

Teaching Cultural Survival

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This edited volume contains twelve case studies of people struggling for cultural survival, including three written by Indigenous scholars (i.e., Basque, Maori, and Hawaiian). Common to the case studies are the long histories of contested rights between Indigenous communities and colonizers, states, and other non-native groups. This collection is an attempt to increase the awareness that cultural survival of Indigenous peoples is critical to preserve lifeways of unique human groups by both disseminating their stories to the general public and to our students, whether they be taking courses to fulfill general education requirements or as students of cultural diversity (e.g., anthropology, sociology, international studies, and other such programs). What follows is a summary of the importance of the cultural survival of Indigenous peoples and suggestions in teaching cultural survival issues within our courses.

Cultural Survival of Indigenous Peoples

Anthropologists have long been concerned with the survival of cultural diversity under threats from colonialism, imperialism, capitalism, socialism, nationalism, and other forces external of Indigenous communities. As with many other concepts, the one constant is that cultures change. It is not the change itself that has positive or negative consequences to the survival of cultural diversity, but the cause of the change which determines if it is beneficial or detrimental. This change is also occurring in a moment in history where extrinsic factors are not only affecting the Indigenous culture but the agent of change. This agent of change can be either an external or internal group. The impacted culture determines if the change itself is promoting, stabilizing, or diminishing cultural diversity. While the struggle for cultural survival is a part of every Indigenous community in the world, we can best learn about their struggles through specific histories, experiences, and stories.

The case studies within this book have illustrated only a few of many examples of Indigenous communities struggling for cultural survival over their existence within nation-states. While it appears that Indigenous groups are isolated in their fight for survival, there is a long history of anthropologists and others acting as advocates. In

more recent history, non-Indigenous advocates have moved from being the primary voices to supporting Indigenous members in playing the primary role in the fight for cultural survival. Throughout the case studies there were multiple examples of both Indigenous individuals as well as Indigenous organizations that are now taking the lead in advocacy.

Indigenous peoples often form ethnic enclaves within larger nation-states, the nation-state claims ultimate control of both the people and resources, and there are continuous encroachments on Indigenous lands. During and before the colonial expansion of Europe and other imperialistic actors, Indigenous rights and outsider rights often conflicted. The colonial justification for dispossessing Indigenous people was often due to the colonizer's perception that the land was empty or underutilized and that they were bringing civilization and progress.

The post-colonial era did not result in better conditions for Indigenous peoples. The 19th century American Indian policy set the pattern that was followed in nearly every other post-colonial state after independence with the mistreatment of Indigenous people being continued and, in many cases, worsening. Today, similar catastrophes are taking place in Brazil, Indonesia, and elsewhere where disease, dispossession, and forced assimilation are still affecting Indigenous peoples.

There are two phenomena in particular that are negatively impacting Indigenous peoples: international debt and cultural globalization. Many countries, especially developing ones, have international debt. Those countries with tropical forests, minerals, and gems can earn income by leasing timber and mining rights to multinational corporations. Indigenous peoples, often shifting cultivators, are displaced without compensation for their loss of lands and resources. The income that the nation-state earns from these leases goes towards their debt not development for those communities affected by the losses. The displaced peoples are then regulated to poverty either within cities without employment for unskilled labor or as laborers working for owners of the lands that they previously controlled.

Cultural globalization is the worldwide spread of mass media images, consumer goods, world religions, and other ideas and practices of powerful societies. Anyone who has traveled outside of the “first world” is amazed at how the images, goods, and other artifacts of the “first world” have infiltrated even the most remote Indigenous communities. Anthropologists initially interpreted cultural globalization as destroying cultural diversity, but more recently find that people in non-Western cultures can and do give cultural imports new meanings based upon their own worldview. So, while these imports do change the cultures in which they are imported, Indigenous peoples situate them within the context of their culture rather than the culture in which they came (e.g., adorning Western clothes with Indigenous artwork).

Indigenous political action is taking place on several fronts: 1) sovereignty — rights over land and resources, 2) cultural survival — resisting assimilation, and 3) media — combating negative stereotypes. The case studies contained within this volume give multiple examples of each of these political actions, both those that yielded positive results and those that failed.

Teaching about Cultural Survival

Teaching issues related to the cultural survival of Indigenous peoples to undergraduate students in Western countries is difficult. There is a tendency for both instructors and students to exoticize, otherize, patronize, and misunderstand the motivations of Indigenous peoples. This pattern is often reinforced by the long anthropological interest in emphasizing differences between cultures and not their similarities. As teachers of anthropology, we must resist focusing only on how people are different across time and space, but instead put emphasis on the similarities that are shared amongst cultures, thus making us understand our shared humanity.

As anthropologists we strive to “make the familiar strange and the strange familiar” (Myers 2011), but often rely upon using “exotic others” as the only reference between the students (familiar) and Indigenous (strange). Do Native Americans, Bretons of France, Australian Aborigines, and other groups within this book consider themselves the “exotic other”? In treating them as such in the courses

that we teach result in perpetuating both noble savage myths¹ and their continued need to fight for cultural survival?

Instead we must confront notions of “exotic others” by starting at home. Our students all have experience with the “exotic”. By this, I do not mean those activities that most would consider deviant behavior. Rather, each of our students has family, work, recreation, hobbies, et cetera that would be considered strange/exotic by another member of our own society. Does that make the student strange/other/Indigenous? No, it does not. It demonstrates instead that we each have both the familiar and strange within our individual suites of microcultures that presents the opportunity, in turn, to view other people, groups, and cultures as being both familiar and strange.

As teachers of cultural diversity, it can be challenging to introduce university students to peoples so different from themselves. As a point of illustration from my own teaching, I once had my students watch *The Nuer* (1971), a classic ethnographic film showing the life of an African pastoralist people. Students reacted to this film by falling asleep or, if they were able to complete the film, not being able to connect to any of the individuals’ lives due the focus on the differences between the Nuer’s lives and our own. Being a fully indoctrinated anthropologist who found both the pace of the film and the documentation of social organization presented in the film intellectually and emotionally satisfying, I was troubled that my students could not also connect with the film. I then found *Sweetgrass* (2009), a film documenting shepherding in Montana. The next semester that I taught the course, I first had the students watch *The Nuer* and then *Sweetgrass*, both while I was away at a conference. While the students still experienced the disconnect with *The Nuer*, they reported that while the where watching *Sweetgrass* they were able to compare the two groups and see the many similarities between them and the differences faded away. They were also better able to see the Nuer as people, not exotic others. How we may begin making the familiar strange and the strange familiar while countering ethnocentrism and noble savage mythologies is not a simple process.

When working on issues on cultural survival with students, having them passively read case studies, watch ethnographic films,

and listen to well-constructed lectures may result in only surface-level understandings of the issues involved. Discussing and writing, however, can lead students towards deeper understandings as they grapple with the content and questions that prompt them to work through the issues. This takes time. In short semesters already packed with content, assignments, and exams, it can be difficult to make time for deep discussion and writing, but it is critical for us to make the effort not only for the benefit of our students, but also those that will be affected by our students' understandings in the future.

From my prior courses and within the context of this volume, the following are a few prompts that may be used to spur discussions or guide written assignments about cultural survival:

1. What impact did colonialism/ imperialism/ nationalism/ capitalism have on this community?
2. How can religion be used as an instrument of domination/control and the reduction of cultural diversity?
3. What efforts did this cultural group make in retaining their cultural survival?
4. What alliances did this cultural group make in their efforts for cultural survival?
5. What experiences (effects and responses) did the communities in this volume share?
6. What are successful approaches towards gaining cultural survival?
7. As an anthropologist, to what extent do you think you would get involved in the political, economic, medical or cultural survival struggles of the people you were studying? What ethical issues influence your answer?

Of course, there are many other questions, based upon the instructor's training, research, and interest that may be spurred from the content of this volume.

Conclusion

Human cultural diversity is intricately tied with the struggle for cultural survival. As shown in the case studies within this volume,

nation-states have actively been working towards reducing cultural diversity among their Indigenous peoples by dispossessing them of their lands, preventing them from using their languages, restricting their access to legal protection, and various other repressive acts. While genocide is universally distained, ethnocide (the destruction of a cultural group) has historically been accepted as a necessary component of colonialism and imperialism. It is the threat of ethnocide that Indigenous peoples are now actively working to prevent.

In anthropology, there has been a recent shift away from research with small-scale Indigenous populations to research in more urban settings either abroad or at home. While this expansion of the anthropological enterprise to the human condition beyond small-scale societies should be applauded, the lessons learned from working with smaller communities should not be ignored. We must never assume that the fight for cultural survival among Indigenous groups is a settled matter. Just because all Indigenous peoples are now subsumed within nation-states does not mean that Indigenous peoples are no longer fighting for cultural survival, rather, it is a fight that may never end.

References

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¹ See Ellingson (2001) for a history of the noble savage myth.