



Agitate

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REMEMBERING FORGOTTEN CULTURES

The progress of civilization was fueled with the blood of indigenous cultures. I was reminded of this after reading an article in *The Nation* (April 28, 2008) about the contemporary native resistance movement in Hawaii. The article highlighted one more example of arrogant expansionist empires steamrolling the desires of indigenous populations and calling the appalling results “progress.”

High school American History textbooks refer to the “annexation” of Hawaii. That’s a sterilized way of framing what actually happened. In fact, Hawaii was more than annexed. It was usurped and ultimately conquered by the US for corporate sugar and ranching interests as well as military and shipping interests and thus incorporated into the expanding American empire. Hawaii’s last monarch, the popular Queen Liliuokalani, after being informed that resisting the desires of the US would lead to the slaughter of her subjects reluctantly accepted the terms of progress. Over a hundred years later, indigenous people of Hawaii resent the imposition of American culture over their own traditions.

American cultural colonialism in the Hawaiian Islands has been catastrophic. Native cultural expression that could not be reduced to quaint tourist exhibitions and attractions has been all but erased. The full weight of American power in Polynesia has almost eliminated the cultural remnants of the indigenous population.

Almost! Where power is asserted there is always resistance. Indigenous people in Hawaii are breathing new life into their erstwhile culture. They are restoring the lost language and rituals, learning about ancient values and norms and celebrating their lives as a culturally distinct people. In the face of the MacDonalidization of the world such movements are a reminder that there exist other ways to live and feel and believe and enjoy life.

But to what end does the Hawaiian resistance movement and other indigenous movements aspire? It’s unrealistic to assume that the United States will leave Hawaii and give the land back

to its original inhabitants. Nor would this necessarily be a beneficial thing as all Hawaiian institutions are intertwined with American society.

The postmodern realities are that a return to traditionalism, no matter how attractive, no matter how rhetorically compelling, is unrealistic. The world has moved on in a very real way, and its starting point is the very infrastructure and cultural imperialism of the last five hundred years. All social systems on earth are a bi-product of Euro-American expansionism. Everything that exists today, whether malignant or benign, is a reaction to that era. There is no going back.

Imagine the consequences if, in an inexplicable fit of civility and humanity, Euro-American culture just turned tail and gave it all back (what’s left of it) to the original indigenous owners. The resulting social instability would have pervasive negative consequences for the entire world.

But in the face of the unrealistic scenario above, support of indigenous movements is of paramount importance. The postmodern world that has resulted from Euro-American imperialism leaves individuals feeling empty and dissatisfied. For human beings the offerings of globalization and consumerism, materialism, rationalism, hyper-reality and Byzantine bureaucracy are empty calories. The individual in the postmodern world is left hollow, with nothing more than a surface simulation of meaning.

The values espoused by indigenous movements, however, remind us that there is something more out there for us. There are histories, values and a depth to humanity that is so much more meaningful than what television and Wal-Mart have to offer. And one of the benefits of the postmodern world is that we can all learn from the resurrection of lost cultures. We can all grow from the experience of bringing a little piece of tradition back into the world. We can incorporate some of the values and belief systems of the past into our lives, and in so doing making our lives richer and more meaningful. While

Exactly what is an “indigenous” person? It’s difficult, from a sociological perspective, to answer this question adequately. A considerable amount of biological assimilation has taken place among co-existent cultures, be it by force or by marriage. There are very few people among remaining indigenous cultures that are “pure” biological members of the group. Whereas *Agitate* rejects the concept of biological determinism for group inclusion, the distinction of what constitutes an indigenous person is muddled by history. From the perspective of this author and this magazine mention of indigenous people is in reference to those who ideate as members of a particular indigenous cultural group. This definition also includes those who are sympathetic to indigenous cultural movements.

we ensure the posterity of indigenous cultures we enrich our own, a culture currently lost in its own contrivances.

We do well to remember that contemporary civilization stands on a foundation of ruins. Millions of people and thousands of cultures are swept away in the great genocide known as the westward march of "civilization." This is exemplified by the very existence of the United States. At one time the New World was awash in amazing, heterogeneous societies, each with different stories to share and sciences to contribute. These societies could not stand the onslaught of colonization. They fell in the face of superior war technology, religious fanaticism, disease, and the irrepressible tide of European expansion.

The Native American, for much of US history, was considered a problem which civilized people had to solve. Many were exterminated, never to be seen again. Many more were assimilated, their cultures drowned in the flood of manifest destiny. Other groups had their cultures meticulously and methodically destroyed.

Through a process of militarism, in which the United States utilized battle tested generals from the Civil War to solve the "Indian Problem" in the west, what few cultures left to offer resistance were disarmed and herded into reservations. The Civil War hero, General Phillip Sheridan, was famous for saying, "the only good Indian is a dead Indian." His racism was a reflection of American policy with regard to the resistance offered by indigenous people—resistance that mostly ended at the Massacre of Wounded Knee.

In 1887 Congress forced private property down the throats of communal cultures with the passage of the Dawes Act. This law broke up the reservation system and allotted small plots of land to individuals within the tribes. Of course it also re-allocated much of this land to white settlers, leaving native tribes with the worst possible allotments.

Congress also initiated a policy of forced assimilation. Native people were expected to *Americanize* whether they wanted to or not. Christian missionaries were brought in by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Indigenous religious practices were denounced as illegal and treated as open rebellion. It became illegal for Native Americans to speak their own languages. To add further insult, Native American children were often removed from their



President Evo Morales, of Bolivia, is an example of the potential power of indigenous movements. Morales is the first Native American President of an American state in modern history.

homes and sent to boarding schools to learn the superiority of American culture. In short, the entire cultural landscape of the Americas was bulldozed within two hundred years.

And we Americans benefited from these policies (though some more than others). It is disheartening to realize that everything we know and everything we have come at the expense of another culture. Right now I'm typing this article in my home in Cape Coral, Florida. My community is surrounded by canals that drained what was once a thriving eco-system. The Calusa culture dominated this land at one time. Some of their burial mounds have been preserved. The home of my family and the foundation of my happiness is borne on the destruction of that culture and many others that once fished and hunted and raised their own families on this land.

Indigenous revivals force me to remember the sacrifices that were made so that I could raise my own family in happiness and prosperity. With this in mind I thought it fitting to create a symbol to serve as reminder of the sacrifices of indigenous people that secured the American

way of life. You will notice that it looks familiar. A standard American Flag...minus the stars. Every star on the American flag represents not only a state, but also many indigenous cultures that

were pushed aside to make that state a reality. Removing the stars is symbolic of the removal and, in many cases, the extermination of indigenous cultures all over the United States. It is incumbent upon us to remember, to always remember those sacrifices, and to endeavor to preserve what vestiges of indigenous culture that we can.



Take Action!

The plight of indigenous cultures is not an artifact of an imperialist past. It is a contemporary global problem recognized by the UN Charter Convention Concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries. The children pictured are of the Bushman tribe in Botswana (www.survival-international.org). They and their families were forced from their traditional lands by the Botswana Government to make room for diamond mines. In 2006 a Botswana court mandated the return of the Bushman to their traditional homes, but the Botswana Government is making this impossible. Many organizations are dedicated to the preservation and protection of indigenous cultures like the Bushman throughout the world. See the Activism page of the Journal of a Mad Sociologist (www.madsociologist.net) for the UN Charter Convention and a few of the many organizations dedicated to this very important issue.

