Constructing indigenousness in the late modern world

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COLLISIONS OF CULTURES AND IDENTITIES
SETTLERS AND INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

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CONSTRUCTING INDIGENOUSNESS IN THE LATE MODERN WORLD

Robert Cribb and Li Narangoa

The twentieth century, like the four centuries which preceded it, was a dismal era for indigenous people. In the Americas, Australasia, Africa and Asia, indigenous peoples were expelled from their lands, infected with new diseases, robbed of their languages and cultures, and murdered. Scholars may debate whether the fate of indigenous peoples constitutes true genocide, but there is no doubt about the catastrophic consequences for many indigenous peoples of their encounter with the modern world.1

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, there are many who would claim that the position of indigenous peoples shows little improvement, that displacement, dispossession, deculturation and demoralisation remain the fate of indigenous peoples from Amazonia to Borneo to Darfur to the Australian outback.2 Yet, a significant global change has taken place in attitudes and policies towards indigenous peoples. That change has involved a new discourse of respect for indigenousness. Much of the time that discourse is superficial and perfunctory, but the fact that such a discourse has emerged is significant. The discourse on indigenous rights overlaps with the general discourse on human rights, but it is not the same as that human rights discourse. The aim of the indigenous rights discourse is to deliver basic human rights to indigenous peoples, but indigenous rights do so in a way that seems contradictory to the principle of human equality: that is, by identifying indigenous peoples as a category of human being whose rights take at least a different form from those of non-indigenous peoples.

Our interest here is to identify the main elements of the discourse which seeks to give those different rights to indigenous peoples and to explain why that discourse has been taken seriously by people who on first appearances seem unlikely to benefit from it. We argue that this discourse rests on four elements. First, indigenous peoples have been able to insert themselves into a characteristically modern valuing of the fact of being first. Second, settler societies, in developing an attachment to the land that they have acquired, have sometimes also developed an appreciation of the attachment to land of indigenous peoples. Third, scepticism has emerged about the capacity of modern technology to manage the environment sustainably and this scepticism has led to a corresponding appreciation of the value of indigenous knowledge. And fourth, recognising some people as “indigenous” has turned out to be a powerful shortcut to protecting their general human rights even though it gives them a category separate from other humans. To explain these arguments, however, we need first to discuss the way in which the term “indigenous” has reached its contemporary meaning.

Migration on a vast scale has been a constant feature of human history and prehistory. Except perhaps for some inhabitants of Africa we are all the descendants of migrants, whether the movements which brought our ancestors to the lands they called “home” took place decades or centuries or millennia ago. Some migrations took place into lands empty of humans, even in relatively recent times. Many Pacific islands, for
instance, experienced their first human settlement within the last two thousand years.\(^4\)

Other migrations took place at the expense of older communities. Although pre-historians have become increasingly wary of assuming that cultural diffusion always took place by means of migration, we can remain certain that human prehistory was repeatedly marked by the arrival of new settlers in lands which already had human occupants.

Many human societies still bear the marks of the arrival of new settlers in the form of terms which distinguish older and more recent communities. "Native", "aborigine", "autochthon", "local" and "indigene" describe the peoples who arrived earlier in a land, but each term has acquired a variety of meanings, both political and regional. Until about the middle of the twentieth century, the term "native" was the most commonly used word used in English to denote prior communities. In some respects "native" was a neutral, descriptive term, referring simply to place of birth, but for this reason it could be ambiguous. The Australian Natives Association, founded in 1871, was an association of people born in Australia, not of Australian Aborigines. In the early decades of the twentieth century, the term "native" had become largely restricted to peoples who inhabited non-European lands at the time of the arrival of European power. In many contexts, especially in Asia, "native" developed a somewhat derogatory implication and by the 1930s the term had come to stand for the deep-seated prejudice of some Westerners against Asians.\(^5\) Over this same period, the term "Aborigine" came to be applied to the native inhabitants of Australia, to the extent that it has almost lost its broader meaning, while "autochthonous" largely fell out of use altogether. During the second half of the twentieth century, the term "indigenous" emerged as the most widespread and acceptable term for original inhabitants.

The distinction between older inhabitants and newcomers normally implied a difference between the moral and political value attached to each status. For much of human history, prestige has been on the side of the newcomers, mainly because newcomers have generally been conquerors. There was no embarrassment amongst Tutsi in Rwanda and Burundi in the widely held belief that they were the descendants of Hamitic conquerors from the north.\(^7\) Nor did the Vietnamese feel ashamed of being interlopers in territory formerly occupied by Cham and Khmer in what is now southern Vietnam.\(^8\) The Hawaiians celebrated their settlement of Hawaii at the possible expense of the MENUHUN.\(^9\) The Mongol conquests of neighbouring tribes and civilisations in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries are considered glorious episodes in Mongolian national history rather than a matter for regret.\(^10\) European colonialists, too, of course, assumed an unquestioning superiority over their subjects throughout the world. These assumptions of superiority by conquerors were based especially on military success, with its assumed implication of greater technological skill, organisational and social fitness, and, often, divine support. The relative status of older inhabitants and newcomers, however, was not uniform across cultures. Some conquerors adopted a policy of integration with native elites. Alexander the Great was celebrated for having encouraged marriage between his generals and elite women from amongst his conquered peoples. Other conquerors maintained the sharp distinction between themselves and their new subjects. The early Manchu rulers in China discouraged intermarriage between Manchus and Chinese and sought to prevent Chinese migration into traditional Manchu lands.

The status of migrants who arrived in an alien land for economic reasons, rather than as armed conquerors, was more varied. Where the migrants came to outnumber the indigenous inhabitants on a vast scale, and where they were able to win political power, they generally behaved like conquerors towards the indigenous peoples even if military conquest was not an important part of their historical mythology. White Australians in Australia and Chinese in Taiwan are examples of this phenomenon. On the other hand, where economic migrants remained a minority they seldom enjoyed high status even when they achieved great wealth. The Chinese in Southeast Asia, the Indians in Africa, and the Jews in Europe were cases in point. Migrants who came as slaves or indentured labourers had still lower standing, such as Indians in Fiji, and Africans in the Americas.\(^11\)

The distinction between newcomers with high prestige and natives with low social standing was particularly sharp during the colonial era. In the European colonies, and those of the United States and Japan, there was invariably a structure of discrimination in which explicitly racial classification blended into classification on the basis of culture and religion and even at times resembled a classification based on social class. In colonial Indonesia, for instance, all inhabitants were classified as Europeans, "foreign Orientals" or natives, but those categories were not as sharply racial as the terms imply. Culture, religion and class enabled and sometimes obliged people to shift from one category to another.\(^12\) In the Portuguese colonies, by contrast, the category civilizado, "civilised", which defined many social rights, was superficially not based on race but on culture though in practice it privileged European newcomers. Especially before the nineteenth century, the term "Indian" or "Indio" was widely used to refer to native peoples even where they had not the remotest connection with India. Nonetheless, in all this varied terminology the status distinction between new arrivals and older communities remained the rule.

During the twentieth century, a significant improvement took place in the status of "native" peoples. This change was reflected partly in the increasing use of the term "indigenous" in place of "native". The word "indigenous" itself, of course, is an old one. It derives from a Latin word indigena ("native"), itself derived from the Old Latin in du, indo (in, within) and Latin signare (to beget), but until the middle decades of the twentieth century it was more commonly used to refer to plant and animal species than to people. Like "native", however, the term was always used in contrast to imported species and peoples ("exotics", "foreigners"). The term never implied that there were common characteristics shared by the original peoples of Australia, Amazonia, Siberia and other regions of the world where the intrusion of modern states had failed to snuff out the separate identity of earlier inhabitants. The indigenous grasses of Australia and North America were considered to have no more in common and no more connection with each other than the native peoples had. "Native" and "indigenous" were local categories, not a global identity.

The shift from "native" to "indigenous" has not been absolute. In much of Asia, the term "native" still has a deeply unacceptable taint of colonial contempt. In North America by contrast, the adjective "native" retains a relatively positive connotation, at least in the construction "Native American". Nor has the term "indigenous" fully escaped the implication of being primitive. Even if indigenous values are now celebrated in a way that was not possible half a century ago, indigenousness never conjures up images of modernity, technology and progress.\(^13\)
We can identify two phases in the changing status of the term "indigenous". The first phase relates to anti-colonial nationalism. The colonial era was marked by the arrival not only of settlers who took over the lands of the original inhabitants and began to farm or mine them but also often by the arrival of traders and labourers from third countries — often but not always other colonised regions — who settled in the colony to take advantage of commercial or employment opportunities there. The nationalist struggle against colonial rule often implied also a struggle against these settlers. They were not part of the colonial ruling class, but they were seen as part of the colonial system and discriminating against them was often seen as an essential part of the decolonisation project. As Mamdani comments: "There is a growing tendency for indigeneity to become the litmus test for rights under the postcolonial state. [...] We have ... turned indigeneity into a test for justice, and thus for entitlement under the postcolonial state."[5]

In a few cases in the first half of the twentieth century, we can see how colonial powers enhanced the status of indigenous peoples, precisely in order to diminish the status of migrants not belonging to the conquering group. When the Japanese Kwantung Army occupied Manchuria in 1931, they found a landscape inhabited primarily by Chinese. There was a significant Mongol minority, especially in the west of the territory, and smaller Korean, Manchu and Russian communities, but the heartland of Manchuria was dominated by Chinese. This Chinese settlement was a relatively recent phenomenon. Manchuria had not been historically part of China proper and had been largely closed to Chinese settlement until the second half of the nineteenth century. At the time of the Japanese occupation, the memory of massive migration into the region therefore was still strong. Well before the Japanese seized Manchuria, however, Chinese both in the region and elsewhere in China regarded the territory as "Chinese", though it was not yet imagined as having the same integral status as regions further south.

Refuting Chinese claims that Manchuria was "Chinese" quickly became an important part of the Japanese political strategy in the territory. Japanese propaganda stressed that the indigenous peoples of the territory were the Mongols and the Manchus and that the Chinese, like the Japanese and Russians, were immigrants. In this construction, the Mongols and Manchus received a special standing as indigenous peoples: they were given a separate political status and even some limited degree of autonomy. The former Manchu emperor of China, Pu Yi, was made head of state. The relative status of the immigrant communities, by contrast, was determined by their supposed ability to contribute to developing the territory. Japanese propaganda therefore placed great emphasis on the failure of Chinese society in the region to create a prosperous existence and on the contrasting success of the Japanese in doing so. The Japanese "puppet" state in the region, Manchukuo, was presented as a developmentalist state par excellence, presiding over rapid expansion in mining, agriculture and industry and employing the most modern technology.[4] In Manchukuo, thus, we see both the celebration of newcomers as better developers of the land and the celebration of indigenes as the land's traditional custodians.

In colonial Indonesia, the Dutch maintained a formal legal distinction between "natives" and "Foreign Orientals" (mainly Chinese). In some respects the Chinese were privileged in this arrangement — they enjoyed a high degree of autonomy within their own communities — but they were not permitted to own land and their distinct legal status was designed to prevent them from assimilating to the native communities. Britain in Malaya and Fiji similarly maintained a system of racial classification which distinguished migrant labouring communities (Chinese and Indians in Malaya, Indians in Fiji) from the indigenous Malays and Fijians. In all these societies, the migrant groups were generally portrayed as being more industrious, more civilised, and therefore more dangerous to the colonial order than the indigenous peoples. By marking them as outsiders in contrast to the indigenous peoples, the colonial powers undermined their grounds for claiming political rights.

The eventual outcome of this colonial-era discrimination in the decolonisation process had great deal to do with numbers. In Manchuria, the overwhelming numerical dominance of the Chinese ensured that their colonial-era status as "newcomers" would be largely ignored following the dismantling of Manchukuo. White settlers easily took control of the independent state of Australia. In Malaysia and Fiji, by contrast, where the newcomers were numerically more or less balanced by the indigenous population, and in Indonesia and Burma where they were vastly outnumbered, the "newcomers" became second-class citizens, experiencing both legal and practical discrimination in comparison with the native population. This fate was experienced not only by "third country" migrants but in some cases by European settlers. The Eurasian community in colonial Indonesia, which had had European legal status in the colony but which became a small minority in a large country, lost most of its privileges at independence.

In the second phase of the transformation of the term "indigenous", its meaning has become much more restricted. Rather than referring to the long-standing non-European inhabitants of a land, it has come to refer to small, often tribal, communities. These groups have seemed to be powerless in the face of global and national political and economic forces, yet they have achieved a prominence and an influence in world affairs which belies their small numbers and their dispersed location in isolated parts of the world. The United Nations General Assembly, for instance, proclaimed 1995—2004 to be the International Decade of the World's Indigenous People and created a Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in 2000 to provide a centre for coordinating and strengthening international cooperation on indigenous issues.

We should emphasise that we do not include in this valuing of indigenousness the process of commercialising and displaying indigenous cultures for the entertainment of outsiders. This process, in which traditional cultures, including costumes, handicrafts, ceremonies, music and dance, become commodities for consumption by outside observers may involve some respect for indigenous societies, but it most often leads to a distortion of traditional practices and an unequal engagement of "exotic" communities in a national or global economy.18
The new meaning of the term "indigenous" is summed up in a recent World Bank publication: "The characteristics which distinguish indigenous peoples include their strong attachment to the land, their dependence on renewable natural resources, subsistence practices, distinct languages and cultures, their historical identities as distinct peoples, and often mistrust of outsiders." Whereas it remained possible to use the word "native" to refer to, for instance, the long-term European inhabitants of Germany or England, this definition made it impossible to call them indigenous. More important, the new usage made it impossible to refer to most large majority communities— the Indonesians or the Vietnamese, or the Chinese in China — as "indigenous". This restriction in the size of the communities referred to as "indigenous" has been paired with the development of the term as a global social or cultural category. "Indigenous" peoples are defined not just in relation to the ruling community but have been defined as a global category sharing important characteristics. This shift in meaning has not taken place everywhere. The Indonesian government continues to use "indigenous" (primiti) in the older sense to refer to the large majority which is not identifiable of foreign descent. In Malaysia, the comparable term, bumiputera (literally, "sons of the soil"), refers to the politically dominant Malay community to the exclusion of Malaysians of Chinese and Indian descent, but bumiputera status has been acquired by recent Muslim immigrants to Malaysia from other parts of Southeast Asia who are not indigenous to Malaysia itself but who were native to other parts of the region. This category includes Javanese, Minangkabau from Sumatra, Bugis from Sulawesi and Cham from Vietnam.

Of course there is a political reality that indigenous people are on the defensive almost everywhere in the world. Indigenous cultures are threatened by national education systems and by the spread of commercial media, while traditional tenure over land is often not recognised, or recognised only with difficulty, in court systems based on alien traditions and conceptions. Nonetheless, the claim to being indigenous has a power which we can identify particularly if we compare the moral and political standing of underprivileged indigenous peoples with that of underprivileged immigrant communities. It is clear that being indigenous confers important moral advantages.

PRIOR SETTLEMENT AND BEING FIRST

One of the most prominent elements in discussion of indigenous status is the moral and psychological importance which many people give to being prior settlers and especially to being the first in a new, unpopulated land.18 "First peoples" is a respected, if somewhat political, synonym for "indigenous peoples" and the antiquity of a people's occupation of a land is strongly symbolic.19 The issue is especially acute in islands, where it can be presumed that people arrived in an empty land at some time in the past. The supposed arrival of the Great Fleet of Maori in New Zealand in 1350 was for a long time a symbol both of the prior Maori claim to the islands and of early Maori technological prowess in navigating across vast oceans.20 In the case of the Australian Aborigines, pushing the date of first Aboriginal settlement in Australia far back into prehistory, perhaps even suggesting the Aborigines evolved separately in Australia, tends to be a badge of approval for Aboriginal claims to a special relationship with the land. Assertions on the other hand that the Aborigines arrived later, and particularly assertions that they arrived in a number of waves, so that the late-comers in fact conquered and displaced the earlier inhabitants, have been a badge of rejecting that special relationship. Disappearance in New Zealand over whether the Maori displaced earlier settlers has a similar political implication. In Taiwan there is a continuing debate over whether the aboriginal inhabitants of the island arrived there from China or from maritime Southeast Asia, or whether they developed separately on the island.21

On the Asian mainland it has always been far more difficult to identify anything like an arrival date for the ancestors of present inhabitants. In these circumstances, priority of settlement is the most important. There is little political symbolism in the fact that the Mongols came to the lands around the Gobi Desert after a long series of other peoples, now long since vanished, but it is of great political significance that they were there before the Chinese, and precisely for this reason Chinese ideologists have attempted to assert an ancient Chinese presence in the region. Similarly, some Thai historians have claimed that their ancestors did not migrate from the north in the period after the tenth century, displacing the older and Mon and Khmer inhabitants of the Chao Phraya valley, but rather inhabited the region from time immemorial. Some societies seek to be blind to the priority of earlier inhabitants while asserting their own priority. For instance, many white Australians disregard the first settlement of Australia by the Aborigines but claim that their prior settlement gives them the right to exclude settlers from Asia, Africa and elsewhere. The United States, built by immigrants, seeks to exclude vast numbers of would-be new migrants from Latin America. In the Japan-sponsored state of Manchukuo, the Japanese portrayed the numerically dominant Chinese population as migrant, distinguishing them from the "indigenous" Mongols and Mandchus in order to be able to repudiate Chinese rights in the territory.

The value of being first seems to be a distinctive phenomenon of modernity. Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" captures the sense of excitement that priority generates: "The fair breeze blew, the white foam flew, The furrow followed free; We were the first that ever burst Into that silent sea."22 Neil Armstrong's words upon stepping on to the moon — "That's one small step for [a] man, one giant leap for mankind"— convey the special meaning that a simple act can acquire by virtue of being first. From early times, communities have developed techniques to identify and reward those who were strongest, fastest, cleverest or most dextrous, but it seems that only the modern world has put a high value on the simple fact of being first: the first to climb a mountain, the first to cross a sea, the first to develop an invention, the first to express an idea, the first to choose a particular form of words. The vast legal apparatus of copyrights and patents is in essence a system for recognising and rewarding priority. In the academic world, and much of the artistic world, priority and novelty are hugely important sources of status. To do something the best is important, but to do it first may be even more important. The significance of being first seems to arise from the idea of progress, the idea that each new discovery, each new invention, each new deed is a step forward in human progress. A major part of the new valuing of indigenousness has come from the ability of indigenous peoples to insert their history as first settlers into this global and modern appreciation of priority.
ATTACHMENT TO LAND

The World Bank document quoted above cites "strong attachment to the land" in first place in its list of the characteristics of indigenous peoples and this claim of a specially strong attachment to place is one of the most widely heard elements in arguments for the distinctive treatment of indigenous peoples. Although this claim distinguishes sharply between indigenous peoples and immigrants, it derives its force from the fact that immigrant communities also quickly develop attachment to the land in which they have arrived. Just as indigenous peoples have been able to place themselves favourably in the discourse of priority, so they have also been able to position themselves effectively in the discourse on attachment to land.

In the age of first Western settlement outside Europe, native peoples were generally considered to have only a weak attachment to the lands they inhabited. If they were nomadic, or did not practise agriculture, they were thought to live only on the surface of the landscape, having no real sense of its character or potential. Even if they tilled the soil their agricultural technology was generally seen as less advanced, and therefore less engaged with the land, than Western agriculture. Native possession could be swept aside brutally by programmes of extermination, casually by assuming that the land was empty, or by moving indigenous peoples from one place to another to suit the convenience of the conquering power.

With the passage of time, the newcomers often came to claim not only that they made better use of the land than did "natives" but also that they hold it in greater affection.25 This attachment to land arose from using it and from knowing how to survive in it. Human beings tend to feel empowered by knowledge of the natural environment in which they live and work. The farmer who knows what needs to be done to coax a crop out of the soil, the herder who knows how to keep herds and flocks healthy through changing seasons, the hunter who knows where to find quarry and everything who knows what must be done to survive local peril — dangerous animals, poisonous plants, hostile climates, diseases and unfriendly fellow human beings — all of these people gain a sense of empowerment from their local knowledge.26 This sense of empowerment tends to be strongly environmental. The "Blat und Boden" doctrine of the German Nazis emphasised the special attachment to the soil which a farmer develops by the act of farming.27 In the European settler colonies of North America, Southern Africa, Southeast Asia and Australasia, affection for local landmarks and for local flora and fauna emerged rather quickly, publicly expressed in poems, novels, paintings and other works of art. The Dutch in Indonesia became avid consumers of a sentimental genre of painting known as mooi Indië (the beautiful Indies), featuring waterfalls, volcanoes, rice terraces and other characteristic features of the landscape. White Australians celebrated eucalypts, wattles and kangaroos, New Zealanders silver firs and kiwis.28 Of course not all members of settler communities took part in this celebration of the local landscape. In every country there remained many for whom the local environment was alien and hostile. For these settlers there was still a goal to recreate the landscape of their former homes. Nonetheless, affection for the local land and environment was a powerful element in local discourses.

Initially, the political implication of this claim of attachment to the land was primarily in relation to the metropolitan power. By claiming that they were attached to an African, American, Asian or Australian landscape, settlers of European descent made it clear that they no longer considered themselves European and they implied that they were entitled to a separate political status. Dorothea Mackellar's poem "My Country", widely taught in Australian schools in the twentieth century, specifically rejected any feeling of attachment to the English landscape and celebrated precisely those aspects of the Australian environment — droughts, harsh sunlight, distance, danger — which the English might be expected to find alien and forbidding. In this respect, it is not surprising that the first broadly-based popular movements for protecting landscape within national parks emerged in settler colonies — New Zealand, Australia, South Africa and the United States — and that the very term "national" park linked nature conservation and landscape protection to a distinct national identity.29

In some respects, this assertion of settler attachment to the land was a tool against indigenous claims of attachment to land. By asserting their affection for the landscape, the settlers could discount the older ties of indigenous people to place. In a land claims case in New Zealand, white farmers of several generations' residence in a particular region offered copious personal testimony, which has been accepted in the courts, that their spiritual and practical attachment to their land exceeded that of distant traditional Maori owners.30 Like the discourse on priority, however, the discourse on attachment to land was one which indigenous people were well placed to enter and make use of.

The contemporary discourse on indigenous rights tends to assume a sharp dichotomy between indigenous and settler societies. Our argument here suggests that, although the cultural distance between indigenous and settler communities may be vast, the arguments presented on both sides to identify and explain their relationship with the land may be surprisingly similar. Indigenous and settler societies use and protect their land in different ways, but they both trace their attachment to use and protection. Although the historical experience of indigenous and settler societies on the land is generally very different, they share an appreciation of the importance of history. Their formal religious beliefs may differ profoundly, but they often share a remarkably similar sense of spiritual values of the land. This conclusion helps in part to explain the power of the indigenous claim to attachment to land: in some cases at least, settler societies have become able to recognise the importance of indigenous attachment to land precisely because they themselves have also developed such an attachment.

THE VALUING OF INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE

When Europeans arrived in "new" lands, they commonly learned much from earlier inhabitants, especially about the local environment. They learned which plants could be eaten and how they should be prepared, they learned how to deal with local fauna, they learned traditional medical practices, and they learned survival techniques in sometimes hostile or dangerous landscapes. Until the 1950s this knowledge, despite its value for survival and sometimes for commerce, had no special status. The knowledge of local people was considered to be fragmented practical knowledge which had to be further developed and incorporated into modern science.
Settlers living on the fringes of civilisation might gratefully acknowledge that native lore could help them to survive winters, droughts and other hardships, but such lore was considered to be part of the past, a relic with little more than curiosity value once civilisation was properly established. There was no sense that indigenous knowledge might constitute an intellectual whole: knowledge of the medicinal use of, say, a particular plant was treated as separate from any spiritual meaning the plant might have. Native peoples such as those of Australia and North America, whose economies relied heavily on hunting and gathering, were commonly portrayed as not being good stewards of the land because they failed to use the land to its full potential. Chinese authorities have commonly assumed that the use of land by nomadic herders such as the Mongols does not make proper use of the soil of the steppe, which would be better converted to agriculture. Israel’s occupation of Palestine has similarly been justified by the claim that the Palestinians had failed to develop the land productively.54

In many areas settled by outsiders the initial view that indigenous peoples were only loosely attached to the land was supplemented by a discourse which portrayed them as actively harming the land with their traditional practices. Swidden (“slash and burn”) agriculture in the tropics was widely condemned as wasteful and destructive.55 In the arid temperate zones, traditional herding practices were similarly condemned. Throughout the world, traditional hunting practices were seen as unsustainable and inimical to biodiversity.

From the 1960s, however, some observers in the West gradually came to see indigenous lore as a coherent knowledge system equal in standing to the knowledge systems of the West. Rather than simply acknowledging that a particular people might know a worthwhile use for a particular plant, these observers saw that knowledge as being embedded in a more comprehensive understanding of the world which might provide an important counterpoint to Western understandings. Anthropological research began to highlight the complex ecological relationship which many traditional peoples had with the land and with the animals, plants and ecosystems in general which existed on that land. They observed medical practices which approached illness in very different ways from conventional Western medicine and which sometimes produced results much better than Western medical practice.56 At about the same time, the sense of environmental crisis in the West, which was brought to a head by the publication of Carson’s Silent Spring and of the Club of Rome Report, focused attention on ways in which indigenous peoples had managed their relationship with their land.57

This sense of crisis was underpinned by a growing awareness of the catastrophic consequences of inappropriate modern technical interventions in formerly stable environments. During the Mao Zedong era in China, vast areas of steppe were brought under cultivation in the belief that modern Chinese agricultural techniques would deliver hugely increased production. The slogan of the time was “Human kind can defeat nature”. Similarly in several parts of Indonesia, transmigrant settlers were brought in to apply the modern rice-growing techniques of Java and Bali to the jungles of Kalimantan in the expectation of a great increase in production. In the Mongol lands north of the historical areas of Chinese settlement, however, intensive agriculture quickly led to desertification. With the grass cover of the steppe removed, the thin topsoil was quickly blown away and the land was spoiled forever. In the jungles of Kalimantan, Javanese-style agriculture interrupted the rapid cycling of nutrients between vegetation and the thin topsoil. With the jungle removed, the topsoil quickly eroded, leaving only barren laterite subsoil which can be neither made productive nor restored to its original state.58 In some cases, outside intervention does not directly change the landscape but instead works to prevent indigenous peoples from carrying out their traditional land management practices. In Australia, the killing, removal and settlement of Aborigines ended longstanding practices of burning vegetation in a patchwork pattern or a regular cycle. With no regular burning, dead and dry vegetation accumulated, providing fuel for less frequent but often far more devastating bushfires.59

In these circumstances, traditional knowledge which had been dismissed as irrelevant or even destructive came to be seen widely as holding fundamental truths about both proper land management and about the value of plant and animal species to humankind in general, whether for food, for medicine or for insights into the nature of things.60 Indigenous peoples’ understanding of the land and environment came to be taken seriously as “indigenous knowledge” which might hold the key to the sustainable management of resources. This awareness of and respect for indigenous knowledge were by no means universal, but it became a major part of discourse on issues of indigenous rights in a way that was unimaginable a few decades earlier.

INDIGENOUSNESS, NATIONALISM AND HUMAN RIGHTS

The fourth and final reason for the contemporary valuing of indigenousness is not directly related to land or place. It arises rather out of contradictory currents in the global debate on human rights. During the twentieth century, a massive political and intellectual struggle took place to eliminate race as a criterion for discriminating between humans. This struggle was motivated both by the appalling historical consequences of so-called scientific racism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries — most notably the African slave trade and the Holocaust — and by a principled commitment to the fundamental equality of all people, especially before the law and in their dealings with governments.

This struggle was largely successful in eliminating formal systems of racial discrimination and in making it unacceptable to speak publicly in simple racist terms. Nonetheless, there has always been a realisation that democracy, the open door, the free market and the level playing field are not neutral environments. Rather, they favour those with experience and with social and economic capital. Democracy sometimes dispossesses indigenous peoples just as effectively as colonialism, because it tended to install the rule of the majority and because it was linked with nationalist ideologies which prescribed both unity and political uniformity for all citizens. Free markets brought significant disadvantages to communities which were short of capital and which did not know their way through the complex legal institutions of the modern state. The social groups which are discriminated against on the basis of race are often also those which lack experience and social and economic capital, so that additional measures are needed to protect their interests. These measures have historically included both efforts to eliminate indirect or structural discrimination and various forms of “affirmative action”. By affirmative action, we mean measures which set aside the principle of equal treatment of all people in order to protect the interests of those who would be unfairly
disadvantaged in an open system. In this respect, the recognition of indigenousness as a politically valid category falls within the broader phenomenon of affirmative action. In other words, recognizing a group of people as indigenous has become a way of protecting human rights which would otherwise be at risk. The protection of the rights of indigenous peoples, moreover, stands in some ways for the broader issue of protecting cultural diversity from the homogenising effects of the market. In this respect, protecting the culture and land rights of indigenous peoples stands on the same broad international platform as protecting the French film industry against the commercial power of Hollywood, or offering special access to higher education to students from underprivileged social groups.

The protection offered to indigenous peoples in this way, however, is a double-edged sword. First, it brings with it the inevitable risk of “museumisation”, of the half-forceful confinement of people within a tradition which may not suit their needs. On the one hand, traditional ways of life do not always prepare people to function effectively in the modern world. On the other, efforts to preserve tradition often work to homogenise it, removing elements of versatility and innovation and strengthening hierarchical patterns of authority, so that “traditional” cultures which have been deliberately preserved may be rather different from their original forms.

Second, the political implications of claiming to be indigenous are also ambiguous. Although indigenousness is sometimes paired with the principle of self-determination to create a basis for national liberation (reflecting the older identification of indigenous rights with anti-colonialism), it more commonly implies an abandonment of claims to national self-determination. Indigenous peoples characteristically seek recognition and status within larger polities, rather than claiming separate statehood. In the 1980s, the Okinawans refused to identify themselves as indigenous precisely because they feared it would weaken, rather than strengthen, their standing in Japanese society. Unfortunately, we can say that the United Nations’ decision to recognise the rights of indigenous peoples at the highest level through the creation of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in 2000 was possible precisely because the term “indigenous” had been emptied of any possible link with separatism. The recognition of indigenous rights no longer challenged the contemporary state system.

CONCLUSION
The meaning of the term indigenous has shifted dramatically in the course of a century. A term which once referred most often to plants and animals came to be used more commonly for native people and then to develop specific moral and political meanings. Initially it took meaning from anti-colonial nationalism, becoming a tool with which native majorities could claim rights from colonial rulers and could attack the social and economic power of “third-party” settler communities. More recently, however, its meaning has become restricted to isolated and “tribal” peoples and it has provided a moral basis for preserving the cultures and social autonomy of those peoples. This moral basis arises from recognition of the importance of prior arrival in a land, from a valuing of indigenous attachment to land and of indigenous knowledge of land and environment, and from recognition that market systems do not provide equal protection to all.

The changing meaning of the term “indigenous” reflects a global political shift from self-determination by means of political independence to self-determination through the assertion of land rights. Political self-determination was a leitmotiv of the twentieth century, with the number of independent political units on the face of the globe rising from a few dozen to more than 250. The emphasis now given to the attachment of indigenous people to land has had the effect of subverting the drive for self-determination by implying that land rights alone — rather than sovereign national rights — are sufficient to satisfy the aspirations of indigenous peoples. The issue for the twenty-first century is whether the land rights formulation is sustainable in the way that the sovereign state has turned out to be sustainable.

Indigenousness has become an important force in modern politics, empowering those who can claim it and weakening those who cannot. We can even suggest that indigenous identity is not a static condition, but rather a political resource that may be both acquired and lost. Although we conventionally imagine that indigenousness distinguishes indigenous peoples sharply from settlers, the claim to rights on the basis of being indigenous is only effective because it seems to appeal to values which are more widely held. Being indigenous is respected because those who are not indigenous can understand why being first is significant, why attachment to land is significant, why indigenous knowledge is valuable, and why everyone at times needs protection from the ruthless power of the market place, democracy and universal human rights.

NOTES
5 This opprobrium was not limited to the English word “native”. In colonial Indonesia the equivalent Dutch term “inlander” had acquired the same hated derogatory sense by the 1930s.
6 The term “Aboriginal art”, for instance, is taken almost automatically to refer to the art of Australian Aborigines, though the term “aborigine” is also used for the descendents of the first inhabitants of Taiwan and the Malay Peninsula. See for instance Elizabeth Burns Coleman, *Aboriginal Art, Identity, and Appropriation* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005).
24 Some of these themes are developed in Kerry Neville Bakken, “Place Matters: Cultivating Commitments to Local Soil and Local Memory”, paper presented to the International Conference on New Directions in the Humanities, Rhodes, 2–5 July 2003.
26 Of course, the celebration of distant landscapes was also an aspect of calculated campaigns to encourage migration from metropolitan regions to the colonies and former colonies.
27 See Alfred Runte, National Parks: The American Experience (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979). We can see this process repeated on a global scale in the creation of World Heritage sites under the auspices of UNESCO. The implication of declaring World Heritage sites is that a sense of their importance to the globe will give them a greater certainty of protection than any sense of their national importance.
29 See, for example, Ivi Liebler, The Case For Israel (Australia: The Globe Press, 1972).

The regional differences in English language usage of the words “native” and “indigenous” make it difficult to be dogmatic about the implications which the two words carry, and this uncertainty is compounded when one seeks equivalent words in other languages. The Japanese term *senjinmin* can be translated as either “native” or “indigenous” and retains many of the negative connotations of “native”. The people of Okinawa, who are generally considered ethnically different from other Japanese, strenuously resisted being described as *senjinmin* because they saw the term as derogatory. In Indonesia, by contrast, there is no term which clearly corresponds to “native” or “indigenous”. The word *asli* (“original”) can refer both to descent and to place of birth.