Chapter 2: Becoming Indigenous:
Identity and Heterogeneity in a Global Movement

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Introduction

Two years ago an event took place in New York City that may be as momentous in a positive way for indigenous peoples throughout the world as Columbus’ so-called “discovery” of the Americas 500 years ago was calamitous. The Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples was finally signed into international law, after more than twenty years of contentious negotiation, by the United Nations General Assembly on September 13, 2007. While the difficult work of implementation still lies ahead, the ratification of this treaty by the majority of the world’s governments—passing “with 144 votes in favor, 11 abstentions, and 4 votes against” (Wessendorf 2008:10)—nevertheless signals a sea change in attitude towards the globe’s indigenous peoples, a population that, according to one recent estimate, numbers “over 250 million worldwide spread across more than 4,000 different groups” (Starn and de la Cadena 2007:1). The Declaration heralds, at the dawn of this millennium, that the genocide, exploitation, and forced assimilation of indigenous peoples, not to mention the calculated dispossession of their resources and involuntary removal from their lands, as well as the elimination of their languages, religions, and cultures—a tragedy that too often has been the lot of indigenous peoples on every continent and too seldom an embarrassment for the rest of the ersatz “civilized world”—will no longer be tolerated in the international community.

This chapter traces, in broad brush-strokes, how we got to this point in history and suggests possible trajectories that might be taken in the future. It seeks answers to fundamental questions about the indigenous movement and how it got on the world’s agenda: Why is indigenous identity, based on numerous local, “aboriginal,” societies, not only a new phenomenon but also a global one? Who are indigenous peoples and what accounts for the creation of indigeneity? How is the struggle for indigenous rights in Africa and Asia different from that in the Americas, Australia, and New Zealand? Who are the opponents of indigenous movements and what is their logic? Why are most indigenous peoples among the poorest populations in almost every country where there exist data yet in other cases indigenous peoples have been quite successful? How does the global mobilization of indigenous peoples relate to the issues of representation, recognition, resources, and rights?

While it is true that we have moved in recent decades from a situation where the extermination of indigenous peoples and their ways of life are no longer tolerated, and even though the aforementioned United Nations accord is now a formal covenant, indigenous peoples still stand precipitously on the brink of an uncertain future. The goal of this study is to give an overview of both the promises and challenges at this historic moment as well as outline the sheer heterogeneity beneath the common struggle of today’s global indigenous movement. The current situation is aptly summarized in the poignant words of Anna Tsing: “The global indigenous movement is alive with promising contradictions. Inverting national development standards, it promises unity beyond plurality: diversity without assimilation. It endorses authenticity and invention, subsistence and wealth, traditional knowledge and new technologies, territory and diaspora” (Tsing 2007:33). The creative potential unleashed on the world’s stage through the conjunction of these seeming antinomies is the topic this chapter explores.
Rethinking indigenous identity

Our starting point is the question of indigenous identity, which on cursory appraisal seems straightforward enough, but identity actually is a slippery concept. Social scientists debate endlessly about it and the topic fills the stacks of news-stands and libraries alike. Ethnic identity, national identity, gender identity, the identity of religions, cultures, and classes, not to mention the way these overlap or interconnect, are all analyzed in minute detail without much discussion, let alone agreement, about what identity means in the first place. This may, in part, be the source of the problem. Philosophers and mathematicians, by contrast, seem to have comparatively less difficulty with the concept. For them, the meaning of identity is about as tight as a concept can be. Technically speaking, a thing is identical only with itself. As Wittgenstein put it, according to Quine, “to say of anything that it is identical with itself is trivial, and to say that it is identical with anything else is absurd. What then is the use of identity?” (Quine 1987: 90).

“Genuine questions of identity,” says Quine, “can arise because we may refer to something in two ways and leave someone wondering whether we referred to the same thing” (1987:90). Thus when we are introduced to a man in the village of Mishongnovi on Second Mesa in Arizona, in the southwestern portion of the United States, we are told his name and that he is a member of the Coyote Clan. When he goes on business to the nearby town of Window Rock, capital of the Navajo Nation, he specifies that he is a Hopi; at a lecture he delivers in Chicago he claims to be Native American and at the Palais Wilson in Geneva, as he sits between a Dayak woman from Kalimantan, Indonesia and an Ogiek man from Kenya while attending an international human rights conference, he identifies himself, and is identified by others, as indigenous. The same man has claimed four different identities, yet none are inconsistent and all are true. How so?

Heraclitus as well as Hume both noted that although identity has to do with the notion of sameness, it becomes salient, paradoxically, only through the recognition of difference. Two points emerge. Genuine questions of identity arise in reference to differences in nomenclature; furthermore, the concept of identity is ineluctably relational. As the example above shows, although in one sense the man’s identity persisted throughout, in another sense different facets of that identity were created or inflected instrumentally. That is, while at one level his underlying personhood did not change, the contexts did, and this altered the structures of identification.

Like other collective or social identities, such as ethnicity (Cohen 1978), indigenous identity arises contextually as part of a series of nested dichotomizations in relation to the social distance between oneself and one’s interlocutors. But unlike these other identities, indigenous identity is an apical or universal category that subsumes others within it, without, however, diluting or challenging their integrity or existence. Furthermore, it emerges not only in the widest possible field of socio-political relations—international contexts of conquest, states, and empires (and thus is a phenomenon that is both new and truly global in its reach), but also designates the pre-conquest, non-dominant, and marginalized sectors within these political arenas (Starn and de la Cadena 2007, Friedman 2008).
**Indigenous peoples and the creation of indigeneity**

If authentic questions about identity are both relational and nomenclatural in nature, then as new identities emerge in the context of new social relations, new terminology, or at least new understandings of old words, is likewise required (Levi and Dean 2003: 4-9). Such is the case with the popular neologism “indigeneity.” The term designates a fresh conceptualization of indigenous identity under recent conditions of globalization, or what Niezen similarly intends by the word “indigenism,” a term he uses “to describe the international movement that aspires to promote and protect the rights of the world’s ‘first peoples’” (Niezen 2003:4). Increasingly over the last two decades disenfranchised peoples from around the world are discovering the liberating potential of the term “indigenous” and claiming this identity as a badge of pride wrested from oppressive conditions, thereby allowing actors from diverse local cultures access to a spanning universal category of collective empowerment predicated on primordial attachments. Put simply, these groups are becoming indigenous. As Hodgson says while comparing indigenous movements in Africa and the Americas: “Increasing numbers of historically marginalized groups are ‘becoming’ indigenous by joining transnational networks and alliances that promote indigenous mobilization and by demanding recognition of rights from their respective nation-states and the international community” (2002:1037).

The genealogy of this idea, that essentially has to do with postcolonial political mobilization across boundaries of various sorts, has salient historical antecedents, none more noteworthy than the creation of the category “Indian” in the Americas, though it too shares a colonial kinship with similar words like native, aborigine, and tribal, which in recent decades likewise have undergone emancipatory revaluations in meaning inverting the implications of social hierarchy, backwardness, and savagery that the terminology connoted in earlier practice. In his seminal essay, “Becoming Indian in Lowland South America,” David Maybury-Lewis begins with the observation that “[i]t was the European invaders of the Americas who, through a famous confusion, started to refer to the inhabitants of the new world indiscriminately as Indians. The Indians for their part had little sense of possessing common characteristics that distinguished them from the Europeans. Their Indianness was a condition imposed upon them by the invaders” (1991:207). He goes on to show, however, that this imposed category enabled diverse Native American peoples of Brazil, Argentina, and Chile to have a change in consciousness increasingly throughout the 1970s and 1980s that allowed them to transcend pre-existing “tribal” identities in order to form new pan-ethnic organizations at the level of the nation-state, concluding “that becoming Indian in lowland South America is a difficult process of trying to create Indian organizations at a national level that are strong enough and astute enough politically to be able to defend Indian lives and interests locally” (Maybury-Lewis 1991:233; see also Jackson 1991). In this chapter we make a cognate argument, but substitute the concept of indigeneity for Indian, and move the playing field from the national to the international level.

**The heterogeneity of indigeneity**

Indigeneity enables groups that from a conventional anthropological perspective would seldom if ever be lumped together—peoples as ethnologically dissimilar as Saami reindeer herders, Karen, Lahu, and other shifting cultivators known as “hill tribes” on the Thai-Burmese frontier, diverse groups of forest dwellers—formerly known as “Pygmies” and traditionally hunter-gatherers—
scattered throughout the Congo basin, Andean peasants, Australian Aborigines, and Native Hawaiians, to name but a few—to all find common cause under the universalizing banner of indigenism. Thus, rather than being a specific type of society, indigenous peoples instead represent a particular position or subjectivity vis-à-vis fields of power.

Yet this transcultural, essentially politico-economic, characterization only scratches the surface. Beyond ethnological differences, divergence in modern political orientations and economic philosophy likewise abound.

“Consider two contrasting examples. In Alaska, the Kaktovik Inupiat Corporation—an organization made up of Kaktovikmiut and local whaling captains—supports oil development in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR), which some native people feel was created without adequate consultation in the first place. This group has clashed with environmentalists, and wants to work with the Shell Oil Company. By contrast, Bolivian President, Evo Morales, the first self-declared indigenous president in modern Andean history, ordered troops to occupy his country’s oil and gas fields ceded earlier to multinational corporations. ‘Capitalism is the worst enemy of humanity,’ he announced together with his intention to renegotiate all contracts” (Starn and de la Cadena 2007).

The above contrasts are hardly isolated cases. On the contrary, the global indigenous movement is rife with diverse strategies for indigenous empowerment. Notwithstanding neat depictions of a “general indigenous model,” based on romantic notions of culture, supposedly typifying peoples as diverse as the Lakota, Wampanoag, Mapuche, Miskito, Adevasi, Maori, Kurds, and Pashtun as all more or less egalitarian, spiritual, consensus building, harmonious custodians of nature universally resisting capitalist encroachment (Fenelon and Hall 2008), in fact the global indigenous movement is far more complex and resists, if anything, a facile politics or an ideology of closure.

One recalls, therefore, that Mayan Zapatista rebels signaled their protest to increased neoliberal economic reforms brought about through Mexico’s signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) by launching an armed insurrection in the southeastern state of Chiapas on January 1, 1994—precisely so as to coincide with the date that NAFTA went into effect (Nash 2001, Stephen 2003), while on the other side of the border in the United States, “reservation economic developments” (Stull 1990) ranging from mining and forestry to tourism and commercial industry—not to mention the “casino capitalism” of the 367 American Indian owned gaming establishments (the latter industry alone generating $19.4 billion in 2004)—has now become legend (Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development 2008: 148). And in Canada, whereas Exxon Mobil showcases the broad support exhibited among Aboriginal and Métis peoples in the Cold Lake region of northeastern Alberta for the economic benefits—in the form of training, employment, and scholarships through the Native Internship Program—created by its affiliate Imperial Oil Resources, a company that operates the largest thermal in situ oil-recovery project in the world (Coyne 2008), on the other hand, in the Ecuadorian Amazon considerable concern has been registered over the negative impacts the OCP (Oleoducto de Crudos Pesados) project’s 503 kilometer heavy crude oil pipeline is having on the indigenous

1 Alejandro Toledo, President of Peru, also makes this claim owing to the fact that he was elected president before Morales in Bolivia and that he comes from a family of Quechua campesinos.
population of that region (*Latin American Herald Tribune* 2009). Meanwhile, the varied responses of Maori activists and entrepreneurs who sought to set up Maori language immersion schools in the wake of New Zealand’s recent dismantling of its welfare state in favor of privatization reflect the push and pull of competing understandings of the individual and community, as well as the way that multicultural neoliberal regimes engender novel indigenous subjectivities (Tuhiwai Smith 2007). The lesson overall is that today indigenous experience cannot be reduced either to capitalism or communism, the principles of free market competition, structural inequality, individual profiteering, and environmental degradation being as likely to be found in indigenous communities (sometimes with their blessings, sometimes without) as are redistributive economies, egalitarian social structures, and eco-friendly, communitarian values.

*Scales of difference, dimensions of divergence*

To merely observe that there exists heterogeneity in the identities, interests, and tactics deployed by those involved in the global indigenous movement will not suffice. Rather, we need to stipulate the form, range, and valences of these differences. First, we observe that not only between countries or regions but also within them there is dramatic heterogeneity among indigenous peoples in terms of political mobilization and levels of economic development. While it is true that as an aggregate Native Americans consistently have a significantly higher poverty rate than any other ethnic group in the nation (*Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development* 2008: 115)—a statistic that unfortunately characterizes indigenous people in virtually every country where they exist—nevertheless, tremendous discrepancies in wealth, and ipso facto power, exist among different indigenous peoples as much in industrialized countries as in developing ones.

Thus, in the United States for the year 2000, on the Crow Creek Reservation in South Dakota per capita income was $4,043. By contrast, at the Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community in Minnesota the per capita income in 2000 was $113,509—a difference in excess of nearly $110,000, thanks to the latter being a gaming reservation located in suburban Minneapolis-St. Paul, a major metropolitan area, whereas the former is situated on a desolate patch of land in rural Midwest America (*Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development* 2008: 118-119).

At the other end of the spectrum of international development is Nepal. It is one of the poorest countries Asia, uncomfortably sandwiched between India and China, two burgeoning economic power-houses. Yet just as in the United States, Nepal too exhibits a range of economic development among its diverse indigenous peoples. The Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities classifies each of its 61 *Adibasi Janajati*, that is, indigenous or tribal peoples, into one of five categories representing a continuum of politico-economic development. This ranges from peoples like the Lepcha and Majhi, categorized as “endangered” and “highly marginalized” through merely “marginalized” and “disadvantaged” groups such as the Tharu and Gurung, to “advanced” peoples like the Newar and Thakali, the latter now being successful businessmen in many parts of Nepal (*NEFIN* 2008).

Another component of these differences is the degree to which different groups are represented in umbrella organizations and transnational alliances (International Work Group on Indigenous
Affairs, hereafter IWGIA), Euro-American advocacy organizations (Cultural Survival), and electronic media (Internet), the combination of which has been critical to the articulation of modern indigenous rights movements, discourses, and practices. In Tanzania, for example, the national indigenous movement took shape through an umbrella organization known as PINGOs (Pastoral and Indigenous Non-Governmental Organizations) and, as elsewhere in Africa, focused largely on hunting and herding societies. However, representation in PINGOs was unequal. In its member organizations, Maasai representation dominated over that of other pastoral nomads, like the Barabaig; this despite the fact that today many Maasai are no longer full time transhumant pastoralists and instead rely on sedentary agriculture, wage labor, and other forms of income. The sustained participation and political voice in PINGOs of Tanzanian hunter-gatherers during the 1990s, such as the Hadzabe, was minimal at best (Igoe 2006).

Salient differences in economic development, organizational pluck, and cultural politics exist not only between indigenous societies but also within them. There is a tendency in much scholarship about indigenous peoples to conveniently speak of them in terms of groups rather than individuals. This has the unfortunate effect of eliding cross-cutting hierarchies of knowledge, gender, age, geography, and class that increasingly stratify indigenous peoples throughout the world. Whether it exists informally, as when one person dominates another in a conversation, or formally, for instance when a king dominates his subjects, inequality is a feature of most human interactions, notwithstanding important experiences of communitas (Turner 1995). But much of the literature on indigenous peoples still traffics in idealistic and essentialized images, failing to differentiate between an ethos of normative community equality commonly found in many indigenous communities, on the one hand, and, on the other, the very different reality, equally common, of inequalities among individuals in knowledge, power, and resources, a situation that is often a source of tension (Levi 1999). Even among famously egalitarian hunter-gatherers, they are not all equally egalitarian. Instead, there exists a spectrum of inequality, in this case gender inequality, among foraging societies determined by gender relations in subsistence activities, the relative dependence on hunting versus gathering, and the variable opportunity women have to distribute meat (a valued resource) outside the family (Friedl 1975).

So too, intra-ethnic inequality has fueled much organizing in the indigenous world. The aforementioned Zapatista rebellion (and ensuing violence that followed in the wake of the creation of indigenous autonomous communities) was not only an armed insurrection against corrupt local non-Indians who had obtained by nefarious means indigenous lands and siphoned off indigenous labor and resources, as well as a revolt against the Mexican state that had forgotten its early 20th century revolutionary compact with indigenous peoples in its zealous pursuit of late 20th century capitalism. It was also a decisive battle in a long festering virtual civil-war within the Indian community itself, between impoverished Tzotzil and Tzeltal Mayans in the highlands of Chiapas, on the one hand, and a corrupt but equally indigenous oligarchy, on the other. Over decades, the latter had usurped the leadership in their towns which they ran as personal fiefdoms, maintained Mexico’s strong arm single party system in the countryside in exchange for patronage from state officials, squelched alternative peasant and religious organizations that challenged “traditional” (that is, oligarchic) authority, and freely killed, maimed, or expelled individuals who opposed the status quo—thus creating, on the eve of the rebellion, many thousands of displaced and disgruntled indigenous Chiapanecos ready to support the Zapatista cause (Harvey 1998, Levi 2002, Rus 1994).
Less dramatic but equally noteworthy are peacetime differentiations of individuals in indigenous communities. Claudia Briones (2007) discusses various constructions of self and cultural style in terms of diverse idioms all expressing variations on a common theme of Mapuche identity in Chile. She notes that the diverse cultural politics of belonging at contemporary Mapuche gatherings encompass people who articulate their identity by dressing in bombacha garb in order to inflect their attachment to rural identities and “traditional” Mapuche culture, as well as urban youth in jeans and face piercings who identify as part of the new movement known as mapunky (punk Mapuches) and mapuheavy (heavy metal Mapuches). All of this is part of the Mapuche experience today (Briones 2007).

What accounts for such radical differences within and between indigenous groups? There are no easy answers, but undoubtedly it has to do with an imprecise calculus of internal cultural variables articulating with exogenous political and economic structures. Variations in economic vitality, political consciousness, and social re-awakening among indigenous peoples are surely correlated with some combination of differences in their natural and cultural resources, different demographic factors, different levels of education, differential skills in organizing, networking, and coalition building, differential access to capital, information, and global media, and different histories of interactions with both state agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The impressive economic success of the Nepalese Thakali mentioned above no doubt is in part attributable to the fact that they were able to parlay their traditional knowledge and skill as salt traders whose home territory was located along the main caravan route between Tibet and India into modern business savvy, just as the predominance of Maasai in Tanzanian indigenous rights fora trades on the political marketing of their handsome cultural distinctiveness and warrior aesthetics, traits that have captivated variously the fascination, horror, and admiration of outsiders since British colonial days.

Similarly, the variables that determined the difference between the aforementioned Crow Creek Reservation, which is one of the poorest Indian reservations per capita in the United States, and the Shakopee Mdewakanton reservation, which is one of the most wealthy, stem directly from the political and military decisions which their respective ancestors took during the same critical event: the Minnesota Dakota War of 1862. That uprising, not unlike the turmoil and violence that split Mayan communities in Chiapas during the late 20th century, was not only a war against whites and the federal government that had usurped their land, but was a tragic civil-war within the Dakota Nation itself, the painful wounds of which have not healed to this day. The 1862 conflict represented a crisis of conscience and divided loyalties that tore apart the Dakota, a divide between so-called “friendlies” and “cut-hairs” who were Christianized Indians that had taken up farming and, most importantly from the perspective of Abraham Lincoln, had aided white settlers and government soldiers during the war, on the one hand, and so-called “hostiles” and “long hairs,” on the other, who were more trenchant in maintaining the ways of their forbears, including ultimately rising up in arms to defend their land and feed their families, now on the brink of starvation, from the invaders. In the end, the small group of farmer Indians or so-called “Peace Party” was rewarded by being allowed to stay at a few tiny places in the tribe’s home region of Minnesota, hence the Shakopee community, while the rest of the Dakota people (men, women, and children), after being interred in a virtual concentration camp at Fort Snelling and enduring at Mankato the largest mass execution in United States history, were ultimately
shipped off to desolate reservations, such as Crow Creek, far out on the windswept plains (Anderson and Woolworth 1988).

In other situations it is not tribal history that authors present circumstances so much as new structural openings and strategic maneuverings made possible through modern regime changes, democratization, roving capital, decentralization, and economic liberalization that have to do with contemporary indigenous realities. The case of indigenous peoples in Siberia during the post-Soviet era is instructive. As Balzer (2003) demonstrates, the Sakha, known to outsiders by the ethnonym Yakut, had a more or less successful history of negotiations with Moscow, clearly related to the vast unexploited subsurface energy and mineral wealth of their lands—and even though today they are one of the poorest per capita republics in Russia, they did manage to secure regional autonomy. Thus they exist as the Sakha Republic, or Yakutia, and overall are a “rich and pivotal” indigenous people of Siberia (Balzer 2003:115). At the other end of the spectrum of success, but still partially within the Sakha Republic, are the “poor and despised” Yukagir, a tiny minority of 1,142 persons (according to the 1989 census) with a vocal intelligentsia but without a land-based “homeland.” Between these two extremes are the 22,500 Khanty who, like the Sakha are “mired in oil” but, like the Yukagir, are a traditionally hunting, fishing, and reindeer breeding post-tribal people now deploying their shamanic religion and dramatic rituals of reindeer sacrifice (which were prohibited under Soviet rule) as strategic vehicles for public protest, cultural revival, and political mobilization (Balzer 2003: 123-130).

Indigenous spaces: tradition, civilization and its discontents

Nor can sentimental attachments to ethnic essentialism, “unchanging tradition,” cultural purity, pre-industrial technology, territorial integrity, or rooted intimacy with the land be marshaled anymore as ubiquitous or defining traits of indigenous peoples (if indeed they ever could). True, in May 2008 CNN broadcast images around the world of an “uncontacted tribe” in the western Amazon near the Peru-Brazil border—naked men painted red and black shooting arrows at the low flying plane that took the photos—but conditions of such pristine aboriginality are not only the rare exception, but are so at variance with most experiences today, indigenous and otherwise, as to make them newsworthy internationally. More typical of many indigenous lives in the 21st century are those of Australian Aborigines who, even though they are still stereotypically associated with the “outback,” nowadays are more likely to be found in Sydney and other urban centers (Merlan 2007), just as “[i]n the United States the majority of Native Americans live in cities,” (Ramirez 2007:1), although again the popular conception is that Indian issues are largely confined to reservations in the rural West.

In like manner, the Baguio Declaration of the Second Asian Indigenous Women’s Conference, ratified by 100 indigenous women from twelve Asian countries, addressed explicitly the emergent problems faced by pastoralists in Mongolia transitioning to cities on account of the loss of their livestock due to climate change, as well as the heightened vulnerability of indigenous women similarly forced to become urban dwellers after being displaced from tribal areas (Baguio Declaration 2004). While most indigenous peoples fall somewhere in between uncontacted Amazonian tribes, on the one hand, and citified Indians in the United States, on the other, in general “Diaspora” as well as “Homeland” are equally descriptive of the traditional centers and geographical distensions characterizing indigenous peoples today (Clifford 2007).
To be sure, in some places uncanny cultural continuity as well as territorial integrity still does exist: the Hadzabe in Tanzania, for instance, have in fact managed to remain in the same general area and maintain a foraging way of life that has changed little in centuries, perhaps even millennia, despite having long been in contact with both pastoral and agricultural societies and, increasingly after the 1990s, tourists intent on seeing Africa’s last nomadic hunter-gatherers (Marlowe 2002). Yet where indigenous communities have been torn asunder by the forces of colonial or neoliberal dismemberment, as is often the case, there are also creative mechanisms of “re-membering,” reconstruction, and reconciliation; lost members and even non-members connecting in novel ways in addition to new identities being woven from the shreds and patches of old ones. Thus, in the wake of the “Indian termination policy” of the 1950s whereby the United States sought to abrogate its obligations to federally recognized tribes, there arose during the 1960s and 1970s the pan-Indian movement, as Native Americans from various tribes and reservations increasingly gathered into urban Indian hubs (Nagel 1996, Ramirez 2007). One does not normally think of Silicon Valley, California, as a particularly “indigenous” place, but with the reinvigoration of the Muwekma Ohlones who were always native to the area, in concert with the in-migration of Native Americans from across the US, Mexico, and beyond, it has increasingly become so (Ramirez 2007). Imaginative redefinitions of belonging and expansive notions of membership are also exhibited by recent efforts at reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in northern Australia. There Yolngu symbolically tied in Australian “white fellas” with their community based on the hydraulic metaphor of the mingling of fresh water and salt water in the estuaries of Arnhemland, an ecological phenomenon where two come together as one without either losing its identity (McIntosh 2003). In the face of politico-economic realities, reconstruction and representation can also demand that indigenous peoples remake themselves in the stereotyped cultural image that the world expects of them, rather than allowing them to be seen as they actually are. Consequently, in order to regain lost homelands, Namibia’s Omaheke San, “a landless underclass of farm laborers, domestic servants, and squatters” (Sylvain 2002:1074, 2005a), are today compelled to deploy what Gayatri Spivak has aptly termed “strategic essentialism” (see Kilburn 1996), instrumentally manipulating their identity so as to conform to popular (mis)conceptions of “authentic Bushmen” as timeless hunters and gatherers, trackers of wild game still roaming the vast Kalahari, people essentially naked or scantily dressed only in skins, rooted inseparably to the land since time immemorial—never mind that for the Omaheke San today this image exists only as a dim and fading memory in the minds of a few ancient elders.

The dialectics of indigenous spaces may be defined, but not exhausted, by the thesis and antithesis of homeland and displacement. Instead, the seeming antinomies are partially resolved through their synthesis in an entirely new kind of space: cyberspace. Telecommunications in general and the digital revolution in particular go a long way toward the answering the question: Why now? Why at this stage of world history is there a global indigenous movement? In our media saturated world, where news and images can be flashed around the globe in seconds, bounced off satellites, modulated via airwaves, no country is really isolated, no place so remote that contact cannot somehow be made, sites located, communication achieved. Text-messaging, cell phones, chat rooms, e-mail, blogs, web-sites, and video conferencing via the internet, not only regularly connect transnational migrant K’iché men working in the United States with family members back home in their communities in the highlands of western Guatemala, but
create and maintain the linkages that gave rise to the global indigenous movement in the first place, enabling communication between Tuscarora (in New York) and Turkana (in Kenya), Saami (in Finland) and Seminole (in Florida), Ainu (in Japan) and Innu (in Labrador) and all of them with multilateral organizations and international institutions, such as the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, Cultural Survival, the Indigenous Peoples of Africa Coordinating Committee, and so on. Furthermore, as Niezen argues in “Digital Identity: The Construction of Virtual Selfhood in the Indigenous Peoples’ Movement,” the emergence, spread, and relative affordability of new information and communication technologies has encouraged local, primordial identities to be re-imagined in terms of a global and virtually borderless geography (Niezen 2005).

The veracity of the above notwithstanding, a digital divide still exists, perhaps in the indigenous world more than elsewhere—separating on opposite sides of an ocean of difference an elite cadre of internet insiders from the vast majority those who do not even have access to electricity. At the same time, it must be recalled that the modalities of intimate, organic, and embodied communication occurring in the context of face-to-face interaction that takes place in small scale societies where most of the world’s indigenous people still reside contrasts strikingly with the disembodied and segmented communications that typify the talk in cyberspace. Nevertheless, new communication technology offers a radical and phenomenally empowering medium that allows people to transcend instantaneously both spatial and cultural distances, as indigenous peoples and their supporters forge social and political alliances of all types in all corners of the globe. There is no turning back of the clock. Pen pals and snail mail could never have achieved this kind of connectivity and immediacy.

Polythetic classification: a flexible approach to unity amid diversity

Given the tremendous historical, political, economic, and cultural variety of peoples who identify as being indigenous, and are mutually recognized as such by others, one might well ask: is there any common core or set of determinative characteristics that sets them apart from other groups? Furthermore, how does this radical diversity square with a more or less “unitary” global movement? In fact, although there exists “no universally accepted definition” of indigenous peoples (MacKay 2007:51), several working understandings are widely consulted, as well as critiqued, by academics, advocates, and multilateral organizations working in the field.

Perhaps the definition most commonly used, implicitly and explicitly, is the one provided by José Martinez Cobo, Special Rapporteur to the Subcommission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, in his detailed 1986 report to the UN, Study of the Problem of Discrimination against Indigenous Populations:

Indigenous communities, peoples and nations, are those which have a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of society 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 (Cobo 1986: 379).

While the above definition is widely used, none of the initiatives of the UN concerning indigenous peoples, neither the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, nor the Regional Initiative on Indigenous Peoples’ Rights and Development, nor even the Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, has a legally binding definition of indigenous peoples (a situation that has caused consternation among some member states). At the present time, “the only definition of indigenous peoples that is legally binding to ratifying states is the one included in the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention 169 that was adopted in 1989 by the International Labour Organization” (Hodgson 2002:1038). However, this definition, like the one used by the World Bank (MacKay 2007), does not differ substantially from Cobo’s paradigmatic conceptualization, although Saugestad points out that Cobo’s characterization links indigeneity to the method of colonization, thereby separating the definition of indigenous peoples in Africa and Asia from those in the Americas and Australia, in essence bifurcating what would otherwise be a global indigenous peoples movement (Saugestad 2008). Significantly, she notes that the UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations “brings out four principles to be taken into account in any possible definition of indigenous peoples:

a) priority in time, with respect to the occupation and use of a specific territory;

b) the voluntary perpetuation of cultural distinctiveness, which may include aspects of language, social organisation, religion and spiritual values, modes of production, laws and institutions;

c) self-identification, as well as recognition by other groups, as well as State authorities, as a distinct collectivity; and

d) an experience of subjugation, marginalisation, dispossession, exclusion or discrimination, whether or not these conditions persist” (Saugestad 2008:165).

These four features—historical antecedence, cultural distinctiveness, self-identification, and non-dominance—appear repeatedly as fundamental criteria of indigenous peoples. Still, problems remain if the intent is to deploy all in a universal definition. The first problem is the notion of prior occupancy. The Maasai are by far the most prominent actors in indigenous rights movements of East Africa, yet they are not, nor claim to be, “first peoples” in the region since they migrated south into Kenya and northern Tanzania probably only in the last several hundred years (Hodgson 2002:1087). Thus, there exist other peoples in these countries who antedate them historically, yet are not included in the indigenous peoples movement.

Similarly, the difficulty with the criterion of cultural distinctiveness is that it may be linked to arbitrary markers of alterity, and thus the problematic logic equating “culture” with “difference” (Kenrick and Lewis 2004:8, Rosaldo 1989). Some groups therefore have had trouble being recognized as indigenous precisely because they were unable to demonstrate sufficient cultural distinctiveness. We have in mind here the difficulty certain groups of Native Americans, such as the Mashpee in Massachusetts (Clifford 1988) or the Lumbee in North Carolina (Blu 2001), have had in gaining federal recognition as bona fide “tribes” since they do not conform to stereotypic images of American Indians, and in other respects may be largely indistinguishable from surrounding populations (Lambert 2007). A similar dilemma has faced certain San groups in

So too, if self-identification is called forth as a critical criterion of indigeneity, what is one to make of situations where groups, who by all other indices are unequivocally indigenous, do not aspire to label themselves as such, either because they do not know that the “indigenous” category exists, as in the case of the “uncontacted Amazonian tribe” mentioned above, or because they actively and assertively disavow the label, as is the case described by Quetzil Castañeda in a provocatively titled article, “‘We Are Not Indigenous!’: An Introduction to the Maya Identity of Yucatan” (2004). Are we to conclude therefore that these peoples are not indigenous because they have not self-identified as such?

Finally, indigenous peoples are conventionally defined as non-dominant, because they are minority populations or are otherwise dominated, subjugated, or marginalized. Yet in Bolivia, Indians are in the numerical majority, the Quechua and Aymara alone number an estimated 62 percent of the country’s population (Layton and Patrinos 2006), not even counting the smaller populations of Indian peoples in the eastern part of the country. On the other hand, if non-dominance is interpreted not in terms of population but rather marginalization or economic standing, then the Newar and Thakali minorities might not qualify as indigenous since these peoples are among the most prosperous in Nepal, and have been for years, the Newars being renowned throughout the Himalayas as merchants and fine artisans, just as the Thakali historically were long-distance traders. Or again, consider the Otavalo: a Quichua speaking group in highland Ecuador, a people who are simultaneously profoundly traditional yet remarkably successful entrepreneurs marketing Andean textiles and music throughout the world via an ethnically based transnational trade network of producers, distributors, and retailers (Colloredo-Mansfeld 1999, Meisch 2002), a cultural practice that sometimes has garnered them the dubious distinction of being called the “Jews of the Andes” (Freeman 1997).

In sum, if even the four basic principles stipulated as necessarily being part of any definition of indigenous people cannot be applied universally, then, given the apparent ambiguity of the concept, is it better to dispense with it altogether, and perhaps call into question the legitimacy of the international rights movement which is predicated upon the concept, on grounds that are at once scholarly, practical, and political, as some critics have argued (Beteille 1998, Kuper 2003, Igoe 2006)?

The answer, put simply, is a resounding “no.” The idea of “indigenous peoples” is neither vacuous nor uncircumscribed, and its conceptual complexity demands not that we disqualify it as a meaningful analytic category upon which to base a social movement but only that it be understood as a heuristic device in the manner of a polythetic rather than a monothetic class. The latter is the kind of category most people have in mind when they think of demarcating the boundaries of a particular class or kind of phenomena: certain traits are specified and the possession of said traits are both necessary and sufficient criteria for inclusion in the class. But this is not the only way to delimit a category. Polythetic classification, a concept that draws on the Wittgensteinian idea of “family resemblances” and is used regularly in fields as diverse as biology, philosophy, linguistics, psychology, anthropology, and sociology (Needham 1975),
offers an alternate way to reduce the complexity of phenomena into conceptually meaningful categories. As Bailey (1973: 294) puts it:

Unlike a monothetic type, a polythetic type has no unique set of defining features. It can be formed from many different combinations of values on the component variables, hence the name polythetic. As Sokal and Sneath (1963:14) say: ‘A polythetic arrangement, on the other hand, places together organisms that have the greatest number of shared features, and no single feature is either essential to group membership or is sufficient to make an organism a member of the group.’ In a polythetic group each feature is shared by many members, and each member possesses many features. If no single feature is possessed by all members, the group is termed fully polythetic.”

This is precisely the scenario that obtains in the delimitation of “indigenous peoples.” The pronounced heterogeneity of indigenous peoples we have reviewed so far—in terms of political mobilization, economic standing, territoriolarity, history, discrimination, prior occupancy, organizational savvy, structural dislocation, poverty, international connections, technological access, cultural distinctiveness, rootedness to the land, and self-ascription as indigenous, to name a few of the dimensions of difference that have been discussed—can all be easily accommodated with the notion of a polythetic class (see also discussion in Barume 2000: 35-37). Consider a set in which there are seven features (1, 2, 3, etc.) spread among five indigenous societies or peoples (A, B, C, etc.) with each feature being represented among three societies. No society possesses all the features, and there is no single feature possessed by all the societies (Figure 1). In like manner, a rope is made because many fibers overlap and interweave in complex ways, not because there exists a single golden thread that runs throughout. So too the integrity that holds together the polythetic class of indigenous peoples is attributable not to their uniformity, but on the contrary to the combination and diversity of their complex interrelationships.

Figure 1: Polythetic classification, showing the variable interrelationships among components

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The *idée fixe* of indigenous peoples, which is the central organizing principle for the global indigenous movement, can be further thought of as akin to what anthropologist Victor Turner famously articulated as a *multivocal* symbol (see Turner 1967), a symbol that has multiple and diverse meanings, condensing a fan of referents into a single metaphor, image, or concept that functions as powerful mode of communication, often found in political and religious settings. The more public the symbol, the bolder and more ambitious its assertions, the more open it is to ambiguous and even contradictory interpretations. But therein lies its power, for it enables a wide variety of audiences to find meaning in its broad connotative range. Indeed, the polysemous quality of political language and multivocal symbols is at the heart of much social
and political organizing, illustrated, for example, by the relationship between national flags and political parties. “While the existence of different political parties shows that not everyone agrees about what their country stands for, everyone does agree that their country’s flag stands for their country” (Levi 2007: 251).

The flexible character of the indigenous movement is conceptually analogous to this. It is a flag, a banner, a rallying point, a dynamic, moving effort at collective action and political struggle seeking justice and social reform. It is a social movement not a social stasis, a process more than a category, a diligent work in progress with delicate negotiations taking place across contested boundaries on multiple fronts. It encompasses with pride and without apology, radically divergent discourses, practices, ideologies, and philosophies. Indigenous peoples, so it seems, would not have it any other way. Why? Because more than any other people they have been denied, literally as well as rhetorically, the very terms of life (which always involves noise and struggle), people who for too long have been treated as living fossils, who had open to them only two routes, equally unsatisfactory, towards their place in the future: either be annihilated (or swept aside) in the name of progress, on the one hand, or mummified, stuffed, and preserved as fragile relics in virtual museums, on the other. The global indigenous movement and its allies say “no” to both options, insisting that neither is a viable choice. Instead, for the first time in history, indigenous peoples are increasingly demanding, and getting, their rightful places at the bargaining table.

Most importantly, the legitimacy of the indigenous rights movement derives not from its logical consistency or formal features as a recognizable category, but rather quite simply because it exists as a political fact and global social movement in reality, commanding the attention of advocates and academics alike. Thus, contrary to the objections of critics like Béteille (1998), the question is not whether “indigenous peoples” makes sense scientifically as a generalizable category, nor whether it is sound ethnologically when applied either globally or to particular cultural areas, such as India. Ultimately, the question is not whether it is admissible anthropologically, but rather whether it is justifiable politically. On this matter, Kuper’s (2003) criticism of indigeneity as a platform for collective empowerment gets closer to the real issue, but in the end he too misses a crucial point of the indigenous movement. Kuper argues much too closely to the group and not sufficiently in regard to the group’s relationship with outside power holders in his critique of the term “indigenous” and indigenous peoples’ movements. This becomes clear when he takes as an example the case of Canada:

[In Canada, one] has rights only if one has a certain number of appropriate grandparents. This might be fairly called the Nuremberg principle. A drift to racism may be inevitable where so called cultural identity becomes the basis for rights, since any cultural test (knowledge of a language for example) will exclude some whom might lay claim to an identity on grounds of descent. In the indigenous-peoples movement, descent is tacitly assumed to represent the bedrock of collective identity (2003: 392).”

In the first place, we argue in the development of the polythetic approach that descent is but one of a number of important factors that may define indigeneity; but is neither necessary nor sufficient. True, indigeneity may often involve indigenous descent, but it does not have to, nor does it always in actuality. One has only to recall the case of the Choctaw Freedmen in the
United States, former African slaves and their descendants who were incorporated as citizens into the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma in 1885, or even more strikingly and recently Sub-Comandante Marcos, the eloquent, masked, pipe-smoking, spokesmen of the Zapatistas whose words revolutionized the indigenous consciousness of a nation—the son of Spanish immigrants—to realize that membership in the indigenous movement cannot be neatly distilled as race. More than anything, indigeneity is a political identity. And in the second place, to equate those defined as indigenous with dominant peoples with plausible world power aspirations and capabilities, such as pre-World War II Nazis, fails to take into account a salient (although again, neither necessary nor sufficient) characteristic of indigeneity: people who have had an experience of subjugation, marginalization, dispossession, exclusion or discrimination, whether or not these conditions persist (Saugestad 2008: 165). For that reason, indigenous peoples should not be equated with state regimes intent upon using racist criteria to impose themselves on others. As Alcida Ramos puts it bluntly in her comment on Kuper, “[T]o put in the same category indigenous claims for legitimate difference, Nazi racism, and South African apartheid is to miss the point of differential power.” (Ramos 2003: 392). In sum, indigeneity is a discourse of empowerment and social justice for the most disadvantaged members of society, not a rhetoric of world power and domination. Just which strands in the polythetic class will be activated and chosen to count as “indigenous” is a radically contingent event. Ultimately, indigeneity is conjunctural.

Finally, we contend that the multiplex differences among indigenous groups do not weaken their collective struggle for recognition and rights. On the contrary, we argue that it is precisely these differences within the movement that are often its source of greatest strength. The divergences within and between groups self-identifying as indigenous, thereby claiming membership in this self-ascribed polythetic category, fosters creative engagements across boundaries of various sorts insofar as they partake of a relational vocabulary of belonging at different levels. From this perspective, political, economic, and cultural oppositions constitute not the undoing of the movement or the conceptual category upon which it is based, but conversely the terms for greater organic complementarity and overall integrity within it.

For example, consider how the differences that have resulted among indigenous peoples whose territories were bisected by the international boundary separating the US and Mexico—originally constituting crises and sources of considerable pain—in recent years have been re-imagined as bases for cultural sharing and collective reorganization. For instance, the Kumeyaay of southern California, who retained into the 20th century comparatively more ceremonial knowledge and fared better economically due to the demarcation of reservations (Shipek1968) and, more recently, substantial gaming revenues, have used their newfound wealth to host cultural gatherings with the Kumiai of northern Baja California, Mexico who, although poorer monetarily, are richer in the 21st century by having retained greater knowledge of the indigenous language, material culture, ethnobotany, and subsistence arts (Levi 1992).

Whereas the example above shows how cross-border differences have been utilized creatively within a single group of indigenous people, the illustration below shows how the self-ascribed category of indigeneity allows peoples without historical connections, common cultural ties, or geographical contiguity might nevertheless still make a virtue of their differences. Ronald
Niezen, comparing the involvement of the Tuareg and Cree in the global indigenous movement, writes that several decades ago:

The Tuaregs of the West African Sahara and the Crees of northern Canada would have had little or nothing in common. One is a nomadic pastoral people of the desert and arid savannah, the other a hunting, fishing, and gathering people of the northern boreal forest. One is a people with rigid class distinctions and with chiefs drawn from a nobility; the other an egalitarian society with a tradition of leadership based on hunting skill. One is a people in conflict with governments that are ready to use deadly force to restrict their mobility and their suprastate exercise of self-determination; the other is in conflict with a liberal democracy subject to embarrassment and public censure for the use of unnecessary force…

Yet in recent years these two groups have somehow come together in the same meetings under the same rubric: as indigenous peoples. Under these circumstances the basic common features of their histories become more important than the contrasts of environment, subsistence, social structure and politics. When we look for the things that indigenous peoples have in common, for what brings them together and reinforces their common identity, we find patterns that arise from the logic of conquest and colonialism…They are similarities based largely on the relationship between indigenous peoples and states…[which] usually fall into one of three categories…assimilative state education, loss of subsistence, and state abrogation of treaties (Niezen 2003: 86-87).

Facing common problems, indigenous peoples have learned from each other’s diverse circumstances, successes, and failures in dealing with their respective nation-states. The identity which indigenous peoples share therefore is born, so to speak, of their common differences. From an organizational perspective, their differences do not weaken the movement, but rather supply the sources of ingenious, and truly “multicultural,” transnational, collective global action.

Indigenous Identity in Continental Contexts: “Settler societies” versus the African/Asian Controversy

The first crucial dichotomy of any analysis of the world’s indigenous peoples begins with a discussion of the differences in the identification of indigenous peoples in so-called “settler societies,” as took shape in the Americas, Australia, and New Zealand, on the one hand, and in African and Asia, on the other—a process set in motion by the global consequences of what has come to be known sparsely as “The Conquest.” The European trans-oceanic expansion of the then known “Western” world began powerfully in the 15th century with groups of Spaniards purposely traversing the South Atlantic to the Caribbean, the Antilles, and the Americas to begin the installation of what would eventually become Spanish America. They began doing so in what they thought was an archipelago off of the coast of India. In a similar effort to reach India by sea, as opposed to the arduous land journey to “the East” of the previous centuries, Portuguese seafarers, soldiers, priests, adventurers, and traders, in the same period, circumvented the African continent, sailing around the Cape of Good Hope and penetrating the African hinterland and later India. One such Portuguese, Pedro Álvarez Cabral, sailing toward the Cape of Good Hope in 1500, was blown off course by a storm, “discovering” Brazil, thus beginning
Portuguese America on the Brazilian Atlantic coast. These dual processes, supplemented in the 17th and 18th centuries by Dutch, English, French, Danish and other European incursions into the Americas had profound impacts on the peoples the Europeans encountered. Europeans entering overseas lands already occupied by indigenous societies normally resulted in an all-too-familiar pattern that is widely documented: uneasy contact, warfare, ethnocide, and genocide (for classic scholarly accounts of European exploration, discovery, and colonization, see Parry 1971 and 1981).

The definitional issue of who are the “indigenous peoples” was and remains much less problematic in regions where peoples of European origins overran indigenous peoples to form “settler” societies in the Americas and, later, in New Zealand and Australia. But the definitional issue remains quite problematic in Asia and Africa. Though Europeans eventually went around the world to all the continents, they did not take over and remake, to the same degree, the entire social order, during centuries of colonization, outside the areas that we designate, here, as “settler societies.” In the Americas, Australia, and New Zealand, even after independence, peoples of European origins continued to rule; and to dominate the Indians, Aborigines, and Maoris respectively. Though European traders, adventurers, and colonists did, of course, enter into the Asian and African hinterlands, their descendents did not maintain long-term power as in the post-independence contexts of the Americas, Australia, and New Zealand.

Thus, of equal or greater significance than the different conditions of conquest, it was the varied circumstances of the postcolonial world that has shaped indigeneity in modern times. That is, in the postcolonial states of Africa and Asia, after independence, the colonials—by and large—went “home.” Not so in the Americas, Australia, and New Zealand where the descendents continued to dominate, politically and economically, and usually numerically as well. In Africa and Asia, however, after departure of the colonial European powers, these newly independent states concluded that the remaining peoples in these places were all indigenous. In the vigorous attempt to foster national unity in the new states, the argument that some minority peoples were indigenous whereas other were not, was often interpreted as a re-inscription of “tribalism” and invitation to ethnic conflict, though in actuality it often served as just another way to legitimize the right to rule for dominant groups. The articulation of indigenous rights in the postcolonial scenarios of Africa and Asia, thus, has historically encountered particular difficulties.

The first geo-political dichotomy, then, when analyzing the world’s indigenous peoples today, is between the “settler societies”—the places where Europeans established governing colonies and, later, their descendents founded independent states—and those which did not follow this pattern. Indigenous peoples are and remain clearly those who are non-European “First Peoples” in these settler societies (although the phenomena of Mestizo and Métis peoples poses interesting issues from another direction), whereas the problem of defining who is and is not indigenous, in the rest of the world, is complicated in other ways (Maybury-Lewis, D. 2002: 6).

Hodgson offers an insightful summary of this issue and why claims of indigeneity are so problematical, today, beyond the “settler societies” (Hodgson 2002: 1042):

In contrast to their American counterparts, African groups, as well as many Asian groups who identify themselves as indigenous, face a different set of issues. First
and foremost, while most groups are recognized as “indigenous” on the international scale, they are still struggling for similar recognition by their national governments. Moreover, they are doing so, at least initially, in terms of an international discourse and definition of *indigenous* that has been shaped by the experiences of indigenous peoples from the Americas, Australia, and elsewhere. The term has been used in Africa and Asia by distinct cultural minorities who have been historically repressed by majority populations in control of the state apparatus. Although few claim to be “first people” as such, these groups argue that they share a similar structural position vis-à-vis their nation-states as indigenous peoples in the Americas and Australia: the maintenance of cultural distinctiveness; a long experience of subjugation, marginalization, and dispossession by colonial and postcolonial powers; and, for some, a historical priority in terms of the occupation of their territories. Perhaps, most importantly, in terms of the ILO and Cobo definitions, these groups now self-identify as indigenous, despite the arguments of their national governments to the contrary. They argue for what scholars and advocates have termed a “constructivist,” “structural,” or “relational” definition of *indigenous* that encompasses and reflects their situation, rather than more “essential,” “substantial,” or “positivist” definitions.

These self-identified indigenous people and their allies argue that whether a national government is controlled by people from another continent or from the same country makes little difference. Minorities like themselves—they argue—in decolonized areas need to assert their indigenous rights and identities if the new states (wherever they may be), which they are confronting, oppress them by jeopardizing indigenous knowledge, culture, and customary patterns of politico-economic activity, following the patterns of domination found typically in the “settler societies.” The momentum for Asian, as well as African, claims of indigeneity therefore remains palpable (Niezen 2003: 73-75; Kingsbury 1998: 449).

There are also certain differences in the history and organization of the indigenous movement in Africa and the Americas, both in terms of structure and longevity. In the Americas, the indigenous movement was a grass-roots struggle that grew organically among a number of organizations and networks from the bottom up, developing initially from the 1970s political consciousness of organizations like the American Indian Movement (AIM) and “Red Power.” By contrast, indigenous mobilization in Africa not only began much more recently, just in the 1990s, but also was built from the top down, by indigenous representatives in Geneva and New York, who then went back to their home countries to build coalitions that became the indigenous movement in Africa (Saugestad 2008).

The particular difficulties faced by indigenous peoples in Africa and Asia, fundamentally having to do with struggles to be recognized as “indigenous” by the governments of the nation-states wherein they reside, can best be understood by examining specific cases. Here we will briefly mention the situations in India and China, since these are both important countries with large indigenous populations, and although neither country recognizes these peoples as “indigenous” they are recognized as such by the international community and also self-identify as indigenous peoples, thereby aligning themselves with the global indigenous movement.
“The government of India has taken a firm position on indigenous peoples, insisting that there are none in India or, more precisely, that there are none who can be singled out as indigenous, since most peoples of the subcontinent have been there for thousands of years” (D. Maybury-Lewis 1997: 40). Instead, today there are 461 ethnic groups that the Indian state recognizes as Scheduled Tribes, sometimes also known locally as adivasi. They constitute 8.2% of India’s population, or 84.3 million people. (IWIGIA 2008: 359). These marginal peoples of the subcontinent are the so-called hill and forest tribes, minority peoples who nevertheless constitute the majority in the “tribal belt” of seven states in northeastern India between Burma/Myanmar and Bangladesh, literally and psychologically “a frontier” region, poor and far away from India’s major center’s of commerce and industry. The Indian constitution “established special protections for scheduled tribes and also specified that they should receive certain benefits. In 1993, for instance, 41 seats out of 545 were reserved for their representatives in the national parliament and 527 out of a total of 4,061 in the state legislatures” (D. Maybury-Lewis 1997: 41). Notwithstanding this political representation and theoretical legal protection, local authorities have routinely been willing to cooperate with developers and their state allies to aggressively go after tribal lands and resources, pushing aside many of these safeguards in a pattern all too recognizable in the experiences of indigenous peoples in Canada, the U.S., Latin America, Africa, Australia, and other parts of the indigenous world.

Given the antiquity of settlement for most peoples in the subcontinent and thus the virtual inability of determining who were the “natives” who were the “invaders,” Béteille has argued on anthropological and historical grounds, that in the Indian context, the designation “tribal peoples” is preferable to “indigenous peoples” since the former term refers to a “type of society or stage of evolution [rather] than to the priority of settlement” (1998:188). Similarly, Kingsbury details the Indian government’s rationale for refusing to recognize domestic indigeneity (Kingsbury 1998:435):

The Indian government’s position contains an implied argument that a forensic inquiry into who appeared first in India would be unhelpful and undesirable, for two reasons. First, some groups meriting special protection would be excluded while others not in need of such protection might be included. Second, recognition of special rights and entitlements for having been the earliest or original occupants might spur and legitimate chauvinist claims by groups all over India, many of which might be very powerful locally while in some sense “nondominant” nationally. Claims to historical priority already feature in some “communal” conflicts and incipient chauvinist movements abound, as with the pro-Marathi, Hindu-nationalist Shiv Sena party in Maharashtra. In effect, if some people are “indigenous” to a place, others are vulnerable to being targeted as nonindigenous, and groups deemed to be migrants or otherwise subject to social stigma may bear the brunt of nativist “indigenist” policy. Once indigenousness or “sons of the soil” becomes the basis of legitimation for a politically or militarily dominant group, restraints on abuses of power can be difficult to maintain.

Though defending a distinct regime type and confronting different historical and cultural circumstances, the leaders in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) make an analogous
argument. State actors in the PRC assert that the nation succeeded, through its revolutionary struggle, to liberate the Chinese people from colonial oppression, bringing in its stead the Maoist revolution. While China supports the United Nations’ efforts to promote the rights of ethnic minorities, maintaining (without explaining why) that there are no minority-based rights organizations in the PRC, it can hardly accept that there could be those who need liberation in the “New China,” a nation-state whose founding principal was the Marxist-Leninist vision of man’s liberation from oppression.

For this reason, there are 105,226,114 people (8.47% of the PRC’s population) in 55 government recognized minzu or ethnic minority groups, 20 with less than 100,000 each according to the 2000 census, but no “indigenous peoples.” “Indigenous peoples” is not a term the state recognizes. The ethnic minorities living in the PRC are concentrated in the southwest, particularly in Yunnan province where there are 25 of the 55 officially recognized. Others live in the north, the east, and on the island of Hainan. They are mostly subsistence farmers, have illiteracy rates of over 50%, and are among China’s poorest people (IWGIA 2008: 257). In February 2007, for the first time since the beginning of the Revolution, the China State Council announced, in its 11th Five-Year Plan (2006-2010) policies and plans for the development of ethnic minorities. The goal was to effect improvements in six areas: income, education (increasing the mandatory time youth must remain in school to nine years), infant survival rates, quantity of ethnic language publications, professionalization for employment, and “urbanization” [sic]. It remains to be seen how these policy intentions will be implemented, given the PRC’s weak provincial record, in recent years, of working with the poor, rural, and vulnerable citizenry. That these people are outside of the predominant Han ethnic group adds another dimension to the potential problems surrounding implementation of these plans (IWGIA 2008: 256-257).

Not surprisingly, the highest concentration of ethnic minorities in the PRC is in the province of Yunnan, a frontier area bordering the Tibetan Autonomous Republic, India, Burma/Myanmar, Laos, and Vietnam: countries also containing numerous ethnic minorities, particularly in their border regions. The government has initiated an effort to revitalize Yunnan’s border areas, focusing, again, on keeping youth in school, income generation projects, infrastructure and housing investment, culture, health, and training in science and engineering. The programs are important for showing the good intentions of the PRC government. But there is little involvement of the minority population in the design or implementation of these projects. Misappropriation of funds and corruption is not uncommon. It remains to be seen the result of the upcoming five-year plan. What is already clear is that—with the exception of the PRC’s current effort to publish more of the minority languages, while giving access to the region to scholars, of the Han majority, to study cultures and languages in order to preserve them—the overriding ethos of the state’s effort is assimilationist. Around the world, we have observed that state mandated assimilationist policies tend to usher in a cluster of problems for cultural survival, especially when associated with non-participatory planning. The tendency is to both disrespect and undermine indigenous cultures.

The “Four R’s” of indigenous movements: with a focus on the San of Southern Africa
Several authors state that indigenous movements and the scholarship describing them can be summarized in terms of four key concepts, each of which begins with an “r.” Harris and Wasilewski (2004) write that indigeneity, as an alternate worldview, is characterized by “Four R’s (relationship, responsibility, reciprocity, redistribution) versus Two P’s (power and profit).” However, we view this stark dichotomization between an indigenous weltaschauung and a non-indigenous one rigidly differentiated from the former in these terms as more a function of misplaced romanticism than ethnographic reality. We therefore instead follow Hodgson who rightly observes that the indigenous movement and the expansive literature that has traced its transformations, is largely concerned with four cross-cutting issues: representation, recognition, resources, and rights (Hodgson 2002). These “Four R’s,” as we call them, characterize not only the global indigenous movement, but also individual indigenous movements in different parts of the world.

In what follows, we sketch some of the ways in which the politics of representation, recognition, resources, and rights play out among indigenous peoples. Rather than illustrate these issues in terms of globe trotting ethnology, we have instead elected to focus this discussion ethnographically, drawing on the example of the San or so-called “Bushman” of southern Africa, among whom we conducted field research during the preparation of this chapter. The San comprise a series of distinct, yet culturally and linguistically related, traditionally hunter-gatherer groups (Ju/'huansi, Khomani, !Xun, Khwe, etc.) inhabiting the more arid and remote regions of South Africa, Botswana, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Zambia, and Angola. Today numbering slightly over 100,000, these “First People” of southern Africa are struggling to overcome their painful experiences of exclusion and, via meetings, workshops, organizations and informal encounters, are beginning to forge a meaningful social movement and common San identity (Le Roux and White 2004: 12) that transcends other boundaries. Following Hodgson’s four frames of analysis, we describe below a few of the ways San struggles can be understood in terms of what we are here calling the Four Rs of indigenous movements.

**Representation**

The way indigenous peoples are represented in public fora, both by themselves and others, is at the heart of many anthropological studies, since it connects the politics of identity and cultural authenticity debates, on the one hand, with the ability of peoples to be recognized as indigenous by states, the international community, and the media, on the other (Warren and Jackson 2002). “In the absence of electoral clout, economic prowess, or military might, the ‘symbolic capital’ accompanying authentically performed cultural identities represents one of the most influential political resources available to indigenous peoples” (Levi and Dean 2003:15, see also Conklin 1997).

Put simply, the more that indigenous peoples fail to conform to popular stereotypes and essentialized images of who and what indigenous people are, the more they risk being seen as culturally “inauthentic.” That is, “the more they become savvy about the media, politically skilled, linked to the international community…the more they begin to slip out of the ‘savage slot’ (Trouillot 1991)—whether noble, natural, primitive, or romantic—in spite of the fact that this is the rhetorical position from which they derive much of their symbolic capital, moral
authority, and political clout” (Levi and Dean 2003: 2-3). The world community, so it seems, likes its indigenous people culturally distinct in stereotypically recognizable ways.

In many cases, there seems to be an odd calculus at work whereby the less clothes one wears (or the more clothes one wears that are distinctly ethnic) the more one’s indigeneity is unassailable, an exotic aesthetic of primitive authenticity that not only perpetuates Western fictions and re-inscribes indigenous peoples as perennially subaltern, but poses an unfortunate identity challenge for increasing numbers of real indigenous people on the ground. On the one hand, indigenous people who become displaced from their homelands, or are no longer anchored to their putatively timeless traditions—impoverished individuals forced to subsist as rural farm workers or urban slum dwellers—risk losing the acknowledgement of their indigeneity since they come to be seen as indistinguishable from other sectors of the nation’s poor. At the other end of the spectrum, indigenous people who work as doctors, lawyers, politicians, economists, computer scientists, academics, engineers, or other professionals jeopardize their indigeneity by having become too successful. Having achieved a certain status they are now culturally indistinguishable from other educated and accomplished sectors of the nation’s dominant class. In both cases—indigenous elite on the one hand and indigenous poor on the other—the individuals in question tend to be seen as people who have “lost touch” with their culture. As such, they are judged more by the affinities they share with others in their class, yet the representation and recognition of indigeneity is usually tied to culture.

Lest there be any doubt that indigenous people are acutely aware of the authenticating power the Western gaze casts on the colonized, and the subaltern occasionally feeling compelled to conform to the fantasies of those from the Developed World wielding cameras and video-recorders, consider the case of South Africa’s Kagga Kamma theme park described by Richard Lee (2003). Here, according to a promotional pamphlet from the 1990s “several families of stone-age Bushmen…let you share in their age-old skills of hunting and firelighting, and in the beauty of their handicrafts, dancing, and story-telling” (White cited in Lee 2003:92). The Kagga Kamma “Bushmen” are in actuality ≠Khomani San, people who had lived for decades in servitude to white farmers in the northern Cape, and whose distinct identity as San was officially erased ever since they were re-classified as Coloured in the racist lexicon of apartheid, as if this minority were no different from the mixed race people who predominate in this region of South Africa. However, by the 1990s the ≠Khomani San at Kagga Kamma were again wearing “traditional” clothing while performing daily for throngs of tourists in exchange for modest wages and rations, “attempting to reinvent themselves as ‘authentic’ carriers of an age-old tradition” (Lee 2003:92).

The representation of the primordial Bushman continues, catering to the appetites of the industrialized West. Along the road to the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park, ≠Khomani men dressed in loincloths pose for photographs for tourists while they sell ostrich eggshell necklaces and other small trinkets. The men in loincloths dressed that way to attract business, exemplifying what is known in the anthropology of tourism as “staged authenticity.” When destitute natives hungry to sell a few crafts represent themselves in accordance with tourist fantasies of the timeless primitive it is one thing. It is quite another when national museums also perpetuate this image. The South African Museum in Cape Town, among other things, showcases various native cultures of South Africa and is especially proud of its galleries exhibiting delicate San
rock art, including the famous Linton Panel, and its renowned ethnographic display on the San. We were surprised, however, to find that all of the descriptions of San artifacts and culture were in the present tense. Thus, a visitor might be left with the impression that contemporary San men in South Africa were still running through the veld barefoot in pursuit of eland with poison arrows while their women gathered bush foods with digging sticks. Nor was there any mention of the dire economic straits of contemporary San in South Africa or any of the social ills besetting their communities. There, San are represented ahistorically as pristine aborigines—as little changed today as they have been for millennia.

A very different portrayal of the San is found at !Khwa ttu, a San owned development project designed as a culture and education center, located about an hour north of Cape Town. Situated on 850 hectares of nature reserve in the hills overlooking the ocean, San from different countries in southern Africa come here to learn from each other as well as share their knowledge with visitors from around the world. In the process, it provides a unique venue for San to participate in diverse training programs and represent themselves and their culture in a dignified way that is neither apolitical nor reduced to timeless romanticism. From the moment visitors arrive, they find intelligent San (clothed not in loincloths but rather khaki uniforms with the insignia of the center on their shirts) happy to answer questions and proud of their culture and heritage, an identity that in previous years had to be hidden or managed as stigma. Besides being taken on a tour of the park where San guides demonstrate various aspects of traditional knowledge, subsistence arts and culture, visitors are also escorted into a gallery displaying old photographs graphically portraying the little known history of San ethnic cleansing as well as brilliant pictures showing what real life is like for contemporary San, from the smiling faces of children at play in the Kalahari to the harsh realities of poverty, alcoholism, and HIV that plague their communities. “Yet,” as their brochure proclaims, “!Khwa ttu is not a monument to suffering or misery. It is a living celebration of past and present San culture; an uplifting and inspirational experience.”

**Recognition**

The politics of representation are inextricably intertwined with the politics of recognition, as suggested in the section above. The first step towards securing rights as an indigenous people qua “indigenous” is being recognized as such by the nation-state wherein the group resides. However, this is often a considerable challenge for two reasons. First, indigenous peoples have to protect resources and demand rights from the very nation-states that historically disenfranchised them in the first place. Second, in some parts of the world, particularly in Asia and Africa, official policy holds that either all citizens are equally indigenous or that no indigenous people exist as a separate category, which amounts to the same thing. Hodgson notes: “Demanding such recognition involves indigenous rights activists learning the relevant legal and bureaucratic categories and processes, lobbying at various levels and sites of government, appealing to the popular media, seeking international support, and molding their images, identities, and agendas accordingly, so that they may be properly recognized, remembered, and acknowledged” (2002:1041).
One of the central paradoxes implicit in the politics of acknowledgement is not only that oral cultures increasingly are having to become literate in order to pursue their struggle for rights and recognition, and similarly fluid practices and flexible social boundaries often become fixed, but frequently indigenous peoples ironically are required to break tradition in order to keep tradition—for example, by divulging beliefs and practices to uninitiated audiences in the context of litigation over protection of sacred sites or culturally restricted knowledge, as has happened in Australia, North America, and Melanesia (Weiner 1997, 1999). Furthermore, at the very time indigenous peoples are required to press their claims in ever more sophisticated manners before agents of the nation-state, bureaucratic organizations, and the international community, they must do so in forms that perpetuate essentialist notions of culture. That is, paradoxically, at the very moment that legal and political exigencies are demanding of them profound cultural change they are compelled, in order to be recognized as indigenous, to depict themselves as having remained frozen in time. Because bureaucratic and legalistic frames shape the terms by which indigenous identities are publicly recognized, too often indigenous peoples have been encouraged “to reify particular practices in order to define themselves as different from the wider society. Both the reifications and the demands which accompany them are products of legal systems” (Harris 1996: 1).

Because cultural distinctiveness is routinely deployed as a marker of indigeneity, the global indigenist movement has perpetuated the salience of culture over class in its struggles to have indigenous identities recognized. Yet Sylvain has written perceptively of the dilemma this poses for various San groups in southern Africa: “As criteria for recognition increasingly focus on ‘cultural’ features of indigeneity, to the exclusion of socioeconomic and political features, the majority of contemporary San find themselves compelled to choose between being excluded from the debate and asserting themselves in essentialist and primordialist vocabulary” (Sylvain 2002:1074). So, while some San peoples, such as the Ju/'hoansi of Nyae Nyae area of Namibia, some of whom were hunter-gatherers into the 1960s and 1970s, conform to popular conceptions of indigenous peoples struggling to regain control over their traditional lands and resources, other groups of San, such as the Omaheke of Namibia and ≠Khomani of the northern Cape region of South Africa, who were “incorporated” as exploited farm workers and squatters into the lower strata of their respective societies, must reinvent themselves to fit these primordialist frames.

Sylvain goes on to critique well intentioned advocacy groups, such as the Indigenous Peoples of Africa Co-ordinating Committee (IPACC) and the South African San Institute (SASI), for continuing to define indigenous cultural identity in terms of a relationship to land and traditional subsistence practices, since, according to her, culture is here ipso facto reified and defined in static terms. San who by choice or force of circumstance moved away from this primitive ideal, as defined by outsiders, are only left with the option of being considered “deculturated.” From this perspective, all culture change is construed as culture loss.

Sylvain notes that this has two unfortunate implications: “First, pegging culture to natural resource use may suggest that indigenous peoples’ cultural rights are limited to the preservation of their (traditional) culture (‘continuing their way of life’). Second, limiting a definition of indigenous culture to a particular relationship to the land precludes any role for political economy in the historical formation of cultural identities or cultural practices” (2002: 1076). In
In southern Africa, the category of ‘indigenous’ is superimposed on a political and cultural landscape that continues to be shaped by the legacy of apartheid. Unlike the peoples whose activism established the paradigm of indigeneity—Native North Americans, indigenous South American indigenous peoples, Australian Aborigines—most San are not struggling against a legacy of integrationist and assimilationist state policies; rather, they are fighting against a converse legacy of racial segregation and class exploitation, based on deeply essentialist conceptions of what constitutes cultural and ethnic difference. Those San who did face assimilationist policies are compelled to draw from apartheid definitions of culture in order to assert their rights, with the consequence that they continue to be seen as radically ‘Other’—as people struggling to regain their ‘primitive’ identity and lifestyle (Sylvain 2002:1082).

Although Nigel Crawhall, the director of the Indigenous Peoples of Africa Coordinating Committee, stipulates that Sylvain has since softened if not recanted her earlier position critiquing efforts to link indigenous identity to a particular relationship to land, her argument nevertheless does highlight the dangers of essentialism implicit in some indigenous movements and activism, ideas that reflect with the sentiments of various sectors of the diverse San population. At the same time, had it not been for the linguistic and ethnographic research undertaken by Crawhall and the South African San Institute (SASI), which anchored historical memories to particular places in the southern Kalahari and connected the ≠Khomani to specific locales through the procurement of N/huki place names, the original 1995 land claim would never have been a success and the hundreds of now landed ≠Khomani would still have remained landless. Therefore recognition of indigenous peoples needs to chart a middle course that neither reduces their identity to a primordial culture with a fixed subsistence form and relationship to land nor ignores contemporary realities where indigenous identities also emerged in historical contexts of developing political economies.

**Resources**

Besides the issues of representation and recognition, discussed above, one of the most significant and recurring sources of grievance for which indigenous activists and their allies seek redress are the conflicts that arise between the assertion of indigenous rights and claims on natural resources. While there is of course both overlap and contradiction in the diverse manners that capitalist exploitation, indigenous subsistence, and nation-state interests interact as stakeholders, the relationship between indigenous peoples and economic resources is of continuing concern to the indigenous movement in basically four ways: 1) threats to indigenous lands and resources by extractive industries, 2) the dislocation of indigenous peoples from traditional use areas in the name of environmental conservation, 3) the proposed linkages between biodiversity and linguistico-cultural diversity, with indigenous knowledge systems providing important keys to understanding nature, and 4) the nearly universal correlation between indigenous peoples and poverty indicators in most of the world.
All of these issues concerning the use of indigenous resources come together in salient ways among the San. In 1931, a huge portion of the Kalahari was declared the Gemsbok National Park. Initially, San families were allowed to stay in the park (by now mostly living around the entrance at Twee Rivieren) being regarded virtually as just another part of the natural wildlife of the area. In the 1950s and 1960s the few San who remained were occasionally trotted out for photographers as the last surviving Bushmen in South Africa. “However,” writes Lee, “the ≠Khomani had an ‘unfortunate’ custom: they liked to actually hunt and eat the animals they lived with, not just pose with them for photographs! This earned them the ire of the powers that be. In 1976, the South African game department chased the last of the ≠Khomani away from Gemsbok Park. The ≠Khomani became simply one of hundreds of displaced peoples cast adrift in South Africa by the workings of apartheid-era statutes. For years they lived dispersed on white farms in the northern Cape, eking out a living doing odd jobs, raising a few goats, and making use of veld foods” (Lee 2003:91). As such, the ≠Khomani became “conservation refugees,” a term referring to indigenous people who have been evicted from their lands in order to create conservation areas, game parks, and wilderness areas, a number that is estimated at over 14 million in Africa alone (Dowie 2006: 9). Below we examine how the other three issues (extractive industries, traditional knowledge systems concerning nature, and poverty) play out among the San in the case of the Hoodia plant.

Here the problem related to the use of indigenous resources exemplifies overcoming what has come to be known as “bio-piracy,” defined as “the appropriation of the knowledge and genetic resources of farming and indigenous communities by individuals or institutions seeking exclusive monopoly control (usually patents or plant breeders’ rights) over these resources and knowledge” (Bhatt 2004: 12). For Hoodia, traditional ethnobotanical knowledge was relied upon as a guide in the prospecting of this wild plant resource that subsequently was extracted and developed for world markets, yet without the prior permission or compensation of San, the relevant indigenous community (Geingos and Ngakaeaja 2002).

From time immemorial San peoples of southern Africa have known and used *Hoodia gordonii*—a cactus-like, succulent, perennial—as a hunger and thirst suppressant, especially on hunting trips. “Scientists at the South African Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (SACSIR) only recently came upon this traditional use of the Hoodia cactus and began research on it to determine its beneficial constituents. In 1995, the SACSIR patented Hoodia’s appetite-suppressing element and thereafter licensed the patent to the UK biotech company, Phytopharm, in 1997. In 1998, the pharmaceutical company Pfizer acquired the rights to develop and market the drug as a potential slimming drug and cure for obesity” (Bhatt 2004: 13).

Scientists and the pharmaceutical industry realized that the possible revenue generated from the exploitation of this knowledge was tremendous. “The current market potential for the dietary control of obesity is over US$ 3 billion per annum in the United States alone. Up until 2001, the San remained oblivious to the fact that their knowledge of Hoodia had commercial application, and that this knowledge had led to research, scientific validation, and the filing of international patents…They were, moreover, excluded from the lucrative deals being struck to develop the drug” (Wynberg 2005:851-852). Although the San historically have chosen passive retreat in the face of encroachment and usually avoid confrontation whenever possible, this time was different. In consultation with legal representatives, environmental groups, and indigenous rights
organizations such as the Working Group of Indigenous Minorities in Southern Africa (WIMSA), the San “claimed that their traditional knowledge had been stolen and that SACSIR had failed to comply with the rules of the Convention on Biological Diversity, which requires the prior informed consent of all stakeholders, including the original discoverers and users” (Bhatt 2004: 13). After a critical period of trust building between the San and the SACSIR, San efforts to protect their rights proved successful. “In 2003…following intense negotiations, an agreement was reached between the [SA]CSIR and the San, to give the San a share of the royalties from potential drug sales” (Wynberg 2005: 851-852).

The negotiations and successful settlement of the Hoodia case has far reaching implications. It has drawn the San, a formerly hunter-gatherer people characterized by a fluid social organization and a world view based on reciprocity and sharing, into the complex world of international law and policy frameworks concerned with patents and intellectual property rights (Chennells 2007). Most importantly, it is “[o]ne of the first agreements ever to give holders of traditional knowledge royalties from drug and product sales” (Wynberg 2005:851). Because it set an international precedent the case therefore received international attention. When New York Times reporter Ginger Thompson traveled to the southern Kalahari to investigate the story, Petrus Vaalbooi, looking forward to the income he hoped would help alleviate the #Khomani’s abject poverty, said: “I am very happy because it was not written that this day would happen…Now I know that God has not abandoned the Bushmen” (Thompson 2003:A4). When Thompson spoke with Jan Vander Westhuitzen, a San tracker, he evidenced a similar attitude of gratitude and generosity. “I do not think we are being robbed of our knowledge,’ he said, ‘I think that people who know how to live from the earth should share’” (Thompson 2003:A4).

Rights

The fourth and final issue that universally is of concern to indigenous movements and activists is the whole matter of rights. It is a topic of such centrality that it has already been mentioned in previous sections, but nonetheless here merits brief discussion on its own. It is of course implicit in rights to land and resources, but also encompasses areas of concern beyond these material domains. As Hodgson notes, “indigenous demands for rights…extend beyond their territorial resources. These demands hinge on the right to self determination and include the right to determine their own development and to control and protect their cultural knowledge and performances, material remains, languages, indigenous knowledge, and biogenetic material” (Hodgson 2002:1041).

There is, however, a difference between the way rights are commonly articulated by contemporary states and the notion of rights that typically are of concern to indigenous groups. The former, based largely on the Western philosophical tradition of social contract theory as initially formulated by Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, imagine rights in terms of civil and political rights, a universal feature of individuals, based on abstract moral principles. By contrast, indigenous peoples stress the concept of collective and cultural rights; individuals have rights by token of their membership in certain groups. Indeed, it is chiefly through their belonging to, and participation in, the locally anchored moral universes defined by these groups that individuals achieve their social being and essential personhood. In a very real sense, it is what makes them human in the first place (Levi and Dean 2003:9-18).
Reflecting this idea of rights as it obtains in Africa, Parker Shipton observes: “Individuals do not have rights independently of kin groups or other enduring entities. One could phrase it this way: rights are relative and relatives have rights. The enduring social entities may be constituted according to principles other than kinship, such as age grading, territory or voluntary association” (Shipton 2003:66). The concept of individual rights and group rights are different, but they are not incompatible with each other. In practice, universal human rights predicated on the autonomy of the individual and exemplified in the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights can and do accommodate the rights of individuals who belong to special groups. From this perspective, indigenous rights are like women’s rights or children’s rights, that is, the rights of certain categories of often vulnerable people who by token of their inclusion in this group merit special consideration, but can still fit comfortably under the rubric of universal human rights. In fact, difference itself may be thought of as a universal right. “If there is universal positive human right, perhaps it contains an irony. The American Anthropological Association’s Task Force on Human Rights has recently agreed on a seemingly paradoxical idea: a universal human right to difference” (Shipton 2003:63).

This idea of the right to be different is largely what indigenous rights are all about. The primary collective right indigenous groups are interested in protecting is their right as peoples. Yet it is this very conception of rights that historically has made modern nation-states nervous. Since in international law the first right of any people is their right to self-determination, many states historically have been reticent to formally recognize even the existence of an indigenous people, other than the national majority, living within their borders, for in doing so it could ipso facto lead these people to legally claim rights distinct from those of other citizens, according to international covenants. Most importantly, many states fear that acknowledging the rights of indigenous peoples, chief among these being the right to self-determination, creates a dangerous scenario of “nations within nations,” leading to balkanization if not outright secession. In practice, most indigenous peoples seek self-determination in terms of constitutional or limited autonomy, rather than wholesale independence from their countries—they are not, by and large, wanting their own seats as separate states in the General Assembly of the United Nations.

Recognizing the need to protect collective rights, and believing that the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights irredeemably placed the autonomous individual at the center of its philosophical and political concepts and therefore smacked of Eurocentric bias, African countries developed their own legal instrument, the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights (our italics). Given the inclusion of the word “peoples” in the title, one might have thought that Africa is leading the way in acknowledging the rights of indigenous peoples. Such is not the case. With rare exception, indigenous peoples throughout the continent have struggled for their recognition and rights. As discussed above, in part this has to do with the fact that once the European colonial powers departed, it was felt that all Africans were equally indigenous. The argument that some groups were more indigenous than others, so it was held, would only lead to invidious comparisons and conflict in these newly independent states that were already struggling to forge common national identities of their many ethnic groups. It would, in essence, represent a tacit re-inscription of tribalism. Or so runs the argument. Even though the African nations have all signed the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the people with whom we spoke in Africa suspected that generally it would have few practical consequences.
Consider again the case of the San in southern Africa. Their call for recognition as indigenous is validated by anthropology, genetics, linguistics and history—they are the direct descendants of the first peoples of southern Africa, arriving centuries before Bantu peoples came to the region. Yet it is not the science that is here in dispute, but rather the San’s desire to use indigenous rights as a form of redress. In every country where the San exist, they are a marginalized, minority population, historically oppressed, and among the most impoverished people in the nation. The San’s struggle for indigenous rights has met with differential success in different parts of southern Africa, with two cases which are particularly interesting to contrast: Botswana and South Africa.

Officially, all citizens in Botswana are indigenous, no one group any more indigenous than another, even though that country has one of the largest populations of San in southern Africa, locally known as BaSarwa. The country has much to be proud of, economically and politically. “Botswana has one of the fastest growing economies in the world, and is relatively better managed than most other economies in Africa” (Nyamnjoh 2007:307). The political system is similarly developed. “Using multiparty elections and other standard indicators, one could make a convincing case for the successful institutionalization of liberal democracy and bureaucratic modernism in Botswana. The country, in fact, is often cited as a rare example of a functioning liberal multiparty democracy in Africa (Nyamnjoh 2007:311).

Nevertheless, Botswana has at best a mixed record in dealing with the San. “Although the most indigenous in terms of longevity in the territory, they are dismissed as less rightful owners of the country because of their ‘inability’ to indigenize (domesticate) the land through agriculture and permanent settlements. By giving priority to rigid agropastoral and residential usages of land as key determinants of the definition of land rights, policy makers have denied BaSarwa the right to land where they have hunted, gathered, and kept some livestock for centuries if not millennia” (Namnjoh 2007:316). Botswana did institute attempts to “assist” the San, notably via a program known as Remote Area Development, but as the name indicates, it was predicated on their marginality, rather than ethnicity. As Saugestad shows in her perceptive study, the whole category of indigeneity is “inconvenient” for Botswana (Saugestad 2001). Similarly, because San political organization was based on band headmen rather than a formal system of paramount chiefs, as existed among the Tswana, their leaders and spokesmen were never incorporated into the “House of Chiefs.” In like fashion, they “have never been directly represented in parliament or in most other public structures. They have had minimal access and representation and have been treated instead as barbarians at the fringes, capable of little more than servitude and subjection” (Nyamnjoh 2007:317).

Between 1997 and 2005, San were evicted from the Central Kalahari Game Reserve and resettled in relocation camps. One version has it that the park was initially established with the protection of the hunter-gatherers in mind, another maintains that the real cause of the evictions was the discovery of diamonds in the area. In 2006, however, the San won a landmark case from Botswana’s High Court allowing them to return. In practice, however, the controversy continues as their return has been frustrated in practice. According to Survival International, the San have neither been allowed to use their water borehole nor issued a single permit to hunt on their ancestral land (despite Botswana’s High Court ruling in December that its refusal to issue
permits was unlawful), leading to arrests of Bushmen for hunting to feed their families (Survival International 2009).

By contrast, in South Africa the San struggle for recognition and rights as indigenous people have fared better, in terms both symbolic and material, at least since they were reconstituted as a people in the late 1990s. At one level, this is reflected by the fact that the national motto of the new nation is in a San language: !ke e /xarra //ke (‘unity in diversity’). Even though it is in the language of the extinct /Xam people, it nevertheless signals that in the new “rainbow nation” of South Africa, the San hold a place of special significance as first among equals. The material gains accorded to the San based upon their indigeneity have already been mentioned: a successful land claim predicated on aboriginal title and a successful negotiation of royalties from the development of Hoodia as a cure for obesity based upon their indigenous knowledge of the plant as an appetite suppressant. To be sure, many problems still remain for South Africa’s San, but there is also cause for celebrating the gains already made and encouraging signs of future success.

Summary and Conclusions

In 2007, the Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples was ratified by all but four member states of the United Nations. Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the United States, refused to become signatories. But ratification of an international covenant, by itself, is hardly a guarantee that the governments of these states have the moral will and political ability to implement a law protecting the rights of indigenous peoples. Ironically, one could argue convincingly that indigenous peoples in the aforementioned four countries, significantly all of them multiparty liberal democracies, have, at least in modern times, been relatively successful in pressing their rights qua “indigenous peoples” in the states where they reside. Indeed, activists from these countries have consistently taken a leading role in defining, mobilizing, and spreading the indigenous movement worldwide (Merlan 2009). The signing of the Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples was a landmark event on a global scale and critical first step twenty years in the making. But of greater significance than ratification is the enforcement of these declarations, conventions, and treaties—national as well as international—protecting the rights of indigenous peoples.

Moving, then, from theory to practice one must first determine who is indigenous and what defines them as such. A related and not inconsequential consideration, in view of the issues at stake, is the question of motive: who is doing the defining and for what reasons? While on cursory appraisal a “cut and dry,” straightforward, general definition based on abstract principles would seemingly be desirable, as soon as one begins to apply a “one size fits all” definition cross-culturally it becomes apparent that whatever might be gained theoretically in terms of its supposedly universal applicability would, on the other hand, be lost the more one is familiar with the particular history, politics, ethnic relations, economics, and ethnography of individual cases on the ground. Indigenous identity is shifting, complex, processual, conjunctural, and ultimately relative to context. Realizing this all too well, given the diversity of indigenous peoples and the multiplicity of definitions, the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples has purposely not defined the term “indigenous” in an unequivocal way. Any serious definition of indigeneity therefore cannot be scientifically generalized nor stipulated legalistically in
advance, although in practice definitions of indigenous identity tend to cohere around four central features: 1) *prior occupancy*, 2) *cultural distinctiveness*, 3) *self-identification*, and 4) *non-dominance*. Ultimately, however, indigenous identity is radically contingent.

The absence of a universal definition of “indigenous peoples” is not a sign or sloppy thinking or lack of methodological rigor. On the contrary, it shows that “indigenous peoples” instantiate what is formally known as a *polythetic* category. Polythetic classification, deployed in a range of human and natural sciences, defines a group in a way such that no single trait or set of traits possessed by an individual is necessary and sufficient to define it as belonging to the group. That is, no trait is possessed by all of the members of the group, but each trait is shared by many members. Consequently, there is a “family resemblance” among them. While it may seem that one could never operationalize such a seemingly vague definition and use it in a pragmatic fashion, in actuality we do it all the time, and on a routine basis. In fact, in contradistinction to “semantic formalism,” it is what forms the basis of “ordinary language philosophy,” that is, the philosophy of how it is we actually use and understand language in practice, rather than in terms of a formal theory of meaning. For example, consider—as did Ludwig Wittgenstein—what it is that all “games” have in common. There are “card games,” “ball games,” “board games,” and many other types of games; not even “rule-guidedness” or the distinction between “winners and losers” defines all games: sometimes we “make up the rules as we go along” or “play just for fun.” Nevertheless, we understand and use the word “game” all the time, notwithstanding the lack of an analytically precise, universally applicable, definition. The definition of “indigenous peoples,” as we have argued here, is of the same order.

A major point of this paper has been that diverse peoples throughout the world are self-consciously claiming an indigenous identity, often for the first time in history. That is, “aboriginal,” minority peoples who in other contexts may identify as Kumeyaay, Hopi, Shavante, Dayak, Batwa, Tarahumara, Inuit, Taureg, Dogrib, Khanty, Sami, Yolgnu, etc. or any other of over 4,000 so-called “tribes” scattered across the globe are, individually and together, doing something radical. They are *becoming* indigenous. Liberating the term “indigenous” from its previous colonial entanglements with words like “primitive” and “savage,” they have instead realized the emancipatory potential of a label that allows them to shift the parameters of their heretofore local identities in the direction of trans-local arenas of power and attach themselves to a global social movement that, ironically, still makes sense to them “culturally.” Even though *heterogeneity* seems to be the most common defining trait of indigeneity today, given the diverse political, economic, social, and religious make-up of the peoples identifying as “indigenous,” nevertheless one cannot help but notice, if one attends a gathering of indigenous peoples from around the world, that the indigenous representatives there intuitively recognize the “family resemblance” among those who have gathered, perspicaciously acknowledging the indigeneity of others belonging to this polythetic group (notwithstanding the absence of formal guidelines to consult).

Arguments and data showing the heterogeneity of indigeneity indicate the vitality and organic complementarity among diverse segments of the 21st century’s first truly multicultural, global, social movement of empowerment, justice, and reform for the world’s most disadvantaged people. The diversity within the movement should not be taken as a sign of either political weakness nor deployed as an analytic tool to be used in divide and conquer tactics. Indigenous
peoples today are rich and poor, educated and illiterate, rural and urban, socialist and capitalist. Some live in their homelands, others in diasporas; some are “traditional,” others are “modern.” They number among their ranks Christians, Moslems, and animists. They live in jungles, mountains, and deserts, and are to be found on every continent save Antarctica.

Notwithstanding this palpable diversity, certain structural and cultural configurations recur with noticeable frequency. Many indigenous peoples are marginalized in remote and often desolate corners of their countries; are politically oppressed or unrepresented; have mobile settlement patterns, subsistence technologies, and traditional knowledge systems finely calibrated to local environments; manifest worldviews predicated on sharing, reciprocity, and interconnections between cultural, natural, and supernatural dimensions of reality; regard land—as well as certain plants and animals—as sacred; are situated in regions rich in natural resources inviting expropriation by governments and/or capitalist exploitation; and suffer disproportionately from poor health, lack of education, potable water, alcoholism, disease, and cognate social and natural ills. Almost without exception they are among the poorest and most disenfranchised people in the states where they reside.

A number of distinct indigenous peoples throughout the world have been discussed in this report. Each case is different. Nevertheless, at the risk of overgeneralization, we suggest that certain social features and risk patterns emerge cross-culturally through the cases. Some indigenous peoples historically have been at greater risk and more susceptible to impoverishment, marginalization, exploitation, disenfranchisement, and discrimination than others, both by neighboring peoples and development agendas. On every continent, indigenous societies with settlement patterns that are mobile (nomadic, semi-nomadic, transhuman, semi-sedentary, etc.) rather than permanent, and dispersed rather than nucleated tend be at greater risk.

These settlement patterns correlate with traditional subsistence methods and modes of production. Foragers (hunters, gatherers, and fishers) perhaps tend to be most at risk of unsuccessfully asserting their claims to traditional use areas and, once dislocated from their territories, are most likely to become landless squatters in their own homeland. Shifting cultivators (peoples practicing swidden or slash and burn agriculture) and non-sedentary pastoralists (transhumant as well as fully nomadic or migratory) also experience difficulties asserting rights to their territories, though perhaps less so than foragers. Indigenous peoples and peasants living at higher population densities and practicing intensive agricultural regimes appear less likely to be pushed off their lands without major uprisings and political turmoil.

This scale of difference in terms of settlement and modes of production overlaps somewhat, although by no means completely, with a cognate scale of increasing socio-political complexity, division of labor, hierarchy, and competitiveness. In general, the more averse to confrontation, the more egalitarian, the more dependent on relations of reciprocity and sharing, the more inclined to deploy forms of passive resistance, the more likely the group will be unsuccessful in sustaining viable negotiations to secure their rights and resources with development agencies, nation-states, and other dominant actors, including other local peoples, both “indigenous” and otherwise. By contrast, the more indigenous peoples have traditions based on social hierarchy, clear lines of authority or leadership, age–grades, confrontational forms of resistance, military preparedness, trade or market skills, and competition the more likely they will be successful in
structuring efforts at self-determination and mounting sustained dialogue and viable strategies to retain control over their economic, political, and cultural resources. While the above configurations suggest themselves to us based on our familiarity with the ethnological record and development literature, it was further corroborated by our field research in South and East Africa in March 2009, with special reference to the San, Hadzabe, Datoga (Barabaig), Maasai, and Iraqw.

Another major pattern that emerges from the research is the dichotomy between the identification and subsequent trans-local organization of indigenous peoples in what we have called “settler societies,” in the Americas, Australia, and New Zealand, on the one hand, and indigenous peoples in Africa and Asia, on the other. To take Africa and the Americas as examples: In the Americas, indigenous peoples represent a rather clear-cut case of the descendants of those “First Peoples” who collided with Europeans beginning in 1492. The situation in Africa is less straightforward. Unlike the case in the Americas where the descendants of the European colonizers still hold power and, at least from the perspective of certain indigenous people, therefore has created a neocolonial scenario, in Africa, by contrast, the postcolonial world created after independence of the new states and the departure of the European colonials for “home,” it rendered all Africans indigenous, or so African elites and national governments claimed. Calls for recognition as “indigenous” by certain African minority peoples who, for a variety of reasons, identified with, and were identified by, indigenous peoples in the Americas as part of the growing international indigenous movement, were seen, at best, as “inconvenient” to nationalist struggles and, at worst, as tacit invitations to heavy-handed responses from state regimes.

Moreover, as the new African states were attempting to submerge factional differences between ethnic groups in the vigorous attempt to forge national unity, the insistence upon the indigenous status of some and not of others, was said to be a return to “tribalism”—though in reality it more often merely served to whitewash what had always happened. Namely, legitimize the continuing pattern of marginalizing the indigenous peoples and treating them as uncivilized barbarians at the fringes, only now European style colonialism was being authored by Africa’s national elites. The history and organization of the indigenous movement in Africa and the Americas also differs. In the Americas, it began in the 1970s as a grass roots movement that was built from the bottom up; in Africa, conversely, it was sparked in the 1990s by indigenous representatives meeting in New York and Geneva, and thus, returning to Africa, was built by indigenous elites from the top down.

The final pattern to emerge from the analysis of the indigenous movement, and here we build directly on the insights of Dorothy Hodgson (2002), is that scholarship on indigenous activism tends to be concerned with for four key issues and the intersections among them: representation, recognition, resources, and rights. These “Four Rs,” as we have called them, get played out in distinctive ways in different parts of the world, although there are also over-arching commonalities irrespective of ethnographic particularities. We focused our analysis of them in terms of the way they get articulated among the San or “Bushmen” peoples of southern Africa, paying particular attention to their manifestation among the ≠Khomani San we visited in South Africa’s northern Cape region and southern Kalahari.
Representation is concerned with the strategies and politics of display, the arts of stagecraft and performance of cultural identities, and the manner these intersect with debates on authenticity. Much is at stake in the representation of indigenous peoples, chiefly whether they will be recognized as such, and thereby acknowledged, most importantly by the states where they reside. However, recognition—which is the second of the Four Rs—is always tied to memory. We cannot recognize something unless, at some level, it conforms to something we already know (or think we know). For this reason, recognition is inexorably connected to representation, and in the case of indigenous peoples, usually involves the issue of stereotype. The stereotype of “authentic” Bushmen is that they are largely naked, save for a bit of leather around the loins, speak a distinctive “click language,” and hunt and gather foods in the bush. In virtually all cases, whether by indigenous peoples themselves or by others (journalists, museums, etc.) there is a negotiation, usually implicit, between the way an indigenous identity actually is (or has been) and the way the Western gaze—which has the ability to authenticate via its nexus with electronic media, popular opinion, and channels of power—imagines it to be. The tension between these two poles, image and reality, is dramatically expressed in the case of the ≠Khomani San.

For the ≠Khomani, there was both contradiction and collusion involved in the politics of representation that were artfully conjoined to launching, and eventually winning, a landmark land claim in the southern Kalahari. On the one hand, the ≠Khomani had lived for decades, not as hunters and gatherers of the vast desert, but as landless farm workers dispersed as a rural underclass throughout the northern Cape, to such an extent that it no longer existed as a viable community and the indigenous language—N/huki—had all but disappeared. On the other hand, the media driven demands of modern South Africa expected “authentic” San to look, not like the local gas station attendant, but rather the primordial Bushman from the hit film The Gods Must Be Crazy. Therefore, in order to gain public and state recognition as “real” Bushmen—and win the land claim based on aboriginal title—they had to conceal their true past and conform, via stereotyped representations—to the fantasies of the industrialized West as to what constitutes “authentic” San identity, in a classic case of strategic essentialism.

The last two Rs, resources and rights, are already implicit in much of the writing on indigenous peoples. The issue of resources becomes part of indigenous concerns in four ways 1) via extractive industries that jeopardize indigenous lands and resources, 2) via the dislocation of indigenous peoples in the name of wildlife conservation, 3) via the nexus between the environment and traditional knowledge systems and, 4) via the correlation between indigenous peoples and poverty. Over the last forty years San have been evicted on numerous occasions from their traditional territories in the name of conservation, for example, from the Central Kalahari Game Reserve in Botswana and Gemsbok National Park in South Africa. The other three issues concerned with resources come together in the Hoodia case, a plant that the San traditionally used as an appetite suppressant that almost became an instance of “bio-piracy” until the San, with external support, successfully negotiated one of the first agreements ever paying royalties from potential drug sales for traditional ethnobotanical knowledge.

The topic of indigenous rights involves not only control over territorial resources, as discussed above, but extends beyond them to non-material domains as well, such as cultural performances, languages, art, symbols, and esoteric knowledge, in addition to exorcizing rights over their own biological material, such as DNA and burial remains. However, all of these rights are derivative
of self-determination that, according to international law, is the preeminent right of any people. Because a people can claim the right to self-determination, some states have been reticent to acknowledge the existence of indigeneity within with their borders fearing that the recognition of a “people” separate from the rest of the citizenry could lead to the impossible scenario of a “nation within a nation.” In the case of the Khomani San, they could not claim self-determination, nor the other rights that flowed from it, until they first existed again as a “people,” and it was not until the success of 1999 land claim that they were reconstituted as such, proving that, unlike extinct species, peoples can be brought back to life.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Our findings suggest that there is indeed a research agenda for multilateral agencies, governments, and non-government organizations interested in advancing responsible development policy that would, by definition, respect the rights of the world’s indigenous peoples. As we have discussed, indigenous peoples often find themselves in areas coveted by outsiders because of their land, water, or natural resources. We do not believe that it is possible, or even desirable, to halt the development of these resources, as long as the environment is safeguarded and the people respected. The health, educational, and income benefits are manifest, as is the possibility for beneficiaries’ improved participation in local, regional, and world affairs. “Development” for ordinary people means truly attaining citizenship.

However, our research suggests that development cannot be advanced at any cost, particularly when the costs are borne disproportionately by those who benefit from it the least: as has often been the case with indigenous peoples. This is neither fair nor responsible, and risks rendering those of us who would advance development appear, to put it mildly, callous. What, then, would be the priorities for future research and how would they be put into action? Given the challenges, we have discussed, in actually determining who is/is not “indigenous”, and given the contested and quite practical nature of these definitional issues—ranging from who will benefit from casino development in the United States to who will receive portions of community compensation for dam or other eminent domain projects in the developing countries to how we are to conceptualize and involve communities (as groups or as conglomerations of individuals?) — identifying the questions before us is neither the largest problem nor the road to its solution; rather, it is how this bundle of questions would best be approached in the first place.

We believe that it is critical that organizations interested in fomenting responsible development have a range of social scientists as well as natural scientists contributing to project planning. Projects that do not carefully take into consideration social and environmental impacts, on a case by case basis, risk destroying the societies of indigenous peoples while damaging the fragile biomes they typically inhabit. Development institutions would do well to continue to involve, along with their staffs of expert economists, research commissions including anthropologists, political-sociologists, environmental scientists, and legal experts to assist in the operationalization of optimal development plans. Above all, there can be no substitute for targeted, fine-grained ethnography to capture the micro-sociology of everyday life that is in fact critical to understanding the impact and implementation of development. Planning commissions must also include the indigenous people who will be impacted by scheduled development projects. The desire, and indeed right, of indigenous people to participate in the planning, implementation, and control of projects that affect them is a theme that emerges time and again.
We believe that it is a desire to be applauded, not only because of its democratic nature, but because it also offers projects a better chance of success. Our research suggests, then, that multi-disciplinary and participatory development project planning, on one hand, is more likely to advance the goal of indigenous peoples’ development; while on the other, projects emerging from such an approach have the additional benefit of better surviving the crucible of public opinion.

The late David Maybury-Lewis, in the course of his over fifty years as a scholar and advocate of indigenous societies, said once that our question is not if we are going to have development in the Indian world, but how. Though well aware of the downfalls indigenous people have gone through as a result of poorly thought out development or what he termed “developmentalism,” he remained a believer in the promise of improving human welfare through sound thinking and action. With him, we believe that we must understand indigenous societies on their own terms, engage them, and ultimately join with them to plan and make common cause. We too remain convinced that an anthropological approach would help us better understand the particularities that created separate cultural identities and would lead us toward the portal where we might glimpse, however briefly, the more fundamental things that bind all humans together.
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