

Tomorrow's tribes

The world's tribal peoples in the 21st century

By Stephen Corry

It is 35 years since Survival International was formed to defend the rights of tribal peoples, and ten years since the UN declared its 'decade of indigenous peoples'. Germaine Greer's new book now brings more attention to these issues. But are things getting better for these minorities? The director of Survival International outlines the global situation from two perspectives – legislative, and the reality on the ground – and draws mixed conclusions.

Earlier this year, 17 Ayoreo Indians emerged from the dry scrub forests of western Paraguay to make their first contact with non-Indians. What fear must have gripped them as they took their first tentative steps towards outsiders? And why come out at all? Surprisingly, we know the answers. But before I describe what happened, it is worth noting that many people are astonished to learn that first contacts still take place 500 years after Columbus. In fact, there are more uncontacted peoples today than experts thought existed 35 years ago. This alone should give pause for thought: for centuries the West has dismissed minority tribes as anachronisms destined to die out, or certainly to become assimilated to 'modern' life. What actually takes place is much more complicated.

An important aspect to this is the breadth which encompasses indigenous peoples: it extends from the still uncontacted all the way to societies which may have reasserted their indigenoussness only recently. An unusual example of the latter is the Pequot of New England who have used Indian exemption from gaming tax to build the world's largest casino. To be a member of the tribe, and

entitled to million-dollar profits, requires just one-sixteenth Pequot ancestry.

To state the obvious, there is no connection at all between the Pequot's success and uncontacted Indians in Paraguay. But other developments do underscore the view that the tide *has* shifted in favour of indigenous peoples. The UN's decade itself, for example, would have been inconceivable 30 years ago when such peoples were everywhere marginalised.

It is true that a UN agency, the International Labour Organisation, passed a convention on indigenous peoples in 1957, but even those countries which signed it, ignored what it said – particularly its most important article which recognised that indigenous peoples owned their lands. In Australia, it was only the Mabo case in 1992 that first established 'native title'. Future generations may find it astonishing that for 200 years the law supported the racist lie that the land was 'of no one' (*nullius*) prior to British occupation. But in a way Australia was in advance of other wealthy countries.

Only in 1997 did Canada, in the Delgamuukw case, finally recognise Indians' land ownership rights, even when they had never signed any treaty; the judgement found, with stark though belated simplicity, 'What aboriginal title confers is the right to the land itself.' This was reinforced last year in South Africa when the Richtersveld people secured a resounding victory with the court declaring land claims must be settled, 'according to indigenous law without importing English conceptions.' In a nutshell, if a tribe thought the land belonged to them before colonists turned up and took over the country, then this fact must finally be recognised in the law imposed by the colonists.

The reason why treaties were signed in North America and New Zealand (the Waitangi Treaty of 1840, still in force) yet no equivalent agreements were drawn up in neighbouring Australia

was because Aboriginal society went unrecognised by Europeans. Peoples like the Aboriginals, and for that matter the Ayoreo today in Paraguay, had no writing, only rudimentary dwellings, and little which Europeans identified as material culture. This is not surprising. They were mainly hunter-gatherers and such peoples travel extremely light, carrying most of their culture in their heads. Possessions are few and even political leadership is largely eschewed. What *is* important is memory, skill, and a refined application of reciprocity, probably the most powerful survival tool ever grasped by humankind. Hunter-gatherers know their land and its plants and animals with the deepest intimacy: they have to in order to survive. Although this seems obvious, the concept is now so alien to most westerners that it is often ignored, denied, or ridiculed as mere romanticism.

Incidentally, it is worth noting that this relationship with territory is not passive. The hunter-gatherer manipulates the environment just as the farmer or herder does, and there is no clear line dividing hunter-gathering from farming. This point is more than academic: tribes are still discriminated against because hunter-gathering is not recognised as a 'legitimate' land use in many places.

The difference between small-scale tribes, often hunters, and larger groups was vital in determining whether the colonial powers were going to sign agreements with them. It remains important today. Beginning in the late 1960s, the movement for indigenous peoples' rights, at least for the more organised groups, has been driven by the affected peoples themselves. In the USA, the American Indian Movement formulated a 'red power' forged by young urban Indians, many with a college education and from the larger tribes. A similar movement, but without Black Power parallels, coalesced in Canada into the National Indian Brotherhood. At the same time, the Aboriginal Land Councils in Australia came together to argue their case to the nation and the courts. Similar organisations, some still embryonic today, some created or controlled by outsiders

(particularly missionaries), were born in Asia and Russia, as well as the Americas and the Pacific.

However imperfect, the fact that they exist is itself a giant step. In many cases, they have won a recognition previously undreamt of. There is, for example, a UN declaration on indigenous peoples which has been partly drafted by indigenous organisations themselves. Admittedly, it has survived ten years of revisions without being finalised. Perhaps it never will be, for it is a radical document asserting rights to lands and livelihoods in a manner which refutes any moral basis for the internal colonialism still at large today. But it is not alone. The 1957 convention on indigenous populations enjoyed major improvement in 1989, when it became convention 169. The new version – again, partly revised by indigenous organisations – is not perfect but it at least eliminates the earlier emphasis on integration into national society. It also strengthens land ownership, which has always been the principal key to whether tribes are going to survive or not. Its article 14 is unequivocal, ‘The rights of ownership and possession of the peoples concerned over the lands which they traditionally occupy shall be recognised.’

Improvements in laws are welcome, but this is no time for *de jure* triumph. In Australia, for example, the government has tried to limit the effect of the Mabo decision and made it harder for Aboriginals to keep their land. In any case, legal advances must be viewed through a pragmatist’s lens. Canada may have created Nunuvut in 1999, giving self-government to the Inuit of the region, but the world’s highest suicide rate is still to be found in the neighbouring Quebec-Labrador peninsula where the Innu Indians (who are not Inuit) have been reduced from self-sufficient hunters to destitution. Their children sniff petrol and commit suicide with shocking frequency. The underlying cause is that the Innu have been told that the government will negotiate about their land rights only if the Indians first agree to abandon those rights. It is a dictum

about as fair as the queen of hearts to Alice in Wonderland. In vain attempts to legitimise its land grab, Canada pours money into the settlements, creating still more dependency. The Innu are not victims of generations of invasion like most Canadian Indians. The appalling social and cultural decay has taken its grip in little more than a generation; the grandparents of today's Innu had barely seen a white Canadian.

After firepower, dependency has always been colonialism's preferred weapon of mass destruction. In Botswana, a rich country by African standards, the state is building a showcase settlement to which Bushmen are trucked after being taken from the lands they have lived and hunted on for 30,000 years. Although millions of dollars have been spent on this village of just 1,500 inhabitants – which boasts a better clinic than English towns ten times larger – this has not stopped the Bushmen calling it 'the death place'. Apart from the fact that it is not the burial ground of their ancestors, and not their land, the principal complaint is that there is absolutely nothing to do, except get drunk. Declaring that the Bushmen must not be allowed to evade 'modern life', the state provides food and a few largely useless training courses, and routinely arrests Bushmen who try to hunt for themselves. The result is that in only seven years, the Bushmen have been torn from a state of economic independence and reduced to beggars, prostitutes and drunks. As in Australia and North America, previously healthy peoples now have access to modern clinics which treat diseases that they never had before those clinics were built. As an Innu woman put it, 'Since we have clinics, we are always sick.'

The lesson that this 'development' results in lower life expectancy and higher rates of disease, infant mortality, and suicide, than for the mainstream population has still not been learnt. Or, perhaps it has! Many indigenous peoples, not surprisingly suspicious of official intentions, argue that the result is exactly what governments seek: a modern way to ensure the tribes disappear in

order to free their lands' resources (diamonds in the Kalahari, nickel in Labrador, timber, oil and gold in Amazonia etc.).

But the Bushmen face an additional and perhaps greater threat to their survival – the denial of their history. Hundreds of Bushman tribes were once the only inhabitants of southern Africa. Their genocide, at the hands of both Europeans and the Bantu tribes, remains unacknowledged. The Botswana government scoffs at the fact that Bushman tribes were occupying the land for tens of thousands of years before anyone else arrived; it insists that *everyone* is indigenous.

This was a common ploy decades ago in countries where indigenous minorities were speaking out for the first time; even Brazil once pretended there were no indigenous peoples – everyone was simply Brazilian. If a people never existed, then of course their disappearance is unmarked. Although that might seem Orwellian, it continues to garner support. Pop stars declare African tribes an invention of European colonials; British MPs go out of their way to support Botswana's actions; and the UN avoids the term 'indigenous' in Africa, masking its concerns as mere 'multiculturalism'. If North America and Australia are beginning to come to terms with the terrible harvest of their colonial past, this has not yet germinated in Africa where both whites and blacks annihilated dozens of Bushman tribes with similar brutality.

Of course, the killing of tribal people was once commonplace. Amazon Indians were bombed in the 1960s. Aboriginals in Australia and Bushmen in Africa were hunted and shot as late as the 1920s and 1940s, respectively. Park guards in Botswana tortured Bushmen as recently as 2000. The Soviets killed Siberian shamans in the 1950s and 60s. Thankfully, violence on this scale is now rare, though it has not disappeared: several Indian leaders were assassinated last year in Brazil, and Colombian Indians have been killed for decades. In recent years, park guards have shot

‘Pygmies’ in central Africa. Papua, taken over by Indonesia in the 1960s to the dismay of the indigenous inhabitants, probably remains the scene of most killings, with the army regularly gunning down those it suspects of opposing its rule. It has plenty of targets, as virtually the entire indigenous population is against Indonesia.

It is significant that the most violence against tribal peoples today is happening where there is least international attention and *vice versa*. This is perfectly illustrated by the Yanomami Indians in Brazil whose very survival was threatened by gold miners in the 1980s. This became a *cause célèbre* in 1989 when the Yanomami leader, Davi, came out of Brazil for the first time to plead his case internationally. The media attention he ignited took another three years before it drove the Brazilian government into setting Yanomami land aside for them. The result of bringing Davi to an international audience was one of the first major successes which Survival achieved, and it set the scene for much more tribal land to be formally recognised in several countries.

Although there are still grave problems in many Yanomami areas, some communities now have exemplary bilingual schooling with Yanomami teachers, clinics with Indian paramedics, and appropriate self-help projects under their control. Twenty years ago it seemed unlikely that these Indians would survive; now it seems probable that there will be Yanomami for generations to come.

In conclusion, the laws for tribal peoples are getting better, and although the situation on the ground remains appalling in some places (Indonesia), and is deteriorating in others (Botswana), it is slowly improving overall. So what about the newly contacted Ayoreo in Paraguay?

There is no doubt that the odds were mightily stacked against the 17 Indians who came out of the forest last March. In the 1970s, the country was rightly accused of genocide for the way it treated its nomadic Indians. In the 1980s, the Ayoreo were hunted down and forced into hellish fundamentalist missionary camps where disease and depression fastened their fatal grip. Every first contact with the Ayoreo, and for that matter every first contact with Indians throughout the continent, always resulted in Indian deaths. But by 2004 at least Paraguay had learnt the lesson. Knowing that it was in the media spotlight, the government sought the advice of experts: it closed the area to whites, allowed only already-contacted Ayoreo to meet their kin, and only when they had been cleared of the infections that once decimated all Indians.

The policy bore fruit. The Ayoreo did not collapse with flu (nor did they drop to their knees in awe, like benighted natives in a Victorian novel). Instead they carefully explained why they had made the contact, and then peacefully retired back into their forest. They had come because they could no longer get water in the dry season, their sources had been taken over by colonists. They asked, ‘Can the whites leave us some of our lakes and can the (bulldozers) stop tearing down our forest?’ In short, they were just asking if they could live in peace.

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There are about 300 million people in the world who can be called ‘indigenous’. Of these, about 150 million can be more narrowly defined as ‘tribal’ people – smaller minorities, clearly separate from the mainstream. Defining these peoples is best done on a regional basis (Indians in the Americas, Bushmen in Africa etc.), as general descriptions are notoriously unsatisfactory. Survival International uses the one adopted in UN conventions:

Tribal peoples whose social, cultural and economic conditions distinguish them from the national community, and whose status is regulated by their own customs or traditions or by special laws or regulations; peoples who are indigenous on account of their descent from the populations which inhabited the country at the time of conquest or colonisation and who retain some of their own social, economic, cultural and political institutions.

Taken together, these peoples are the largest minority in the world. Many are still threatened with disappearance; all are at risk.

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Websites

For more on...

tribal peoples in general
www.survival-international.org.

on Innu,
www.innu.ca.

on Ayoreo,
www.gat.org.py.

on Aboriginals,
www.atsic.gov.au/default.asp

on Yanomami
www.proyanomami.org.br

Books

‘Whitefella jump up’, by Germaine Greer, Profile Books, London 2004.

The following published by Survival International, London.

‘Disinherited – Indians in Brazil’, 2002.

‘Siberia to Sarawak – Tribal peoples of Asia’, 2002.

‘Lives and stories’, 2004.

‘Indians of the Americas – invaded but not conquered’, 1992.

‘Canada’s Tibet’, 1999.
