

***Contemporary Society: Tribal Studies. Volume Five, Concept of Tribal Society*¹
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Reviewed by David Ruppert⁴

The concept of “tribe” has been both useful and problematic for anthropologists. While it provides the heuristically useful notion that a social group under study is bounded and self-contained, it too often encourages us to ignore the fluid reality of shifting ethnic identities and changes of group membership. Although useful as a means of classifying groups that may share identifiable cultural traits, it is often argued that the “tribe” may have no social reality but is a product of anthropological research methods. As the decades pass, and as the academic debate, in its many forms, continues to rage with regard to “what is a tribe?” national governments remain faced with the immediate need to deal coherently with “indigenous” minority communities under their governance. As is the nature of governments, they largely ignore the confusion of intellectual arguments circling the concept of “tribe.” Governments deal with indigenous minority groups more directly and administratively; they simply establish a formal decision-making process to officially recognize and sanction tribal groups (for the allocation of legal rights and obligations) and draw up rules for their membership. Done.

This approach to the problem of “tribe” may be efficient but to many anthropologists it is somewhat dry and uninspiring. In short, it misses all of the anthropological and sociological issues related to William Graham Sumner’s early questions regarding in-groups and out-groups and the powerful incentives of ethnocentrism. It blithely skirts issues of ethnic identity and ethnic boundaries, the forces of intra- and inter-group conflict and cohesion, or the dynamic relationships between economy, political system, and kinship. In short, “tribe” is a complex and moving target. Regardless of one’s view of the concept’s use or misuse, it continues to generate debate on some of the more vexing questions in the discipline.

The edited volume reviewed here provides a welcomed addition to the discussion of tribe and tribal societies. Given the fact that modern nation-states have dealt with ethnic minorities in a variety of ways and are wont to dress them up in new administrative terminology such as “nationalities” or “first nations,” the editors suggest it may be timely to re-examine the tribal concept anew. The book seeks to examine the use of the tribal concept within two general, but

comparable, frameworks, one focusing on the “scheduled” tribes of India, and the other on a broader, global context with examples from the Middle East, North America, and Africa. They begin the discussion by providing an overview of how selected theoretical schools of anthropological thought have addressed the concepts of tribe and tribalism.

The work is a collection of case studies divided into two sections: the first focuses on the context of South Asia; the second focuses on examples from other parts of the world. I have chosen to discuss a sample of articles in both sections that provide widely differing portraits of tribal organization and identity. In Section I of the book Peter Berger notes that social groups are administratively defined by the government as “Scheduled Castes,” “Scheduled Tribe,” and as “Other Backward Classes.” While stating that these categories have little meaning for the social and cultural researcher, such researchers in the past have, according to the author, largely followed this classification. Berger discards these administrative labels and provides rich and detailed descriptions of the interrelationships between subgroups within what he claims is a more unified system than that suggested by the governmental categories. The various groups that make up a village are described less as separate “tribes” or “castes” and more as a set of interdependent social entities that are vertically and horizontally integrated and share common unifying elements. Specific inter-group hierarchy, behavior, and obligations define group boundaries rather than the larger and more pervasive differences in language or religion. He describes the larger Desia society as homogeneous but comprising diverse subgroups. By focusing on government-imposed categories that place an emphasis on group differences, there is a tendency to miss the functional relationships between these same groups that describe a larger holistic social and cultural entity.

In my own experience a loosely comparable circumstance exists in the United States. Indian “tribes” are officially recognized by the federal government and live on reservation lands. However, in certain situations a single label of “tribe” masks more complex social systems. For example, the Paiute Indian Tribe of Utah is a political organization combining a

number of different Southern Paiute bands. In the same state tribal members glossed as the “Northern Ute” are a combination of historically distinct social and cultural groups that were brought together under one “tribal” banner by the State of Utah and the federal government. Contemporary ethnic identities are no doubt affected by the history of state and federal recognition systems. Many federal agency personnel (and others) are largely unaware of the complex nature of intra- and inter-tribal identities in such circumstances. The lack of understanding of these details often leads to confusion.

One of the more intriguing articles in this first section is “The Santal Conception of Time,” by Marine Carrin. In this article, Carrin describes the complex nature of Santal conceptions of time through a descriptive analysis of place, seasons, days, ritual, and myth. The common cultural experience of the Santal is reflected by linguistic categories that mark the passage of time through the complex cognitive world of the Santal. Carrin weaves a tapestry of cultural beliefs, rites of passage, cyclical ceremonial routines, the rhythms of work, mythical time, and draws the reader into the cognized world of Santal identity. This work is a unique contribution to the volume since it alone attempts to provide a description of a distinct cultural group by reference to its own inner world, in this case the inner world of the cultural conceptions of time that relate to a set of beliefs and behaviors. She suggests that other ethnographies have a tendency to “freeze time and reify it through ethnographic description.” Carrin provides a strong case for the value of describing a shared group sense of “inner emotional” intimacy with deities that shape a common conception of group time as well as a common identity.

Carrin goes on to provide an overview of how the Santal cultural and historic identity is shaped by the colonial experience in the 19th century and use of that history to create a political party. History for the Santal begins in the 19th century and the colonial experience, not earlier, although a sense of time lost is expressed in village theater that tries to recapture memories of an earlier golden age. Carrin contrasts mythic time and historic time and suggests that both play a significant role in defining or reinventing Santal tradition. Throughout this article it is hard for the reader to escape the notion that the Santal are themselves defined by their own commonly shared sense and understanding of time, be it time of day, mythic time, or historic time.

Section II of the book broadens the framework of the

discussion. Articles provide case studies from the United States, Afghanistan, Iran, Africa, and Mexico. Since my own experience for the past 25 years has primarily been in the western and southwestern United States I have chosen to comment on the articles focusing on American Indian tribes. The first of these is an article by Peter Suzuki entitled, “Law and Disorder on the Winnebago and Omaha Reservations of Nebraska.” The author provides a legal case heard in the Winnebago Tribal Courts to illuminate contextual elements of tribal authority. To some extent Indian tribes in the United States are held to be culturally distinct through a formal process of recognition as “tribes.” This legal designation provides a convenient means by which the federal government defines tribal membership and all of the attendant obligations, rights, and privileges of that membership. Early in its history the United States government (and earlier colonial governments) tacitly recognized the sovereign status of Indian tribes in its writing of treaties. A legal semi-sovereign status for federally recognized tribes remains to this day.

Suzuki describes a legal case on the Winnebago and Omaha Reservations that illustrates a few important points germane to a discussion of how tribal legal status vis-à-vis the dominant culture affects the social order within the tribe itself. The case involves a dispute over the origin of tribal authority to try civil and criminal cases solely within the tribal court system. The outcome of this dispute revolves around complex case law and addresses the problems inherent in the dominant-subordinate relationship between tribes and the federal government. The author places emphasis on the claim that a greater understanding of tribal legal history by the federal appeals court could have led to different results for the tribe and for the defendant. However, more important to this reader is the author’s use of the legal case to illustrate the present status of the tribe’s internal social order – its sense of its own boundaries (social and legal, if not cultural) shaped by the history of its relationship with the larger federal system. Status as a “tribe” (and its sense of power and authority) in this circumstance can be usefully viewed (and perhaps only fully understood) from the perspective of its relationship with the dominant legal system. From a comparative standpoint the Winnebago case is somewhat similar to the articles in Section I that discuss the legal designations of groups in South Asia.

Other articles offered in this second section of the book provide a wide range of case studies from around the globe. Shahshahani provides a discussion of the use of education in Iran to foster social change among

tribal pastoralists during the American-oriented reign of the Reza Shah in the 1950s-1970s. His views of American foreign policy intentions aside, he points to the importance of viewing "tribal" peoples in their social context and understanding that ethnic minorities are often under great pressure from the dominant culture to change, and these changes often do not benefit the targeted minority group. Gregory provides a description of the culture of Appalachia communities in the United States. Given the definitions of "tribe" used by others, he determines that these mountain folk are best understood in a tribal context. Tanner provides a discussion of the meaning of "tribe" by referencing the importance of religion in East Africa. An understanding of the tribal context requires an understanding of the colonial experience and the competitive climate created by multiple religious traditions. Van Horn contrasts the importance of the group as opposed to the individual to come to an understanding of motivations among the Micmac Indians of New England and Canada. Social success and even maintenance of ethnic identity for the Micmac requires the support of egalitarian values in the face of pressures from the larger society to emphasize individual achievement.

A common thread runs through both sections of this book. Many of the articles emphasize the importance of understanding social, political, and economic contexts within which tribal peoples find themselves in the contemporary period. The relative relationship of power between dominant and subordinate groups increasingly plays a critical role in group strategies to maintain identity. Many of the authors emphasize the fact that tribal groups are increasingly powerless and marginalized by an increasingly dominant national political structure interlaced with an emerging global economy. In this context "tribes" are best viewed as communities that seek to maintain their cultural identity and political integrity through a set of strategies that at times emphasize traditional elements and at times subordinate them. The entire collection of work here is very useful since it helps place the discussion of "tribe" and its meaning in a contemporary context, a context that has changed dramatically during the past century.

Notes

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