

## Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

**RONALD NIEZEN. *The Origins of Indigenism: Human Rights and the Politics of Identity*. University of California Press. 2003. xix + 272p. Index, \$18.95 U.S., paper.**

Niezen states in the preface to this book that he will provide a "historical emphasis on the global nature of the indigenous peoples' movement" (p. xi). He also covers "cultural relativism, collective versus individual rights, and the legal/political implications of indigenous peoples' claims of self-determination" (p. xi). He succeeds admirably in accomplishing all these goals in a tightly packed account that moves from the dizzy heights of the truly global movement of indigenous peoples confronting state powers to the most intimate portrayal of local communities struggling to survive.

For example, he condenses fifty years of an international movement's development into a chapter of just over twenty pages when such material surely could fill a book of its own. He held my interest throughout his complex unraveling of abstract arguments about power, sovereignty, statehood, human rights and ethnic identity. And he provides concrete examples of how these seemingly abstract social constructs operate in the daily lives of indigenous people at the community level. The reader is left with a clearer understanding of how indigenous identities are developed in international forums and acted out in local communities.

Niezen insightfully relates the history of how indigenism became a recognizable and potent force in international relations. It is easy to forget how relatively recent this phenomenon is when indigenist appeals are founded on claims that the people have existed in a place since time immemorial. The coincident rise of the United Nations and human rights standards have been employed to much effect by peoples who now identify as "indigenous." The impact this movement has had on nation-states is examined cogently by Niezen. His analyses of arguments against indigenous self-determination are thoughtful. Niezen convincingly puts to rest worries (or fear-mongering) that indigenous peoples are secessionists. Niezen also addresses concerns about where indigenous autonomy and the resulting collective rights clash with the state's universal application of individual rights. The problems of cultural relativism and anti-relativism are considered as well.

There is only one minor weakness I found. The book cover uses the words "accessible narrative" to describe the writing. While I think post-graduate

readers would have no need for a glossary while sorting through Niezen's writing, sprinkled as it is with polysyllabic words like "apostasy", I would caution against using the word "accessible." The writing, especially when Niezen moves away from community examples to tackle the abstract concepts and social constructs that make up the human rights landscape, can become very dense. Not a word can be spared. In fact, that is probably why the twenty-four pages of footnotes are such a good read in themselves. All material somewhat extraneous to the main arguments has been relocated there. I also find Niezen has a tendency to use many rhetorical questions. Often it is a device to bridge to his next discussion. However, at times, I'm not quite certain whether these questions were actually addressed or merely left hanging.

In the preface, Niezen says he intended "to use the information...gleaned from community-based research to illustrate global phenomena" (p. xv). This is perhaps the strongest and most original contribution of this work, setting it apart from other studies of indigenous-state relations. The communities to which Niezen refers include the Tuaregs of West Africa and the Cree of Cross Lake, Manitoba. The sections of the book discussing the Tuaregs and the Cree in Cross Lake were admittedly my favourite. They were interesting to read probably because the author was close to the communities. In Cross Lake, as the community deliberated on how best to demonstrate its autonomy, it was clear the author was present, not only observing but participating. His recollections provide a picture of how indigenous identity is constructed and put into play. The resources available to a community in combination with images of indigenous peoples in popular consciousness can be pooled to create a powerful statement of self-determination.

The book should be of interest to scholars of international relations, Aboriginal studies, human rights, political science and anthropology.

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