

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

a response to Justin Kenrick and Jerome Lewis (AT20[2])

One thing that makes the 'indigenous peoples' debate so fascinating is that there appears to be no compromise. One is either persuaded by Adam Kuper's (2003a, 2003b) argument that the category 'indigenous' when applied to peoples is utterly fallacious, or, like Justin Kenrick and Jerome Lewis (AT 20[2]), one isn't. But are things really that simple?

In anthropology 'indigenous' can have a number of different meanings. When we say that the human species as a whole is 'indigenous' to Africa (since that's where the species evolved), that the population of British Isles is 'indigenous' to those islands, or that rice farmers in India or fishermen in Greece possess 'indigenous' skills or knowledge, we are not talking about the same thing. And in none of these cases are we talking about 'indigenous peoples', which is a far more complex matter in its construction. As Kuper says, how many grandparents does one need to be classed as indigenous? If the original inhabitants of Australia or Canada should be given land or special rights, then why not the original inhabitants the different parts of Europe?

In an ideal world, people should not be granted land rights on the grounds that they are an 'indigenous people'. Rather, they should be granted land rights because the land *is* already their land. The problem is that nation states generally don't recognize ownership as defined in, say, a Bushman or San worldview. As a supporter of the rights of such minorities, I have found it best to use terms meaningful for political persuasion. ILO Convention 169 on 'indigenous peoples' does say, if vaguely, 'rights of ownership and possession of the peoples concerned over the lands which they traditionally occupy shall be recognised' (ILO 1989: Article 14). However, as an anthropologist I feel more at home with indigenous concepts like, say, the Nharo (Naro) notion of *n!oo kx'ao.dzi* ('land owners') or *kaia.m//oo.dzi* ('ancestors' – those to whom it is believed God gave the land at the beginning of the world) than with the politics of 'indigenouness'.

If someone asks me if the Nharo are an 'indigenous people', I have to say that theoretically I don't see that term as particularly useful. Older terms like *Urkultur* or 'primal culture' were actually at least as useful in their time. 'Indigenous' is no theoretical improvement on them. If anything, it is less precise, indeed confusingly ambiguous. Unlike *Urkultur*, the concept 'indigenous peoples' does not lend itself to analytical divisions based on presumed historical relation (since 'indigenous peoples' are supposed to be indigenous to where they live). Like *Urkultur*, 'indigenous peoples' is nevertheless a diffusionist concept. It implies the swamping of

'primal' peoples or culture by stronger forces. Some theoretical insight could be salvaged if one wanted to go down the diffusionist route, but who today does?

Yet if someone asks me, as a San ethnographer interested in San welfare, if they are 'indigenous peoples', I have to say that they are. The acceptable point about the classification of peoples as 'indigenous' is not that they pre-date other peoples, but that they pre-date state formations established to protect such *other* peoples. Kenrick and Lewis make this point too. Kuper (2003a: 395) may be right that 'the ideas behind the [indigenous peoples] movement are very dubious'. Yet that movement is often what best represents those groups, such as the G/wi and G//ana of Botswana's Central Kalahari Game Reserve, who have been dispossessed of their land on grounds at least as dubious as, and far more damaging than, any popular romanticist ideas that might be kicking around in Europe, North America or South America (the majority of signatories to ILO Convention 169 are Latin American states). In fact the romantic imagery at the root of the indigenous peoples movement is part of anthropology too, and I don't think any of us who work with former hunter-gatherers are immune to it.

For me, the most worthwhile aspect of Kuper's contribution is his sustained and persuasive argument that the term 'indigenous' is theoretically problematic. But the valuable point I have gained from Kenrick and Lewis's critique is that this, in itself, should not blind us to the fact that indigenous rights discourse can be a valuable asset to minority groups who claim this status, whether we like the simplistic classification scheme (indigenous/non-indigenous) or not.

What is missing on both sides of the debate is the potential contribution of anthropology in highlighting the relevance of truly indigenous concepts, for example, of land ownership, or for that matter of indigenously defined 'indigenouness' itself. Kuper's argument depends in part on problematizing the diversity of 'indigenous peoples', an aspect of the argument that Kenrick and Lewis cannot counter. It may not be possible to reconcile the two views at a global level, but local solutions, taking into account both this diversity and truly indigenous perspectives, may be one way anthropology can help 'indigenous' causes – without necessarily endorsing the notion of 'indigenouness' as an anthropological concept. ●

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ILO (International Labour Organisation): 1989. *Convention No. 169: Convention concerning indigenous and tribal peoples in independent countries*. Geneva: International Labour Organisation.

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— 2003b. The return of the native. *New Humanist* 118(3): 5-8.