14.10: Indigenous People

Figure 14.10 - A Navajo man on horseback in Monument Valley, Arizona.
Indigenous people, aboriginal people, or native people, are groups protected in international or national legislation as having a set of specific rights based on their linguistic and historical ties to a particular territory, their cultural and historical distinctiveness from other populations.\(^1\) The legislation is based on the conclusion that certain indigenous people are vulnerable to exploitation, marginalization, oppression, forced assimilation, and genocide by nation states formed from colonizing populations or by politically dominant, different ethnic groups.

A special set of political rights in accordance with international law have been set forth by international organizations such as the United Nations, the International Labour Organization and the World Bank.\(^2\) The United Nations has issued a Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples to guide member-state national policies to collective rights of indigenous people—such as culture, identity, language, and access to employment, health, education, and natural resources. Estimates put the total population of indigenous peoples from 220 million to 350 million.\(^3\)

A defining characteristic for an indigenous group is that it has preserved traditional ways of living, such as present or historical reliance upon subsistence-based production (based on pastoral, horticultural and/or hunting and gathering techniques), and a predominantly non-urbanized society. Not all indigenous groups share these characteristics. Indigenous societies may be either settled in a given locale/region or exhibit a nomadic lifestyle across a large territory, but are generally historically associated with a specific territory on which they depend. Indigenous societies are found in every inhabited climate zone and continent of the world.\(^2\)\(^4\)

Indigenous peoples are increasingly faced with threats to their sovereignty, environment, and access to natural resources. Examples of this can be the deforestation of tropical rainforests where several of the native tribe’s subsistence and their normal lifestyle are threatened. Assimilative colonial policies resulted in ongoing issues related to aboriginal child protection.

### Indigenous Rights and Other Issues

Figure \(\PageIndex{3}\) - The New Zealand delegation endorses the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in April 2010.

Indigenous peoples confront a diverse range of concerns associated with their status and interaction with other cultural groups, as well as changes in their inhabited environment. Some challenges are specific to particular groups; however,
other challenges are commonly experienced. These issues include cultural and linguistic preservation, land rights, ownership and exploitation of natural resources, political determination and autonomy, environmental degradation and incursion, poverty, health, and discrimination.

The interaction between indigenous and non-indigenous societies throughout history has been complex, ranging from outright conflict and subjugation to some degree of mutual benefit and cultural transfer. A particular aspect of anthropological study involves investigation into the ramifications of what is termed first contact, the study of what occurs when two cultures first encounter one another. The situation can be further confused when there is a complicated or contested history of migration and population of a given region, which can give rise to disputes about primacy and ownership of the land and resources.

Wherever indigenous cultural identity is asserted, common societal issues and concerns arise from the indigenous status. These concerns are often not unique to indigenous groups. Despite the diversity of Indigenous peoples, it may be noted that they share common problems and issues in dealing with the prevailing, or invading, society. They are generally concerned that the cultures of Indigenous peoples are being lost and that indigenous peoples suffer both discrimination and pressure to assimilate into their surrounding societies. This is borne out by the fact that the lands and cultures of nearly all of the peoples listed at the end of this article are under threat. Notable exceptions are the Sakha and Komi peoples (two of the northern indigenous peoples of Russia), who now control their own autonomous republics within the Russian state, and the Canadian Inuit, who form a majority of the territory of Nunavut (created in 1999). In Australia, a landmark case, Mabo v Queensland (No 2), saw the High Court of Australia reject the idea of terra nullius. This rejection ended up recognizing that there was a pre-existing system of law practiced by the Meriam people.

It is also sometimes argued that it is important for the human species as a whole to preserve a wide range of cultural diversity as possible, and that the protection of indigenous cultures is vital to this enterprise.

Human Rights Violations

The Bangladesh Government has stated that there are “no Indigenous Peoples in Bangladesh”. This has angered the Indigenous Peoples of Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh, collectively known as the Jumma. Experts have protested against this move of the Bangladesh Government and have questioned the Government’s definition of the term “Indigenous Peoples”. This move by the Bangladesh Government is seen by the Indigenous Peoples of Bangladesh as another step by the Government to further erode their already limited rights.

Both Hindu and Chams have experienced religious and ethnic persecution and restrictions on their faith under the current Vietnamese government, with the Vietnamese state confiscating Cham property and forbidding Cham from observing their religious beliefs. Hindu temples were turned into tourist sites against the wishes of the Cham Hindus. In 2010 and 2013 several incidents occurred in Thành Tín and Phươc Nhơn villages where Cham were murdered by Vietnamese. In 2012, Vietnamese police in Chau Giang village stormed into a Cham Mosque, stole the electric generator, and also raped Cham girls. Cham in the Mekong Delta have also been economically marginalised, with ethnic Vietnamese settling on land previously owned by Cham people with state support.

The French, the Communist North Vietnamese, and the anti-Communist South Vietnamese all exploited and persecuted...
the Montagnards. North Vietnamese Communists forcibly recruited “comfort girls” from the indigenous Montagnard peoples of the Central Highlands and murdered those who didn’t comply, inspired by Japan’s use of comfort women.[47] The Vietnamese viewed and dealt with the indigenous Montagnards in the CIDG from the Central Highlands as “savages” and this caused a Montagnard uprising against the Vietnamese.[48] The Vietnamese were originally centered around the Red River Delta but engaged in conquest and seized new lands such as Champa, the Mekong Delta (from Cambodia) and the Central Highlands during Nam Tien, while the Vietnamese received strong Chinese influence in their culture and civilization and were Sinicized, and the Cambodians and Laotians were Indianized, the Montagnards in the Central Highlands maintained their own native culture without adopting external culture and were the true indigenous natives of the region, and to hinder encroachment on the Central Highlands by Vietnamese nationalists, the term Pays Montagnard du Sud-Indochinois (PMSI) emerged for the Central Highlands along with the natives being addressed by the name Montagnard.[49] The tremendous scale of Vietnamese Kinh colonists flooding into the Central Highlands has significantly altered the demographics of the region.[50] The anti-ethnic minority discriminatory policies by the Vietnamese, environmental degradation, deprivation of lands from the natives, and settlement of native lands by a massive amount of Vietnamese settlers led to massive protests and demonstrations by the Central Highland’s indigenous native ethnic minorities against the Vietnamese in January–February 2001 and this event gave a tremendous blow to the claim often published by the Vietnamese government that in Vietnam There has been no ethnic confrontation, no religious war, no ethnic conflict. And no elimination of one culture by another.[51]

Health Issues

In December 1993, the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed the International Decade of the World’s Indigenous People, and requested UN specialized agencies to consider with governments and indigenous people how they can contribute to the success of the Decade of Indigenous People, commencing in December 1994. As a consequence, the World Health Organization, at its Forty-seventh World Health Assembly established a core advisory group of indigenous representatives with special knowledge of the health needs and resources of their communities, thus beginning a long-term commitment to the issue of the health of indigenous peoples.[52]

The WHO notes that “Statistical data on the health status of indigenous peoples is scarce. This is especially notable for indigenous peoples in Africa, Asia and eastern Europe”, but snapshots from various countries, where such statistics are available, show that indigenous people are in worse health than the general population, in advanced and developing countries alike: higher incidence of diabetes in some regions of Australia;[53] higher prevalence of poor sanitation and lack of safe water among Twa households in Rwanda;[54] a greater prevalence of childbirths without prenatal care among ethnic minorities in Vietnam;[55] suicide rates among Inuit youth in Canada are eleven times higher than the national average;[56] infant mortality rates are higher for indigenous peoples everywhere.[57]

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