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EDITORIAL



Aborigine, Indian, indigenous or first nations?

There has been opposition by various tribal groups and ‘first nations’ peoples to the terms ‘Indigenous’ and ‘Aborigine’ (and its cognates), although governments around the world continue to use both terms. Increasingly, the favoured term is ‘First Nations’ although this term is increasingly used in legal discourse especially in Canada to refer to members of legally recognized reserve communities. Accordingly, some scholars argue that the collective nouns used to name the world’s tribal groups have become increasingly problematic and that at source the terms have often been derogatory, historically inaccurate and contaminated by a colonial past based on the demeaning notion of ‘primitive’ peoples with its assumption of western cognitive superiority. One example—the collective noun ‘Maori’—was introduced, according to Rangihau (1992), to destroy the heterogeneity of the indigenous tribes of New Zealand. Most indigenous peoples prefer to be named or referred to by their specific nation or tribe names which themselves are sometimes contentious. It has been noted that the term ‘indigenous’ (or ‘aborigine’) is not itself indigenous.

The word ‘tribe’ itself has a troubled history. Bétéille (1998) notes that even after the intensive ethnographic fieldwork embarked on during the decades up to the 1950s anthropologists never questioned that what they were studying was ‘tribes’ but finding a suitable definition that covered all cases proved difficult. Finding a definition that transcended the old ideological uses of the term it had inherited from its nineteenth century colonial disciplinary meanings where the concept tribe represented a particular *type of society* and a *stage of evolution* proved even more difficult. In the human sciences, as the French philosopher Foucault (1980) demonstrates so convincingly, even the most basic terminology is a discursive construction of ‘knowledge/power’.

The common currency of all of these terms—Aborigine, Indian, Indigenous, or First Nations—their uses and valency in government, legal and scholarly contexts, are often offensive to tribal groups especially when used in an international, totalizing and universal way to define radically different groups because they have the effect of homogenizing peoples in ways that early imperial anthropology created ‘others’ as ‘indigenous’ in differentiation and opposition to colonial settlers, often using these labels for legal, educational, administrative and policing purposes.

The term ‘indigenous’ derives from the late Latin ‘indigenus’ and ‘indigena’ (native) and from the Old Latin ‘indu’ that is derived from the archaic ‘endo’ (a cognate of the Greek ‘endo’), meaning ‘in, within’ and the Latin ‘gignere’ meaning ‘to beget’, from the root ‘gene’ meaning ‘to produce, give birth, beget’. ‘Indigena’ in Latin means ‘native’ used of plants, animals, peoples who come from a particular region. Its first known use was in 1640s when it was applied to plants and cultures in the New World. The general sense of the term applied to that produced, growing, living, or occurring naturally in a particular region or environment; also sometimes used as a synonym for ‘native,’ ‘innate,’ ‘aborigine,’ ‘endemic,’ and ‘inborn.’ There is a strong sense of *replication* to the term, with the evolution of the indigenous group being self-derived. In indigenous perception, there could quite likely be a fit here between the linguistic label for the group—who, according to the term, have a tendency to rampantly self-populate—and the genocidal tools historically used to stop them from self-populating, or more current attempts to understand them through collecting their genetic material (see for instance Gardiner (1999)). Moreover,

their tie through the term to the natural world sits well with a racist belief that these populations are more basic, unreliable and generally barbaric.

The word 'indigenous' was first used officially by the United Nations in 2002 in its political declaration of the World Summit on Sustainable Development. Prior to this time, the term was regarded as 'still under debate' for use in UN official documents. Béteille (1998, pp. 190, 191) suggests that in the US,

the idea of indigenous people has acquired a certain moral charge, partly because of the awakening of old memories of usurpation, spoliation, and exploitation but also because many contemporary anthropologists seem to enjoy being in a state of moral excitation.

Yet Béteille's comment only emphasizes 'meaning as use' and the significance of political, legal and social contexts in shaping acceptable usage of terms that are contentious because of a tainted past. It shows also the need for constant philosophical and linguistic scrutiny for terminology recognizing that language is both dynamic and infinitely revisable.

The word 'Aborigine' falls also in the same family of terms but is often used in relation to Australian and Canadian tribal peoples. The same problems also accompany the term 'Indian' when used of American and Canadian tribal peoples. In this case, the term springs from an older usage when before Christopher Columbus the word 'India' (and 'Indies') was used to label the entire Asian subcontinent. Later it was applied and qualified as 'American Indian.' The word 'Māori' while in use before 1815 did not appear in writing until 1850. *An Encyclopaedia of New Zealand* notes

Prior to this date the terms *native* or *New Zealand* were those used to indicate the native or aboriginal inhabitants of New Zealand, and it was not until the latter part of the nineteenth century that the term Maori came into common usage.¹

First nations or tribal peoples sometimes object to these terms because the terms or descriptions originate as pejorative concepts used by outsiders, often colonial governments or international agencies for law and administrative purposes, that are historically inaccurate (too inclusive or not inclusive enough), give rise to explicit associated racist terms (like 'Redskin') and deny the self-chosen traditional names preferred by some tribal groups.

A Wikipedia source on the 'Native American name controversy' records the objections beginning in the 1980s to the term 'indigenous':

Arguments against the use of the term 'Indigenous peoples' are that it does not refer specifically to peoples affected by European colonization during the 16, 17 and 18th centuries and later settler colonialism by the independent American states; that it lumps all indigenous world groups into a single 'other'; and that it fails to recognize migratory groups who do not technically meet the definition of 'indigenous'.²

Another source on 'Aboriginal Identity & Terminology' from the website called 'Indigenous Foundations' at the University of British Columbia (UBC) makes a number of substantial points concerning the use of the word 'indigenous':

'Indigenous' has gained prominence as a term to describe Aboriginal peoples in an international context through the increasing visibility of international Indigenous rights movements. 'Indigenous' may be considered by some to be the most inclusive term of all, since it identifies peoples in similar circumstances without respect to national boundaries or local conventions, but it is, for some, a contentious term, since it defines groups primarily in relation to their colonizers.

It is worth noting, however, that 'Indigenous' like 'Aboriginal' or even 'Indian,' is not itself an 'Indigenous' term in the sense of deriving from an Indigenous traditional practice or language, though it is very much a term that Indigenous people have worked hard to define. And though it is often thought to refer to people who have some form of primary or first claim to a territory, it is not solely based on that primacy.³

The Anishinabek Nation incorporated the Union of Ontario Indians (UOI) as its secretariat in 1949, which is a political advocate for 40 member First Nations across Ontario.⁴ In 2008 Chiefs from 42-member communities of the Anishinabek Nation campaigned against the term 'aborigine' characterizing the word as 'another means of assimilation through the displacement of our First Nation-specific inherent and treaty rights.'

'It's actually offensive to hear that term used in reference to First Nations citizens,' said Grand Council Chief John Beaucage. Our Chiefs are giving us direction to inform government agencies, NGOs, educators and media

organizations that they should discontinue using inappropriate terminology when they are referring to the Anishinabek. We respect the cultures and traditions of our Metis and Inuit brothers and sisters, but their issues are different from ours.Chief Patrick Madahbee of Aundeck Omni Kaning said: 'Referring to ourselves as Anishinabek is the natural thing to do because that is who we are. We are not Indians, natives, or aboriginal. We are, always have been and always will be Anishinabek.'⁵

The Australian Government still uses the term 'Aborigine' and 'Aboriginal societies,' as well as 'Indigenous peoples,' as in for example the Australian Commission of Law Reform official document called the 'Recognition of Aboriginal Customary Laws' (1986)⁶ where the report begins by discussing the experience of first contact and changing policies towards 'Aboriginal peoples,' without discussing the appropriacy of the term. The terms 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders' are used in official documents to cover all first inhabitants on Australia and its northern islands, although current practice reveals that there are 'less appropriate' and 'more appropriate' uses of these terms and an emerging practice for using names and titles of tribal groups such as Murri, Nyoongah, Koori, Goori, Koorie, Yolngu, Ananga, Palawa, Nunga and Ngarrindjeri (referring to different geographical territories).⁷

The Parliament of Australia's 'Defining Aboriginality in Australia' (Gardiner-Garden, 2003) begins with the following paragraph:

The definition of Aboriginality has a long and contentious history in Australia. Different classification systems (many with significant personal and social consequences) have moved in and out of fashion. Even today, two very different definitions are concurrently in use. One, predominating in legislation, defines an Aboriginal as 'a person who is a member of the Aboriginal race of Australia'. The other, predominating in program administration but also used in some legislation and court judgements, defines an Aboriginal as someone 'who is a member of the Aboriginal race of Australia, identifies as an Aboriginal and is accepted by the Aboriginal community as an Aboriginal'.⁸

Gardiner-Garden (2003) notes problems with both definitions and whether such a definition should be used at all in public policy. He also charts four phases in the history of the use of definitions: definitions by 'blood-quotum' from the 1830s to the 1950s; definitions by race in the 1960s and 1970s; the rise of the three-part definition in the 1980s; and problems for the Three-part definition in the 1990s. The three-part definition that emerged in 1981 was formulated and used by the courts to give meaning to the legislative expression 'person of the Aboriginal race':

An Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander is a person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent who identifies as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and is accepted as such by the community in which he (she) lives.

During the 1990s, the debate intensified especially when people without family names were pressured to prove descent and whether self-identification was considered strong enough for administrative purposes. The problem was compounded when in 1999 it became clear in local Tasmanian (ATSIC) elections many claimed Aboriginal descent who were not in fact Aboriginal. There were suggestions to supplement archival family tree information with DNA evidence. Those identifying as Aboriginal on the Tasmanian electoral roll rose out of all proportion to natural increase generating ongoing legal and administrative problems. Many of the attacks on identity have tried to deny associated rights that increasingly accompany ethnic identity claims as governments around the world attempt to redress historical grievances. International comparisons reveal similar difficulties often resulting in problematic official statistics especially when many who have indigenous ancestry do not identify as such or have complex multi-ethnic status often through intermarriage. The Federal judge indicated that purpose is important in interpreting what is meant by Aboriginality. Gardiner-Garden (2003) suggests that greater streamlined responsibility by government and state agencies to self-identification as indigenous especially in respect to redressing past grievances and a better understanding and appreciation of indigenous ethnography, history and culture is part of the way forward.⁹ The Law Commission undertook a detailed inquiry into the recognition of Aboriginal law and culture in Western Australia beginning in 2000 and completing the report in 2006, with discussion and background papers. The aim was to inquire into Aborigine customary law but there was no reflection on the origin or application—its construction in law—of the term 'Aborigine'.

The Commission's recommendations seek to respect the cultural diversity of Aboriginal peoples and communities in Western Australia, embrace Aboriginal culture, enhance the cultural authority of Elders and respected community members, and remove systemic bias and discrimination within the legal system.¹⁰

The Factsheet of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues provides an opening statement to the question 'Who are indigenous peoples?':

It is estimated that there are more than 370 million indigenous people spread across 70 countries worldwide. Practicing unique traditions, they retain social, cultural, economic and political characteristics that are distinct from those of the dominant societies in which they live. Spread across the world from the Arctic to the South Pacific, they are the descendants—according to a common definition—of those who inhabited a country or a geographical region at the time when people of different cultures or ethnic origins arrived. The new arrivals later became dominant through conquest, occupation, settlement or other means.

There is no accepted official definition of 'indigenous' adopted by any UN-system body because of the diversity of indigenous peoples. The Factsheet continues:

Instead the system has developed a modern understanding of this term based on the following:

- Self-identification as indigenous peoples at the individual level and accepted by the community as their member.
- Historical continuity with pre-colonial and/or pre-settler societies.
- Strong link to territories and surrounding natural resources.
- Distinct social, economic or political systems.
- Distinct language, culture and beliefs.
- Form non-dominant groups of society.
- Resolve to maintain and reproduce their ancestral environments and systems as distinctive peoples and communities.¹¹

The Factsheet notes that while the term 'indigenous' has been in general use many years, in some countries, there may be preference for other terms including tribes, first peoples/nations, aboriginals, ethnic groups, *adivasi*, *janajati*. The Factsheet notes that various anthropological terms 'like hunter-gatherers, nomads, peasants, hill people, etc., also exist and for all practical purposes can be used interchangeably with 'indigenous peoples. It continues: 'In many cases, the notion of being termed "indigenous" has negative connotations and some people may choose not to reveal or define their origin.'

The International Labour Organisation's (ILO) convention (No. 169), 'Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention,' 1989, provides the following accepted definition:

- (a) tribal peoples in independent countries whose social, cultural and economic conditions distinguish them from other sections of the national community, and whose status is regulated wholly or partially by their own customs or traditions or by special laws or regulations;
- (b) peoples in independent countries who are regarded as indigenous on account of their descent from the populations which inhabited the country, or a geographical region to which the country belongs, at the time of conquest or colonization or the establishment of present state boundaries and who, irrespective of their legal status, retain some or all of their own social, economic, cultural and political institutions.

In this opening definition adopted for the convention self-identification as indigenous or tribal is regarded as a fundamental criterion with an accent on the term 'peoples' that is said is 'not to be construed as having any implications as regards the rights which may attach to the term under international law.'¹²

The World Conference of Indigenous Peoples (2014) reaffirmed its support for the rights of indigenous peoples and to developing a framework for consultation and cooperation with such peoples on almost everything including cultural self-determination except their right to name themselves. Much of the document is based on the implicit recognition of the deep connections between language and naming on the one hand, and cultural identity, on the other. A right-based approach to the world's 350 million 'indigenous peoples' has certainly been influential in promoting and recognizing indigeneity

and participation of indigenous peoples in developing a systematic framework and revising UN institutions to better able to accommodate aspirations of indigenous peoples. Yet as Gagné (2015) points out while the UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007) was widely perceived as hopeful in terms of postcolonial world-making the category 'indigenous' is 'problematic and full of complexities,' for example, in the cases of French Polynesia and New Caledonia. While there are benefits in adopting the 'indigenous strategy' Gagné (2015, p. 392) maintains on the basis of her work in French Polynesia 'Indigeneity is largely relational and finds its way (or doesn't) into specific contexts of struggle.'

One issue at stake with the names for 'indigenous' is the changeable nature of language according to its users, and indigenous peoples themselves are likely to place a much greater emphasis on this aspect of language than orthodox approaches. This overarching philosophical difference will find expression within specific disciplines. In educational scenarios, the repercussions of the terms for the idea of 'indigenous,' including that term itself, are complicated, and it is likely that their origins are overlooked in schooling and policy contexts in favour of their immediate application. The words are used unproblematically in New Zealand policy literature that deals with education, for example, with the term 'Maori' stepping in for local/tribal difference in nearly all these instances. And even where indigenous peoples themselves use the terms, there is not necessarily an immediate expectation that other forums (such as schools) will use them *about* indigenous groups, due to those terms' evocation of sensitivity and the different sense they might have between user groups. It is thus the emotive and nebulous aspects of discourse that call to be focused on more as themes of learning, not simply the strict meanings of terms.

This different philosophical lens to language, not quite incidentally, may also extend to the arms of the UN that deal with indigenous issues. A philosophical council concerning itself with the problems that terminology brings would be useful for various reasons but is an especially relevant possibility for indigenous groups, who may finally have a say within a forum that views language and terms differently. Quite what this forum would look like is uncertain; however, its primary aim would be to research the origins and the connotations of terms from various indigenous standpoints, and to then directly influence any policy that purports to have indigenous interests at heart.

Notes

1. <http://www.teara.govt.nz/en/1966/maori-pakeha-pakeha-maori>. For a nuanced philosophical view see Carl Mika's essay 'Thereness' in which he discusses a Heideggerian concept of Western 'metaphysics of presence' (2015) in relation to Being, truth, colonizing discourse, identity and representation of Māori.
2. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Native_American_name_controversy.
3. <http://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/home/identity/aboriginal-identity-terminology.html>.
4. <http://www.anishinabek.ca/about-us/>.
5. <https://intercontinentalcry.org/anishinabek-outlaw-term-aboriginal/>.
6. <http://www.alrc.gov.au/publications/report-31>.
7. http://www.ipswich.qld.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0008/10043/appropriate_indigenous_terminology.pdf. See also <http://www.ictinc.ca/blog/indigenous-or-aboriginal-which-is-correct>.
8. http://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/Publications_Archive/CIB/cib0203/03Cib10#intro.
9. In this regard see 'The use of Tangata Whenua and Mana Whenua in New Zealand legislation: Attempts at Cultural Recognition,' Catherine Iorns Magallanes, (2011) at <http://www.victoria.ac.nz/law/research/publications/vuwlr/prev-issues/vol-42-2/iorns.pdf>.
10. http://www.lrc.justice.wa.gov.au/P/project_94.aspx. See also *Te Mātāpunenga: A Compendium of References to the Concepts and Institutions of Māori Customary Law*, Benton, Frame, and Meredith (2013).
11. http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/5session_factsheet1.pdf.
12. http://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C169.

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