

Indigenous Peoples of Asia

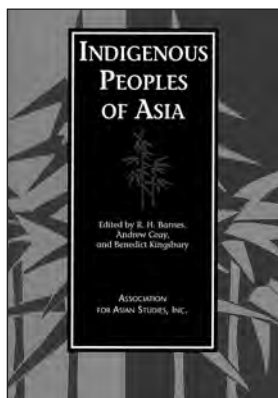
Edited by R. H. Barnes, Andrew Gray and Benedict Kingsbury

ANN ARBOR, MI: THE ASSOCIATION FOR ASIAN STUDIES, INC., 1995
XII + 539 PAGES

According to its editors, *Indigenous Peoples of Asia* addresses the “novel” issue of “which groups regard themselves as indigenous peoples, which groups are permitted to regard themselves as indigenous peoples, and which groups succeed in being regarded by governments and international agencies as indigenous peoples” (p. 1). The book’s first four chapters examine the legal concepts of “indigenous peoples,” the growing political indigenous movements in Asia, and indigenous people’s rights and sustainable resources. Immediately the reader is struck by the controversy surrounding definitions which shape the indigenous movement. A general consensus is that indigenous peoples are not so much defined as the original inhabitants of an area. Rather, they are those that have the following: a self-identification as a distinct ethnic group; a historical experience of, or contingent vulnerability to, severe disruption, dislocation, or exploitation; a long connection with the region; and the wish to retain a distinct identity.

The increased recognition of indigenous groups is rooted in the 1960s. It was during this decade that colonization atrophied in Asia and Africa, and the United Nations established the right of self-determination and placed it in the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights. According to the editors, these events encouraged groups, who felt persecuted or were on the periphery of mainstream society, to push for recognition and sometimes compensation from established governments. Academicians, among others, enhanced their careers by promoting and encouraging minority groups to raise the banner of a persecuted “indigenous minority.” And politicians continue to disagree over the legitimacy of the numerous “indigenous groups” rising throughout Asia.

Following the more philosophical aspect of the book’s first chapters are fifteen case studies of Asian indigenous peoples. The groups represented include those of Asian Russia, the Adivasi in South Asia, Jummas in Bangladesh, minorities in China, the Ainu on Hokkaidō, and “indigenous” peoples throughout Southeast Asia. For this reader, the most profitable aspect of this volume is the range of countries presented. The diversity of the book is based on its origin: a collection of papers presented at the Colloquium on Indigenous Peoples of Asia at St. Antony’s College, Oxford and St. Antony’s College in Hilary Term, 1990. The book’s chapters vary from excellent scholarship and analyses to shallow and mediocre studies. The contributors are acade-



micians, directors of humanitarian programs, and journalists. Because of the variety of authors, some chapters focus not on the indigenous people, but rather on various draconian governments. The chapter on Burma is an example of this misdirected focus.

There is also an absence, in some case studies, of appropriate documentation. For example, one author notes that well over sixteen thousand families in the Philippines’ Cordillera and Mindanao areas have been displaced due to military operations during President Aquino’s early administration. The author’s basis for making such an assertion is footnoted as follows: “Alejandro Parrillada, of International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, saw clear evidence of bombing on a trip to the Philippines in November 1992 (personal communication)” (p. 405).

This volume lacks cohesion and unfortunately, some of the case studies focus on anything but indigenous peoples. Yet, this book would assist an instructor teaching at an undergraduate level. In particular, an anthropologist, political scientist, or historian can draw upon certain case studies in this volume to help clarify the role of NGOs, the United Nations, and foreign and local governments in relation to the growing number of Asia’s “indigenous peoples.”

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