

# **Becoming Indigenous**

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## **“Tell them you’re an American.”**

I was somewhat of a mystery to the other kids in my neighborhood. They would ask me, “What are you?”

The turf was Irish and Jewish. This was Manhattan, Washington Heights, in the 1940s.

When I told the Irish kids I was part Irish, they’d ask, “Are you Catholic?”

“One of my grandmas was Catholic.”

“Were you confirmed?”

“I don’t know.”

“You’re not Irish.”

When I told the Jewish kids I was part Jewish, they’d ask, “Mom’s side?”

“Yeah, mom’s,” I would answer.

“Then you’re a Jew,” they’d say.

I would correct them: “I’m part Jewish.”

“You can’t be part Jewish.”

The Irish and Jewish worlds were very separate; each group kept to themselves. I knew the Jewish kids better, because they went to public school with me. The Irish kids of course went to Catholic school, so I only saw them on the street. There were very few Protestants in the neighborhood, and I wasn’t one of them either, although one of my grandfathers was English Protestant.

I was not brought up in the traditions of any of my blood groups. Where did that leave me? They were the only worlds in my neighborhood.

I talked with my mother about the problem. She said, “When they ask you what are you, tell them you’re an American.”

But her answer didn't satisfy them in the school yard or on the corner. You couldn't be *just* an American. You had to be something else too.

In school I was learning about the "American meltingpot", where immigrants joined from around the world to become something new and different. But this idea did not translate into reality. New York City was divided into ethnic neighborhoods, and mixing was, to say the least, discouraged.

My family seemed to be the only one who really believed in the "meltingpot". Nobody else seemed to have the slightest interest in melting. On the contrary, they clung fiercely to their ethnic identities, and seemed to find great strength in them.

In my childhood consciousness, there was no clear distinction between ethnic groups and races. Maybe because so few people of color lived in my neighborhood. Jewish people said, "The Jews are a race." I understood that I was "white", but what that meant was not obvious to me. People never talked about being "white", so I did not have any deep racial identity. This was still close to World War 2, and Nazis did not consider Jews to be "white". The terms were not clearly defined.

So I did not particularly identify either racially or ethnically. Jewish kids treated me like a *goy*, and Irish kids treated me like an English Protestant Jew. Yet I had a lot of pressure on me to choose one ethnic group or the other. The thing they seemed to have in common was being offended that I preferred being mixed. Later when I got to know Black people, they treated me like a white; when I got to know Rednecks, they treated me like a Mestizo; and when I got to know Mexicanos, they treated me like a Gringo.

The only identity I had was an American. I have spent many hours trying to figure out what that means.

### **Origins**

All kids need an origin story, some explanation of how they arrived in this place in the world. The origin story they told in New York Public School 187 was: Columbus discovered America, then came the Pilgrims, and the Dutch bought Manhattan Island from "the Indians" for \$24. Then "the Indians" went away somewhere, nobody seemed to remember where, or care. The claim was that this foolish "sale" gave us smart Europeans a legitimate right to be here in New York.

It was only years later that I caught up with "the Indians". After living in a place where I got to know Indian people, I acquired a different perspective on history.

There are two different American Indian origin stories, as told by the Native people themselves. One is that The People emerged from a

local sacred spot, usually a lake, mountain or cave. The other origin story is that The People emerged at a far-away sacred spot which they left in fulfillment of a commandment or a prophesy, and wandered until they arrived at the sacred spot where they are today.

### **Who is an Indian? What is a Race?**

“Race” is a concept that seems obvious from a distance but breaks down when looked at closely.

Racial classifications in general use in this country (mostly without legal status) are inconsistent, reflecting prejudices and institutional racism.

The classification “Black” or “African-American” is an inclusive biological definition. People with any African blood are in this category.

The classification “white” or “Caucasian” is an exclusive biological definition. People with only “white” blood are in this category. “White” defines itself as pure; any mixing results in “non-white” offspring. The very concept of a “white” race is racist. Mixed-race people can consider themselves African-American, Native American, Asian-American or Latino-Chicano-Hispanic American, but they cannot consider themselves “white”. However, in reality there is no unmixed blood.

The classification “Hispanic” or “Latino” is not a biological definition at all, but a cultural definition. People from any Latin American background, of any biological racial group, fall in this category. Thus all “Hispanic” people are also Indian, African, “Caucasian” or Asian. However, the “Hispanic” classifier is commonly used as if it were racial. Twenty-two million people identified themselves as this in the last U.S. census. A large number of “Hispanic” people in the U.S. are wholly or part Indian.

The classification “American Indian” is both a biological and a cultural definition. To be recognized as Indian by the United States government (that is, enrolled by the Bureau of Indian Affairs), in general, a person must be one-quarter biologically Indian and a member of a recognized tribe. People from outside the United States, even if 100% native biologically, are not recognized by the government as American Indians. One reason why the government is so selective about this recognition, is that along with it come the legal responsibilities that the colonial peoples have to the Indigenous peoples, in this case amounting to eligibility for special treaty benefits. There were two million Indians in the last U.S. census.

However, census counts, as distinct from the BIA roles, are based on self-identification, which is somewhat subjective. Mixed-race people tend to choose self-identification with whatever group has the greatest social advantages. Recently there has been a large jump in numbers

identifying themselves as American Indian, who chose a different race in an earlier census.

“Hispanic” as distinct from “Anglo” is a carryover from the historical rivalry between Spain and England. The arm’s length relationship that is still often kept between English-speaking America and Spanish-speaking America, is a reflection of this obsolete cultural and political competition. The same arm’s length relationship ironically often exists between English-speaking North American Indian nations and Spanish-speaking Latin American Indian nations. It is a result of the different historical experiences of the Northern and Southern conquests and colonizations. The Portuguese and French experiences in America add even further complications.

In most of Latin America the definitions of “Indian” and “non-Indian” are based much more on culture than on blood. To be Indian in Latin America (Indio, Indigena, Natural) means following a traditional way of life, in an Indian community. By this definition, any person living in the “Western” style is not an Indian. In Guatemala, for example, a person of any race living in the Euro-American style is a “Ladino”, even a person 100% biologically pure Indian; in central Mexico that same person would probably just call himself a “Mexicano”. Therefore of two brothers biologically 100% Indian, one can be an “Indian” and the other can be a “non-Indian”.

Before the coming of people from other continents, the American Indian peoples had no concept of race, only tribal or national identities. They were no “Indians” at all, until they became distinct from Europeans, Africans and Asians.

In the same way, the consciousness of being European only evolved out of the same tribal consciousness as every place else, and has always been secondary to national or ethnic identity in Europe.

For American Blacks and most Mexican Indians, their tribal identities were stolen by the Anglo slave system and the Spanish encomienda system. Since very few American Blacks know their specific tribal identity, they identify as African. In the same way, the tribal identity of most Mexican Indians was taken away, and most identify as Mexicano or - if they live in the U.S. - as Chicano. Spain never recognized any Native sovereignty. The Northern Indian nations have hundreds of treaties, violated by the U.S. government of course, but the Southern Indian nations never had any treaties. At best, an Indian pueblo might receive a royal land grant by His Majesty’s largesse; these often became the foundation for future land struggles. The Southern Mexican Revolution, centered in the State of Morelos and led by Zapata, was an expanded version of this, and won the ejido system of communal

land, only recently reversed by Salinas-Gortari. Zapata, by the way, was pure Indian, and chosen as chief in a traditional way.

Each ethnic group has its own self-definition. According to the Arabs, all people who speak Arabic are Arabs, no matter what their racial background. This is the result of a complex racial and ethnic historical mixture. However, not all Moslems speak Arabic. Iranians, Turks and Pakistanis, although Moslems, are not Arabs.

“White” racial separatism in the U.S. is traceable to the island mentality of Little Britain. The Spanish were less racist than the British, and so is Latin America today. To say this does not excuse the racism of the Spaniards, or the racism that continues today in Latin America. It is simply an historical fact that intermarriage between the Spanish and the Indigenous people was much greater than that of the English, and more acceptable in society. Spanish and Moorish blood had already been mixing for eight hundred years. The racial makeup of much of Latin America today reflects this.

Due in part to the huge immigration into the United States from Latin America, the ethnic and racial situation here is rapidly changing. Because of the physical proximity of the U.S. to Latin America, and because the western third of the U.S. was Mexico until the war of 1848, Latinos are in a different position from any other ethnic group. There is a cultural continuity from Mexico into California, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas. As the marching chant goes, “We didn’t cross the border: the border crossed us.” Although there are pressures on Latino immigrants to give up their cultural identity and assimilate, there are also countervailing forces to retain their culture. Because many Latinos are entirely or part Indian, this population movement has great implications for Indigenous people in North America. According to demographers, in 20 years the majority of Californians will be people of color, the largest group of these Latino.

There is absolutely no scientific way of distinguishing “races”. There are infinite gradations and variations, but no sharp lines. Ethnic groups can continue through even biological racial changes. This is actually common, and can be clearly seen in groups such as Magyars, Turks, Arabs, Gypsies and Jews. Compare Ethiopian Jews and European Jews; it should be clear how biological makeup can change over a long period due to mixing with another population, while the culture - the ethnic group - can be preserved.

The blood of the world is very mixed.

### **Colonial People and Indigenous People**

We all descend from Indigenous people. Our ancestors, if we go far enough back, were all indigenous to somewhere.

But over the centuries there have been great population movements, most of these connected to imperialism and colonialism, resulting in large numbers of people residing in areas where their ethnic groups have no claim to indigenoussness.

In no place is this situation more pronounced than in the United States of America. Here the European conquest of the Indigenous nations has been so thorough that only a small minority are Native American today, although they still make up a sizable population and even a majority in some areas. Even more thorough has been the cultural conquest. A much smaller number of Indigenous people are still living traditional lives in traditional communities. Most of the U.S. is now populated by non-Indigenous people, post-colonial people whose ethnic homelands are far away. The society they live in is not based on Indigenous ideas, but colonial or post-colonial ideas. Despite their independence from the “old country”, their attitudes toward the Indigenous people are not very different from the attitudes of the old colonists.

The idea that the U.S.A. is different from the rest of the world, is a mythological coverup of the conquest. While the rest of the world is made of ethnic homelands, the myth declares, the U.S. is open land, an experiment in freedom and democracy, a place where anybody in the world can go and join. The myth is based on the historical fairytale that the American continent was vacant, except for a few small tribes wandering in the trackless wilderness. Only European audacity could declare a populated continent vacant! Europe tried to solve its social problems by dominating and exploiting other peoples and their homelands, using the colonized world as a pressure valve, dumping troublesome people into the colonies, and transporting the wealth of the colonized lands back to the “mother country”. After Independence the ideology changed to the revolutionary ideas of the 18th century. To the Indigenous nations, the change in 1776 was simply that the invading government was run by a colony-based group instead of from England. This was not a positive change. The King of England had often served as a protector of the Indigenous people, holding back depredations of colonists into the Native nations. Under the new U.S.A., these forces were less checked, and the attacks against the Native nations increased. The political ideas of freedom and democracy are great experiments, but Euro revolutionaries had no right to situate their great experiments on somebody else’s continent.

Many of the inheritors of the colonial conquest see things differently. They view colonialism not as a crime, but as a good thing, an historical necessity, “God’s will”, or “Manifest Destiny”. They describe the U.S. as “a young nation of only 200 years,” intimating that the inheritors have no responsibility for the conquest. They proclaim that

Europe brought the gifts of civilization to primitive native peoples. They tell the Indigenous people that this is for their own good, that assimilation is a step upward into a more advanced society. They claim that it is the Indigenous people who owe much to the Europeans, instead of vice versa.

### **Who is Indigenous?**

Are the Japanese indigenous to Japan? That might sound like a stupid question.

No one today would dispute the right of the Japanese to live in Japan. That makes them pretty indigenous. But the Japanese did not always live in the “Japanese” islands. They emigrated there from central Asia many centuries ago, passing through Korea on the way. Inhabiting “Japan” was a tribal people known as Ainu. Today some Ainu are still there, occupying a small reservation in the north of the main island. The Ainu are the Indigenous people of “Japan”.

Are the French indigenous to France? Are the Diné indigenous to Dinétah? Back in 200 AD the Franks were a confederation of Celtic tribes along the northern Rhine in what is today Germany. Diné (Navajo) histories relate that they have always lived in the land between the four sacred mountains, but their Pueblo neighbors claim that the Diné arrived there recently (about 800 years ago) from the north.

My dictionary defines *nation* as “a stable, historically developed community of people with a territory, economic life, distinctive culture, and language in common.” It defines *indigenous* as “native; born, growing, or produced naturally in a country or region.” It is true that a nation - a people - are bound by the common social fabric of culture, language and economic interdependence. And under ordinary circumstances, a people have a common land base which, through long habitation, they have established as a homeland. However, many peoples no longer reside in their original homelands, but have established themselves in new homelands.

I want to make a distinction between indigenous and Indigenous (with a capital I). Most of the world’s peoples are arguably indigenous to their places of current habitation; this does not make them Indigenous peoples. In the most basic sense, Indigenous peoples are the oldest stratum of peoples residing in traditional ways in their traditional homelands.

Indigenous people do not exist as isolated individuals but as part of Indigenous communities, societies and nations. Indigenous people live in traditional life ways. They are *primitive* people, not in the sense that they are less culturally advanced, which is a lie, but in the sense that “primitive” means “prime” or close to the source. Indigenous life ways have been followed by their communities from the earliest times, and

therefore are well adapted to their locality on the planet. Indigenous society represents a spiritual connection among the community and with Mother Earth.

The very fact that Indigenous peoples have remained in their own homelands instead of participating in the world-wide orgy of imperialism and colonialism, demonstrates that they have lived by Indigenous principles.

Native tribal peoples display a vast variety of social and ethnic customs; yet they have all developed some basic common elements: a traditional way of life rooted in stability, peace, respect for neighbors, and an attempt to live in harmony with the natural environment. While neighboring tribal peoples have often been rivals and enemies, warfare among them has typically taken a ritual and limited form.

Wars of conquest are not undertaken by Indigenous peoples, but by groups who have abandoned Indigenous ways. Imperial aspirations and rebellious populations were not unknown in the Americas before 1492, as any study of Inca Tahuantinsuyu, Aztec Anáhuac, or Mayan Ulumil-cuz-yetel-ceh will quickly show. The Itzás of Chichén, an elite from Mexico, were not exactly popular among the subjugated Mayas. Great metropolises like Teotihuacan and Tikal had environmental problems.

### **Who has a Right to Be Where?**

Then who are non-Indigenous people? They are people residing in some other people's homeland, leading non-Indigenous ways of life. Non-Indigenous ways are typified by "Western" mass society, which is transferable anywhere through sheer force, making no attempt to harmonize into the local ecology, but floating on top of it like an oil slick. The vast majority of non-Indigenous people are where they are because of imperialism. In an ideal world they would be there as guests; but in the real world, they form colonial or post-colonial populations, often privileged strata above the Indigenous peoples, usually usurping the Indigenous peoples' land.

How long does an outside population have to live in an area to establish themselves as indigenous? In the world today, who has a right to be where?

Simply living in a location for generations does not make a population Indigenous. No matter how many generations the English occupy Northern Ireland or the "whites" occupy South Africa, they will never become the Indigenous people of those lands. Yet historians tell us that the Irish also emigrated to Ireland, displacing the Picts and the Erainn, and the African tribes emigrated south from their earliest home in Ethiopia.



There is a deep yearning in almost every human heart to want a spot on earth to call home, an incontestable spot where one can be indigenous. History is full of wandering tribes looking for the correct spot to put down roots. If we believe that we all have common ancestors, then almost all peoples emigrated to their current homelands at some point. The Hebrews wandered through Palestine looking for a home; the Anglo-Saxons invaded Britain; the Mexicas (Aztecs) emigrated south from Aztlán to the Valley of Mexico. Each of these tribal groups eventually established homelands in new territories.

At the time of the arrival of the Spaniards, there were about 10,000 Ohlone Indians in the San Francisco Bay Area. Today 40,000 North American Indians live there, but very few are Ohlone. Does that make the 40,000 non-Indigenous? There are also hundreds of thousands of Native people there from Latin America. Are they non-Indigenous too?

Native Americans are clearly the Indigenous people of Turtle Island (the “American” continent), just as traditional European peasants are the Indigenous people of Europe. The finer distinctions have to be worked out by the Native peoples themselves.

Populations imported by a dominant group into an area for labor, such as the genocidal kidnapping of Africans into the Americas in the past, clearly have special rights that need to be recognized. This applies, on a lesser scale, to “free” labor such as Arabs brought to work in Germany today.

### **Who Gets a Holy Land?**

We all know what the Judeo-Christian world means by “The Holy Land”. Western tradition dictates special treatment toward that little spot of earth called Palestine. But outside the Judeo-Christian world other people consider different areas their Holy Lands. How many Holy Lands can there be?

To the Indigenous peoples, their homelands are sacred spots, Holy Lands.

U.S. citizens are encouraged to remember, defend and pay deference to far-away ethnic homelands, and to recognize the special place in the world known as The Holy Land. At the same time, the U.S. shows absolute disrespect to the Indigenous American homelands, and expects the Indigenous people to gladly give away their homelands, their Holy Lands, to them.

The Mt. Rushmore sculptures of U.S. presidents, on sacred Black Hills land stolen from the Lakota, is perhaps the most startling example of this historic tragedy. It is everywhere you look in Indian America.

If the world were based on social justice, each people, no matter how small, would have the inviolable right to an autonomous homeland. But the real world of course is based on power.

While the political map of the world today is changing fast, it remains frozen in boundaries that reflect neither ethnic borders nor sustainable eco-systems. "Nation-states" around the globe today have been largely defined geographically by the imperialism and colonialism of the last 500 years, from the era when European powers carved up colonies and spheres of influence. Almost all encompass ethnic minorities. Many of these "minorities" are really nations in themselves, captive nations inside more powerful nations. The Indigenous tribal peoples of the world largely fall into this group of captive nations.

In Africa, Asia and the Americas, the political maps are drawn around the old colonial boundaries, cutting across tribal and ecological lines. The new post-colonial rulers are usually not interested in dissolving those borders. Today's "Third World" nation-states are ruled by native people, but often these people act as fronts for neo-colonial powers. And, since most have ethnic minorities within their boundaries, most see Indigenous rights as a threat to their "national interest."

The United Nations, by self-definition, focuses on the modern "nation-state" as its level of organization. And that itself is one of the things at issue. The modern nation state has no place in the traditional Indigenous world, and is indifferent to eco-systems.

The Native nations have never played by the same rules. Traditional tribal ways of governing were always inimical to the "state" in the sense meaning the organized power of coercion: "political power grows out of the barrel of a gun." Native nations have always functioned through traditional tribal democracy, and "chiefs" have always had very limited powers, mostly of persuasion.

Because of this, the United Nations has been very slow and reluctant to champion the cause of Indigenous national rights.

Some progress however has been made in bringing issues of Indigenous national rights before the U.N. by at least a dozen organizations.

### **Alienation in Utopia**

The U.S. is full of displaced rootless people, non-Indigenous people in a land they desperately want to make theirs, but cannot because they are part of no real community. People are atomized, isolated, and emptied. U.S. society seems to offer unlimited freedom in "the pursuit of happiness", but this freedom acts as a facade for the emptiness. They have rejected the place of their childhood as not good enough, and haven't yet found the place of their dreams. At some point most people

just stop looking and make “home” in whatever place they happen to be, although their new community might be as fragmented as the original rejected one.

There are few multi-generational communities in the U.S. because the system trades off community for mobility. Americans have a lot of freedom, but very little control over their communities, and therefore lack of control of their lives. In the U.S. people travel and reside anywhere freely, as long as they can afford to, but everything is controlled by money. The system invests economic control of communities largely in the hands of private monied interests. The system permits unchecked amassment of individual wealth, often at the expense of community needs. Unchecked by social restraints, wealth and power can amass instead of spreading equally among all people. The modern money system aggravates this, condensing power in huge increments, giving the holder of wealth vast powers quickly interchangeable into a multitude of forms. In contrast, a community based on people really taking care of each other, needs more community control of the means of survival. Indigenous communities are controlled by the inhabitants through long-standing democratic traditions. The U.S. system has no room for communities based on Indigenous principles such as tribal land, except in reservations.

### **Mass Consciousness**

The last century has seen two competing international politico-economic systems both promise social justice and prosperity based on technological domination of the environment. “Democratic” capitalism would achieve these through “free market” forces, while “state” socialism would achieve them through centralized planning. Neither system brought social justice or prosperity to all its people, but both drove the planet to the brink of ecological and spiritual devastation.

Marx looked to “class consciousness” as a motor force in constructive social change, and saw ethnic nationalism as reactionary. To solve our social ills and achieve social justice, the working people of the world were going to put aside their ethnic or national identities, think of themselves as members of the “international working class”, and build the new classless society. It hasn’t worked out like that. Despite many decades of “education”, ethnic nationalism was not replaced by “proletarian internationalism”. No nation wanted to commit ethnic suicide. I doubt that very many people in the former U.S.S.R. today think of themselves as “international working class”, or believe that Communism brought social justice to all its people. Ethnic and national identities have proven to far overshadow identification with any economic “class”.

Ethnic identities are seen by most people not as part of their shackles, but as part of their liberation. The international socialist movement recognized this in the Cold War era, and tried to piggyback onto “national liberation struggles”, with only superficial success. The breakup of the U.S.S.R. and Yugoslavia into many independent nations, presages the creation of new organizational forms in Eastern Europe based not on centralized power but on national and regional autonomy. The Commonwealth of Independent States is a parallel development to the European Economic Community. In Western Europe as in Eastern, from Provence to Catalonia to Scotland, peoples are looking to autonomy in the post-Cold War era.

Is the U.S.A., the last “super power”, as internally shaky as the old U.S.S.R.? Is the historic purpose of empires past? What good is ruling the world if it doesn’t get you a caring society back home?

Jefferson looked to democracy, freedom and the struggle for human rights to achieve social justice. It hasn’t worked out like that either. Social justice is a perception; it does not adhere to any fixed formula. If you want to know how much social justice there is in any particular place, ask the people who live there. Ask the people in South-Central L.A. or on “the Res”.

While the Communist world saw the “period of stagnation”, the West saw the triumph of mass consciousness, the international mass culture brought about through new communications technology.

This mass consciousness is the most powerful single force on the globe today. Like all power, it has a light side and a dark side. Its light side is that mass technology can put great power into the hands of the world’s people; its dark side is that it concentrates power at its point of highest development, and so is now primarily used as a tool of Western domination. It is international but dominated neo-colonially.

The mass communications centers barrage the world with pictures of the U.S. as a place of fabulous wealth and success. The stores are filled with products and produce, and the shoppers are having a party, living the good life. It is a world where people win because they’re good, and lose because... well, because they’re losers! The picture minimizes the underlying poverty and misery, by rarely showing the hungry people on the other side of the store window. It presents the U.S. as if it were classless, and not ruled by a racial-financial elite. It rarely shows how racist, ruthless and arbitrary the whole game is.

Yet mass consciousness has its progressive side, and through it the worlds peoples do communicate and get to know each other. They slip the real messages through the cracks, often through the arts.

The main opposition to mass culture in the world today is not class culture but traditional ethnic culture.

The idea that mass culture can replace or is replacing ethnic traditions, is false. Mass culture always seems to be wiping out ethnic traditions, but the deepest traditions always survive. Mass culture often belittles traditions as constraints and relics, but they survive because they nourish, sustain and affirm life. This is true for all cultures equally. All traditional cultures here today have survived because they're doing something right.

There is a bad side to ethnic nationalism, of course: narrow nationalists are often prejudiced against other ethnic groups. When the Communist system collapsed in the U.S.S.R, in Yugoslavia and Eastern Europe, almost immediately, intolerance and border disputes flared up among newly independent ethnic states. At this moment many areas of the world are torn by ethnic warfare, particularly in places recently "liberated" from the damper of Communism's "internationalist" ideology.

Everywhere in the world where there are borders, there are border disputes. Where does one homeland end and the next begin? It is simply a fact of human existence, a problem which is not going to go away.

Ethnic nationalism is no more a magic wand to peace and social justice than is "democracy" or "socialism". The Nazis were ethnic nationalists.

### **Beyond the Meltingpot**

The American "meltingpot" was always a false mythology. It was never everybody who was supposed to melt. On the contrary, everybody else was supposed to become like the Anglos. Non-Europeans - people of color - were expected to become clones to European culture, but not interbreed.

The Indian people were not even invited into the "meltingpot" until long after the conquest. The Anglos wanted the land, not the people, and were willing to use any means to remove the Indians from it. Only after the conquest was absolute, in 1924, were all Indians handed citizenship and offered entrance into the "meltingpot". Their children were herded into far-away boarding schools and forbidden to speak their own languages. Forced assimilation was government policy. In the 1950s came the policy of tribal "termination": the withdrawal of tribal recognition, division of tribal land, and dispersal of the people. That policy has been largely reversed and softened. But there are still few options for most Indian people. Reservation life and city life both can often mean marginalization, powerlessness and poverty.

The "meltingpot" ideology is seen by many Native people as a policy of genocide. To take away a people's culture and traditions is to remove their life support system, their sustenance. For the most part they can only be losers in a different culture. When people lose their culture it

means the end, both spiritually and physically. That is why both Indigenous and colonial people all over the world fight assimilation and hang on to their traditions at any cost. Native people who live outside of traditional communities today, often in urban concentrations, usually retain strong ties with their home communities and return regularly. They protect and defend those communities of their roots, just as Italian-Americans protect and defend Italy. Forced assimilation - "termination" - is death for Native peoples.

Recognizing the need for ethnic cultures and homelands leads us away from the meltingpot, and into a world based on mutual respect among cultures, a multi-cultural society.

### **Prior Rights**

Is Indigenous culture better than the mass colonial culture?

Suppose for a moment that in some ways it is.

Does that make Indigenous people better than colonial people and give Indigenous people more rights than colonial people? Of course not.

And colonial people should have no more rights than Indigenous people.

Colonial populations have no right to set themselves above Native peoples, to usurp their land, or to force Native people into their non-Indigenous culture.

For Native people, the usual human rights of life and freedom are inseparable from the Indigenous rights to land, sovereignty, and the right to practice one's own culture.

Today we are witnessing an upsurge in Indigenous activism, in the fight for Indigenous peoples' rights. Indigenous activism stresses traditional ways and customs. In many places where there are large Indigenous populations, Native activism is seen as dangerous and threatening to the established order. Some traditional practices are illegal, particularly in areas where Indian people still make up the majority, such as parts of Mexico, Guatemala, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, and the U.S. In parts of Guatemala, for example, a man wearing traditional Mayan clothes is seen by the army as a political radical and could be in mortal danger. In the U.S. a person can go to prison for participating in a peyote ceremony. In Mexico the ancient temples are considered national treasures, but Native priests are often forbidden them for ceremonial use. Traditional ways are a threat because they include national sovereignty and land rights to an ancestral homeland. They are a threat because Indigenous American culture does not recognize some of the basic tenets of European culture, such as private ownership of the land. The two systems cannot coexist in the same

space. Traditional ways are a threat because they are a rejection of the dominant culture.

To quote a friend of mine: “ The resources that my people have always used to sustain ourselves are now off limits to our people as defined by our Colonial Great White Father. This paternalistic view forces a dependence of our peoples on a system that does not share the same way of life that we were able to practice. Part of the colonial process is to render the Native peoples incapable of sustaining themselves in a way that is consistent with natural law, and forces their unwilling participation in a system that runs contrary to natural law. Any effort by people who wish to do otherwise is termed illegal or irrational and the weight of society or the colonial yoke is placed on the individual to conform or be sent to prison.”

### **The Indigenous Future**

In the largest sense, both Indigenous people and colonial people, we are all of us indigenous to planet earth.

Many non-Indigenous people today are looking to the Indigenous people for spiritual and political guidance. They recognize that Western society is spiritually bankrupt, and are turning to Indigenous society to learn how to harmonize with the natural world instead of trying to dominate it. They are seeking out the wisdom of the traditional Indigenous elders to lead human society back on the path of peace and a sustainable future.

However, these intentions often quickly deteriorate into a kind of New Ageism that is exploitive of Native peoples. To quote my friend again: “Looking to Native people’s elders to see a way to live into the future, may not be welcomed by the Native community. Rather, the observations of Native peoples may help others who are moving towards being indigenous, to see something in their own culture or to see a way that is not new but is consistent with Natural law. It must be stressed that any interaction with Native ways must be done only on the advice and consent of the peoples and not just a native person who may be willing to share some aspect of his or her culture. A good marker is if a person who is teaching these ways can do exactly the same thing among the people and culture that it emanates from. To practice a way of life out of context of the culture it originates from, does not respect the culture.”

The concept of the bioregion as a practical form of sustainable social organization is attractive as a mass culture concept loosely based on the Indigenous way of life, but has limited applicability due to the serious limitation that it ignores ethnic groups and history.

Most of the few areas of the planet not devastated by industrialization are those spots still inhabited by traditional tribal people. Those spots and peoples are invariably under threat today. If

those areas are destroyed, so too the world as we know it will be destroyed, for those places sustain life on this planet. In a very real sense, the Native peoples are the guardians of those areas, and their struggles are larger than the reservation borders. Helping the Indigenous peoples protect themselves and the natural areas of the world, is one of the tasks of this generation.

We post-colonial mass-culture people, if we are ever going to overcome our alienation, need to put down roots into this continent, to become more indigenous to Turtle Island. That we will never do without finally making peace with the Indigenous people, and working with them to find a constructive future. We need new ceremonies for our new multi-cultural society, and we can only get them the Indigenous way, through being given them in our dreams.

American Indian culture is today treated by mass society as a thing of little value, except perhaps in the romanticized past. The media usually treats it like a big pile of old dirt. But if we dig into the mound, we will find - to the astonishment of some - that beneath that layer of earth, stacked one inside the next, are a series of spectacular living pyramids.

The “mother country” is neither England nor Spain. The real mother country is Turtle Island and Mother Earth.

If we do not learn from the Indigenous elders how to care for our mother, we will become the final non-Indigenous generation on earth. The Indigenous people will know how to survive.

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