

BOOK REVIEWS

STEPHEN CORRY, *Tribal peoples for tomorrow's world*, Cookhill: Freeman Press 2011, 303 pp.

On 13 September 2007, the UN General Assembly adopted a Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The culmination of more than two decades of discussion, the event was heralded by the UN Secretary General as a 'historic moment' when governments and indigenous peoples 'reconciled with their painful histories and resolved to move forward together on the path of human rights, justice and development.'¹ The four countries that voted against the text at the time – Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States – have since endorsed it. But what does it actually mean for the estimated three hundred and seventy million indigenous people alive today?

The answer, according to Stephen Corry, will depend on the extent to which the Declaration is accompanied by action from governments and by a far better understanding from their citizens about who indigenous people are and what they actually want. In *Tribal peoples for tomorrow's world*, Corry – director of the NGO Survival International – distils forty years of work into a short, lively and accessible 'beginners guide' to tribal peoples and the challenges they face (p. iv). This is not an academic book: its message is political (proceeds from its sales go to Survival International), and it contains no references or bibliography. But there is still much in it that may be of interest to anthropologists, especially those studying tribal peoples currently engaged in struggles with governments over land and other resources.

Corry begins with a nuanced discussion of the importance, and difficulty, of defining his key terms: people, indigenous, tribal. He settles on defining tribal peoples, the focus of the book, as those 'which have followed ways of life for many generations that are largely self-sufficient, and are clearly different from the mainstream and dominant society' (p. 22). Indigenous peoples, on the other hand, can be defined more broadly – 'partly by descent, partly by the particular features that indicate their distinctiveness from those who arrived later, and partly by their own views of themselves' (p. 18). Definitions here are key: they have real implications for how indigenous and tribal peoples engage with an international human rights system that has, as Corry rightly argues, privileged individual rights over collective ones. They also provide a useful grounding to the chapters that follow.

These chapters can be divided into four main sections: an overview of the origins of tribal peoples; a 'lightening tour' (p. 153) of the different groups of tribal peoples currently living around the world; a general summary of some common features of lifestyles found among tribal peoples; and finally, an introduction to the problems they face and some possible solutions. Corry's forceful critique of short-sighted and ill-conceived development projects runs throughout. Without proper consultation, and lacking local ownership, these projects – whether in health, education, or housing – can inflict 'immense damage' on tribal peoples (p. 230). Development, for Corry, as he argues

¹ 'Historic Milestone for Indigenous Peoples Worldwide as UN Adopts Rights Declaration', United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, 13 September 2007.

elsewhere, ‘at least for most tribal peoples, isn’t really about lifting people out of poverty, it’s about masking the takeover of their territories.’²

In the face of these kinds of threats, and in a section that may be of particular interest to social anthropologists, he argues against the politically neutral stance taken by some anthropologists working with tribal peoples (pp. 255-260). In contrast, he cites Mark Münzel’s work amongst the Aché in Paraguay during the 1970s as a positive example of a kind of anthropology that can stand at ‘the forefront of the movement to assist’ those groups (p. 257). This speaks to broader debates within anthropology that remain far from settled: about the nature of politically engaged scholarship generally, and about how it relates to indigenous peoples in particular. The Board of the Society for Cultural Anthropology (SCA) deliberated intensely, for example, before ultimately deciding to sign a 2007 American Anthropological Association (AAA) letter endorsing the UN Declaration. Its members recognised that ‘indigenous and minority status were configured very differently in different regions, such that policies and programs addressed to “indigenous rights” have varied effects, and sometimes occlude critical political dynamics.’³

It is therefore unfortunate that this book’s usefulness for anthropologists is likely to be limited by its lack of references and a bibliography. Corry organises his section on the life-styles of tribal peoples (pp. 150-201) around themes that sit at the heart of social anthropology – law, exchange, language, religion, etc. – and he illustrates his points with dozens of pithy examples. But in the absence of any references, the reader is frequently left wondering which of these are drawn from any particular ethnographic source, for instance, and which from his own wealth of firsthand experience. Certain statistical examples – like his statement that ‘in England and Wales, a child is killed by a parent about every ten days’ (p. 164) – cry out for a reference. At some points, moreover, it may have been more useful to discuss fewer cases, but in greater depth. At other points it feels as though certain concepts might be teased out better: the harm inflicted upon tribal peoples by the forces of ‘capitalism, communism and globalisation’, for example, are all dealt with, for the most part, in one small section under that title (pp. 209-210).

But Corry is upfront about the purpose of the book. As a passionate and highly readable ‘beginners guide’, it more than achieves its aim of articulating ‘some points which might be helpful to a growing defence of tribal peoples’ (p. 296). In doing so, it urges readers to accept ‘that the diversity of humankind, with the knowledge it can bring, is valuable for all’ (p. 301). It is an ambitious goal, but one in which anthropologists can and do engage, and a necessary one if initiatives like the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples are to have real meaning.

MICHAEL EDWARDS

² Stephen Corry, ‘Do indigenous people benefit from ‘development’?’, *The Guardian*, 25 November 2011.

³ Kim Fortun, Mike Fortun and Steven Rubenstein, Editors’ Introduction to special number on ‘Emergent Indigeneities’, *Cultural Anthropology* 25/2 (2010), pp. 222-34, at p. 222.