

BOOK REVIEWS

Niezen, Ronald. *The Origins of Indigenism. Human Rights and the Politics of Identity*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 2003. 272 pps. ISBN 0-520-23556-8, Paper.

The terms *Indigenism*, *Indigenous peoples* and *Indigenous rights* are fairly recent conceptualizations, in great part emanating from processes of globalization. At least this is what Ronald Niezen sets out to prove in his most recent book with the explicit program of exploring the global nature of the Indigenous peoples' movement. In doing this he offers a critical reexamination of the aspect of cultural relativism, particularly useful for many anthropologists, not the least those preoccupied with legal anthropological problematics. In addition he discusses in great detail the difference between individual and collective rights as well as the legal/political implications of claims of self-determination. According to Niezen *Indigenous identity* is a modern phenomenon, which is mainly constructed for the international arena to attain national, domestic goals, a new global identity, or, as he qualifies his assertion, "a new way of formulating traditional identities." The latter phrase is quite resourceful, as it well summarizes a complex global feature, underscoring the strategic aspect of the conception.

It is indeed a complex endeavor Ronald Niezen tries to pursue, especially considering the great amount of literature on the topic which has been produced in later years. Niezen is bold in his approach covering a large ground of relevant scholarly texts. He attempts to solve the problem with interrelating the levels of local and global in two ways: a) extensive community-based research among the Cree in Cross Lake, Manitoba and the pastoralist Tuareg in Mali; and b) following closely a great number of international meetings, in which situations the commonly shared Indigenous peoples' articulation, language, can be captured. Niezen's own observations are juxtaposed with ethnographic examples from his extensive readership, consequently his attempts at generalizations appear reasonable and in most instances convincing.

The book covers a lot of ground, due to its well-founded organization, however it has a pleasing format. The style of language is also clear and the intricate text communicates well, rich in varied expressions and phraseology.

The text is, furthermore, logically organized; first introducing the new global phenomenon Indigenism, followed by an historical account of the international movement of Indigenous Peoples. The next two topics treated refer to sources of global identity and relativism and rights, the latter pointing in particular to human rights and the problem of universalism. Chapter 4 goes very far in reevaluating established legal facts, and, no doubt, it is here the reader meets new, fresh arguments regarding international law from a scholar who does not conceal his opinions, rather the opposite. In this manner the text turns out as quite thought provoking, which makes the book exiting as well as widely useful.

The new politics of resistance and a discussion of the three basic terms: Indigenism, ethnicity and the state and how they are interrelated precedes the conclusion. Here Niezen relates his text right to the front line of contemporary research concerning the aspect and problem of Indigenism, emphasizing what he conceives as the politics of identity construction, mirroring, moreover, the more commonly known "politics of difference." In doing this Niezen sheds new light on the problem how to accommodate the universalistic/individualistic emphasis on human right to the struggle for having distinct rights and identity as well as cultural difference recognized, thereby counteracting the common assimilation policy of nation-states. Niezen's approach in this respect is innovative, and personally I feel encouraged by his audacity.

Indigenism will continue to be a critical concept. For example, the award of the Nobel Peace Prize for 2004 to Wangari Maathai, Kenya, has stirred up some public debate among the Sámi in Norway. The reason for this is her persistent refusal when it comes to differentiate Indigenous peoples from more dominant populations in Africa. In other words, the Nobel Peace Prize, awarded for quite other reasons, may generate public attention and debate concerning the intricate conception Indigenism and its derivatives.

Finally, if one should offer a critical remark it relates to the empirical substantiation, which appears rather thin, both in regard to ethnographic cases and first hand observations/recordings from ongoing debates in relevant international fora, also from specific court cases actualizing and testing the issues of principle in question. For instance, with Niezen's background one would expect more in terms of problematizing the conception Indigenism in various African contexts, an area so far little covered in scholarly writing. This notwithstanding, Niezen's book is a

good read for diverse scholars engaged in the field and students both of anthropology and law.

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