, journalists sense that there is public interest in a death watch. For a few years, the stories are presented in a partially optimistic light: the elder is struggling to preserve what he or she can of the language, often working with linguists, anthropologists, and educators to record place-names, grammar, and vocabulary and thereby provide an oral archive for later generations. But there is an inevitability about it all. The elder is aging, no other indigenous members have come forward to learn and preserve the language, and death will signal the end of a centuries-old tradition. The stories are poignant and truly significant, and so a death watch ensues, as the "last of the [fill in the blank]" speakers disappears from the face of the earth. In such scenarios, it is not clear that the interest derives from a sincere concern about the indigenous culture. Instead, part of the attraction lies in the fact that such dramas reveal the excesses and shortcomings of western societies.

There is, among the non-indigenous observers, acquiescence to the inevitability of cultural death. After all, government officials, missionaries, teachers, and others have been forecasting the disappearance of indigenous cultures for almost two centuries. The strength and persistence of the industrial, commercial world, they have accepted, is such that the small, isolated indigenous societies have little chance. That they were generally wrong in the 1850s, typically misguided in the 1920s, and overly pessimistic in the 1950s, does not seem to deter the newest generation of pessimists from sounding the death knell of societies which have functioned and flourished in place for hundreds of years. Language, for many, seems to be the ultimate symbol of cultural death, even though the experience of the Irish – dominated by the British, largely stripped of their language, and yet major contributors to the

literary and cultural world – suggests that the loss of language does not inevitably result in a loss of identity. And so, the evidence that a staggering percentage of the world's languages have died out in the past 100 years or are in imminent danger of disappearing is taken as a sign that indigenous peoples are – this time – truly about to disappear.

Scholars debate passionately the importance of language in cultural survival. Many point to the manner in which indigenous languages are imbedded in land, lifeways and cultural ritual to support their argument that, without the language, indigenous cultures simply cannot survive. Speaking English, Chinese, Hindi, Spanish, Portuguese, or some other imposed language, the assumption goes, overwhelms traditional values and cultures and renders the indigenous society a pathetic shell of its former self. Indigenous leaders often echo these sentiments (often in the boarding-school or university language of the dominant society) and demand educational programs to sustain language fluency. In the process, their arguments lend credence to the sentiment that social systems will disappear without a strong and widely spoken language. And yet, even after the tragedy of having lost their language, indigenous societies persist. They find new ways to retain their uniqueness.

Consequently, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, a generations-old debate continues. Language issues form only part of the discussion. Other observers point to the decline of traditional harvesting, intermarriage with other cultures, social and economic crises, government intervention, and many other forces as representing both cause and symbol of the ongoing destruction of indigenous cultures. Across the continents, in political, cultural, and social meetings, the arguments continue. Will indigenous societies survive, in the face of all manner of human, biological, economic, and cultural domination? Can the remaining small, isolated, indigenous peoples, often inhabitants of the most remote and difficult terrain in the world but now found in densely populated urban environments, flourish in an age of globalization, resource development, and ecological change? Are the forces and influences of colonization so powerful that the remaining vestiges of indigenous societies will be undermined by the wealth, power, and determination of domineering industrial peoples? What possible resources can the small, politically isolated indigenous societies marshal in their efforts to survive, other than the liberal guilt of western societies? Are these cultures on their death-beds, sure to disappear in the crush of the modern world?

This attempt to write a global history of indigenous peoples seeks to balance two critical elements. The impact of the newcomers is crucial to

understanding the transformation and, at times, the destruction, of indigenous cultures. Parts of this story are well-known, although European activity has typically been emphasized and the colonizing activities of Asian and African states and societies have received little notice. The second element – the manner in which indigenous peoples survived in the face of massive pressures of change – has to be given expanded emphasis. This point is not trivial. Peoples as diverse as the Inuit and Maori, Chittagong Hill Tribes and Navajo, Sami and Mohawk, have faced and survived the multiple forces of colonization. They changed, adapted, resisted, protested, accommodated, and otherwise responded to a series of efforts to undercut, undermine, and disrupt their societies. Yet, to a degree that the contemporary rhetoric about colonization does not fully explain, these indigenous peoples remember their central stories and customs, retain centuries-old value systems, and continue to respect and understand the land and resources of their people. To a much greater degree than most outsiders recognize, long-standing family and community relationships remain pivotal in their lives. Even in highly developed western industrial countries, indigenous societies are not dead – and in most instances are not even dying – despite the efforts of newcomers and analysts to signal their impending doom.

To the surprise of several generations of observers, indigenous peoples have emerged as a potent political force in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Cynics attribute much of this rise in prominence to rampant liberalism, tied to guilt over the errors of paternalism and ecological destruction, but they do so in error. Indigenous societies have been struggling for survival for centuries, in some instances, and decades in others. Tactics have changed, as have the intrusions of outsiders, but the level of determination remains much as before. Indigenous peoples are organized on local, regional, national, and international levels. They have learned the tactics of political struggle and are mastering the techniques of the information age to generate support for their causes. They are at the forefront of struggles around the world, over control of traditional lands, the protection of the environment, economic and social rights, and against the intrusions of colonialism and the neo-colonialism of economic and cultural globalization and racism. Their battles hit the front pages, typically, when the struggle is over land and economic development but rarely on more social issues. The indigenous societies themselves tend to devote their greatest attention to matters of cultural sustainability and continuity or,

at a minimum, to managing change within certain cultural parameters. The specific struggles have changed. The European colonial powers of the eighteenth and nineteenth century have, in many places, been displaced by the domination of local social and economic elites. The reach of modern technology and contemporary economics affects indigenous peoples in profound ways, and in areas markedly different than earlier intrusions. But the indigenous will to survive lives on. Indigenous peoples have not yet surrendered to the power of external forces. It is important to remember, in order to place the centuries-long struggle in context, that most of the colonial empires which first colonized indigenous societies around the globe have disappeared or declined dramatically. The indigenous societies they colonized have persisted.

What follows, then, is an interweaving of two closely related threads in the lives of indigenous peoples around the world – the processes of externally driven change and the force of internally motivated cultural continuity. The book begins by exploring the manner in which human society divided – and the division was never precise – into surplus-based and needs-based cultures. It documents the manner in which the ideological, spiritual, and economic imperatives of expansion, largely but not exclusively European, resulted in the occupation of indigenous lands and the dislocations of indigenous peoples. It considers the manner in which indigenous peoples responded to the many changes and influences which threatened to overwhelm their lives. By taking the account through to the present, where the politics of assertive and demanding indigenous peoples has re-emerged as a significant influence in world affairs, this study seeks to remind readers about the vital connections between the past and present, history and contemporary grievances, social change and cultural continuity.

Non-indigenous peoples will continue their death watch. They will look for signs – wealthy Native Americans, Maori marrying Pakeha New Zealanders, Aborigines completing university degrees, Inuit children playing video games, Sami moving into cities, alcohol abuse among the Small Peoples of the Russia North – that traditional values are being undermined and that cultural globalization is overcoming the last vestiges of traditional ways. They will be right, in part, just as they are partially accurate when they observe with shallow sorrow the demise of yet another indigenous language and the loss of the cultural knowledge embedded therein. But a greater awareness of history and of the resilience, determination, and creativity of indigenous societies around

the world will alert the newcomers to a different pattern, one that they see all too seldom. The continuity of indigenous peoples, the manner in which they have lived, adapted, and responded to powerful, often devastating influences from outside their communities, is a critical element in world history. This, then, is a two-part story, of a difficult and often unsuccessful struggle to overcome the external forces of occupation, colonization, and destruction and of the internal and cultural determination to survive in the face of daunting pressures to change and disappear.

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## PEOPLING THE EARTH: THE GREATEST MIGRATION

The initial peopling of the earth is one of the most remarkable of human experiences, and yet we know very little about this expansion. Over many centuries, and in ways as yet not clearly understood, human beings found their way into virtually all of the habitable areas of the world. Indigenous peoples have clear and consistent explanations for their emergence in their homelands, ideas and explanations which often conflict with the arguments advanced by western science. Archeologists, now joined by biologists, linguists, geneticists, and others, have been painstakingly attempting to reconstruct one of the world's great mysteries. How, when, and why did human beings spread out across the globe? This great migration played a crucial role in shaping human history, and is obviously at the foundation of any attempt to understand the emergence of aboriginal societies.

### **Aboriginal Accounts of the Origins of the Earth and Human Life**

All societies have ways of explaining the origins of the earth and the emergence of humanity. In industrial nations, the scientific ethos is so profound that (even though scientists themselves indicate their theories are, at best, works in progress) all non-scientific explanations for the development of humankind are dismissed as myth and legend. Accounts of creation, however, are a crucial part of the indigenous world view and