Indigeneity or Ethnicity: A Choice That Could Harm Tribal Identities

Ethnicity and indigeneity are two different forms of cultural identity. Indigenous individuals and communities are confronted with choices involving retention of an indigenous identity or choosing a mainstream racial, ethnic or minority status. Based on personal circumstances and an encouraging policy environment from modernizing nations states, many people of indigenous descent choose to abandon indigenous tribal identities. Some take up identities as detrabilized indigenous people, or métis as in Canada, mestizos as in Latin American and South America, or as ethnic Indians as in the United States.
The material, political, cultural, legal, and economic forces of the contemporary world are largely predisposed to invite people of indigenous origins to abandon tribal identities and adopt an ethnic identity. An indigenous identity has its center of focus on a tribal nation, or a constructed nation based on internal consent among the Indigenous Peoples of the nation. Indigenous identities focus on or are rooted in kinship, place, land, self-government and holistic institutional and cultural interpretations of the cosmic order. Ethnic Indigenous Peoples have left their indigenous tribal understandings, and generally have moved physically or culturally toward acceptance and participation in mainstream institutions of government, market economy, and kinship.

For many Indigenous Peoples, the choice between ethnic or indigenous identities is not an either/or proposition. Indigenous Peoples increasingly move between tribal and mainstream national worlds. Many indigenous people have become multicultural, and have skills to work and make a living in mainstream nations, while at the same time respect and participate in tribal nations as cultural and political members. Moving between nations and cultures with some ease is at the base of the dual or plural citizenship patterns of the U.S. and Canada.

The formation of ethnic groups of indigenously attached persons are found in many countries around the world. Often indigenous ethnic groupings are more recognizable to nation states, since they are willing to conform to the demands and definitions of national political interest groups. In Canada, Métis form detribalized groups with distinct mixed indigenous and European traditions. The Métis seeks rights that are distinguished from tribal indigenous nations.

In the U.S., there are more people of partial indigenous descent than there are people who identify with a tribal nation. Many ethnic Indians in the U.S. maintain a tribal line of descent like Cherokee or Choctaw, along with descent from English, Irish or other immigrant nationalities. Many, perhaps most, ethnic Indians have little more than passing interest in contemporary Indian community or nations. An American Indian tribal descent is one of several cultural heritages that are honored, but not lived in everyday life. In Latin America and South America Mestizo identities, another form of indigenous ethnicity, requires that the person or group abandon indigenous tribal identities, as well as culture, language, land claims, and self-government.

The formation of indigenous ethnicities are the result of cultural globalization, strong national policies, and the economic marginalization of indigenous people, all of which puts pressure on Indigenous Peoples to accept the mainstream culture, economic, and political system. Nevertheless, many indigenous nations continue to insist on their own rule of law, recognition of their traditional political forms, power over their own territory and resources, and practice of their own languages and cultures. The post-traditional contemporary world offers choices, and moving to an indigenous ethnic identity is one of those choices.

Indigenous ethnic are an emergent part of the world order. It, however, is critical whether indigenous ethnicities will defend or destroy indigenous tribal identities and nations. In moving away from tribal identities, if indigenous ethnic groups are going to be hostile, then they will have joined with mainstream forces of assimilation and acculturation that indigenous nations have struggled against for so long, and will continue to do so in the future. Alliances and mutual support among indigenous tribal and indigenous ethnic groups will support achievement of indigenous tribal rights and goals. However, the indigenous ethnic group movement appears to want to abandon tribal community and rights.

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I do respect the intent of this writing. I also want to parse a couple of thoughts. When you say, “It, however, is critical whether indigenous ethnicities will defend or destroy indigenous tribal identities and nations. In moving away from tribal identities, if indigenous ethnic groups are going to be hostile, then they will have joined with mainstream forces of assimilation and acculturation that indigenous nations have struggled against for so long, and will continue to do so in the future”. First, as Steven Newcomb suggests the word indigenous refers legally to a subordinate group of peoples operating under a larger entity of governance. I prefer the words First Peoples. Second, the history and experiences of Tribal First Peoples varies. As an example, The Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma’s citizenship requirements are based upon one’s documented connection to an ancestor who appears on the Dawes Roll. The Dawes Roll changed the Cherokee’s historical common use of land, to one of division and ownership. It furthered the purposes of assimilation. Additionally by accepting the Dawes Roll as a requirement for membership, great numbers of Cherokee’s were eliminated from membership, which was a political act based upon historical tribal differences. It, like disenrollment efforts today was purposefully used to eliminate tribal membership. There are many Cherokee’s today that, because of the politics of division, or blood quantum requirements (a genocidal concept) remain outside of tribal membership. Many have retained their ancestral traditional lifeways, have blood, language, culture, community, and place (land). Although they are outlanders, they are no less Cherokee than tribal citizens. They are not ethnic Cherokee’s either. They are Traditional Cherokee’s to the bone. Many who are qualified to join a Tribe, refuse to do so because tribe’s have become too assimilated, nor do they want to identify as Indigenous. I’m sure there are many other tribes that have similar circumstances. Although I believe that your intention’s in this article are good, the future consequences of following this path, for a number of reasons including genetic reasons would lead to our ultimate elimination. I would strongly suggest instead, efforts of inclusion, especially of traditional Peoples’ as a method to strengthen the Tribe’s, culturally, politically, and genetically. I would further suggest a complete rejection of the Indigenous label, a rejection of the colonized mind, and recognizing ourselves as free and independent Peoples, the First Peoples’ of Turtle Island.
Such an interesting article. Thank you. One problem for some, is if they have indigenous family, such as a great-grandparent so far away in time, that nothing of the culture is even known or remembered. Or for example if a family was forcibly removed from their indigenous family, and joined the mainstream because there was no other choice - and again, has no record of what their tribal identity was, and no paperwork to connect them to a tribal identity or place - what do they do? Surely it does not mean they should be hostile to tribal identities, I hope. But it can be a quandary - who and what are you and where do you belong? Some might say, if you had an English or Swedish Great Grandfather, you would not obsess about this small part of your family tree - but if you carry a culture that has been nearly erased, outlawed, or marginalized (English or Swedish culture has not been,) you might feel protective of it, or fierce for it. Identity is so complicated - but especially with the racism injected by American laws and the federal government - so intent on erasing indigenous identity, to get more land. (While ironically telling others that if they have even a drop of African in their line, they are Black, for ownership purposes.)

Mashapee tribe filed a lawsuit over how you define yourself. Trying to remember the book and author of a great piece on cultural constructs. I think he wrote in the 1970s. He wrestles with what constitutes a tribe and a culture. Fun stuff. He also did a piece on Conrad's "Heart of darkness" and language. Ring any bells?

You say: "Indigenous identities focus on or are rooted in kinship, place, land, self-government and holistic institutional and cultural interpretations of the cosmic order. Ethnic Indigenous Peoples have left their indigenous tribal understandings, and generally have moved physically or culturally toward acceptance and participation in mainstream institutions of government, market economy, and kinship." What about state records? The best thing that the U.S. affords is self-representation and Free Speech. My family has state records going back to the Revolutionary War that we are tri-racial -- Black Native American (Americans, meaning - European descent). We know of the tribal affiliations (names) because of those records. But the family is not tribal or reservation-affiliated. But that doesn’t mean that we should erase our Native heritage. Black culture is completely dependent upon the hidden Native culture...
within them. Also remember that there are at least three categories -- Tribal, Non-Tribal and Reservation affiliated. I am Non-Tribal, but will never be accepted by the other two categories. If they did accept people like me, the census figures for Natives would become significant. It's time.

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wildrose

Thank you for this article, I think it is wise to bring difficult subjects to light. I disagree that there is always a choice involved when one comes from an assimilated background. In my experience, who knows more about the struggles of an "outsider" ethnic Indian than the Mexican indigenous people. My mother is portugese and northern european. My 87 year old father is a blend of Mexican Indian and American Indian. When I think of him as a little boy, in south Texas, hungry, it breaks my heart. In a large poor family, my grandmother would have to choose a lunch for her children to take to school, crackers and mustard would be more acceptable in a white school, than beans and tortillas, the later would have been more nutritious. So, my father went hungry many days at school. When other kids went on "vacations' during the summers, my father and his family were in the fields working. My father was told to stay out of the sun, because he was getting "too dark". When life becomes intolerable, people learn to change to survive, even if it means leaving your heart behind.

There is always a disconnected sadness in my Indian soul, that stirs within me as well as from my ancestors. So I research my ancestry through genealogy. People do not see the Indian in the Mexican, and surprisingly my native brothers and sisters do not either. My reservation friends are not happy when they are asked if they are Mexican. They say it is an insult. Yet, look at the features of the Mexican, can you ignore the Indian? Mexican; is nationality, not ethnicity. Indigenous Mexicans are a people who were conquered, and forced to assimilate, and to be separate from their native brothers and sisters so that our race would be less powerful. It is the nature of colonization. When I was 25 my father told me of my grandparents healing with herbs, my grandfather speaking with the Spirits. Why did he not tell me before? There was so much he did not speak about. This is a small reflection of what went on in many Mexican households, throughout many generations where the indigenous parts of ourselves were unaware of who we really are. My grandparents and probably others kept their culture a secret even from members of their family in order to survive and in somewhat of an attempt as my father says, to keep the sacred; sacred. Through my research, my belief is that the damage of assimilation is genetic, passed on almost as a new sort of culture until it is ingrained into our DNA. My facial features are Indian. My skin is white. When I see a dark skinned brother or sister, I do not want to be discriminated against, instead I want to remember that I am family, and if I can remember our blood link deep in my native memory, then I will start to remember my loyalty as well. If I am not looked at, as an "outsider" because of my skin color,
then I, as well as other indigenous ethnic Indians can begin our journey home, not to your reservation to learn your culture, not to gain financial benefits or healthcare, but to come home in our hearts and finally feel whole again.

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