Indigenous Identity as a Strategy for Cultural Security

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Introduction and Concepts

For this Open Meeting, I decided to cast my research on the emergence of indigenous peoples as international actors into the context of cultural security. In doing so, I look at several dimensions of how the creation of new kinds of indigenous identities at the international level have influenced the pursuit of cultural security. In presenting three patterns that have emerged in my preliminary findings, I hope to spur some debate on the difficulty of combining the concepts of culture and security.

The first question I hear when tell people my topic, is 'what is cultural security?'. According to Ole Weaver, cultural security can be understood as, "the capacity of a society to conserve its specific character in spite of changing conditions and real or virtual threats: more precisely, it involves the permanence of traditional schemas of language, culture, associations, identity and national or religious practices, allowing for changes that are judged to be acceptable."

The concept of security, as we know from Lassi's position paper, has been broadened from its traditional military understanding or 'hard security' to include other forms such as environmental and economic under the heading of 'soft' or 'comprehensive' security. Cultural security, for reasons we shall see, is perhaps at the softest end of the security spectrum. In fact, the "softness" or "slipperiness" of the concept of culture raises real questions as to whether it can be meaningfully considered under the heading of security.

Culture is a broad, amorphous, and dynamic concept that most obviously includes language, religion, and artistic expression. But we have already seen in this Open Meeting that many things can have a cultural value, whether we are talking about polar bear meat or the modes of communication in the conference itself.

UNESCO definition: "In the largest sense culture today can be considered as the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group and that it encompasses, in addition to arts and literature, lifestyle, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs."

Cultural security, more so than traditional forms of hard security includes a positive sense of security in that cultural security cannot be obtained just through the absence of threats, but comes with an expectation to actively ensure and promote the pre-conditions in which a culture can safely grow and develop of its own accord.

In this conference, I have heard many references to both resilience and adaptability. Part of the problem of our understanding, is that resilience can sometimes imply a permanence which would place the concept in opposition to adaptability. Culture, however, cannot be resilient without being adaptable. The analogy of the river best captures this duality.

The boundaries of culture are of course permeable and dynamic, which exacerbates the difficulty of "securing" them, particularly through legal protection. Once you define and prescribe what you want to protect, you create artificial permanence and inhibit the natural change that defines a living culture. Living

cultures are at once persistent in that the course of the river is relatively unwavering, but at the same time the water moving through it is always in motion.

The **inherent tension** between permanence and dynamic change lies at the heart of placing culture within the framework of security. Because, as Lassi asks, we must ask **what is being secured**? In too many cases with indigenous peoples cultural security, only narrow aspects of the culture are secured, rather than this **overall condition** of security that would allow the culture to live, change, and develop of its own accord. I would argue, that the concept of security carries to much of the sense of 'permanence' to be effective at achieving the kind of overall pre-conditions for cultural *resilience, continuity, and change* sought by indigenous peoples. One proof of this, is that the verb 'to secure' can also mean 'to tie down.'

I will use several examples to show how the pursuit of cultural security through the international mobilization of indigenous peoples has been undermined because of this poor fit between the concepts of culture and security. These three examples show how the 'slipperiness' or softness of the concept of security can result in unexpected and unfavourable outcomes that too narrowly restrict indigenous peoples cultures and identities.

1. Construction and Projection of an International Indigenous Peoples Identity

Securing the status of indigenous peoples as international actors has been a necessary first step towards securing rights to self-determination that would permit indigenous peoples to (A) articulate their own identities and define for themselves what constitutes their respective cultures, and (B) to achieve the necessary rights and resources that would enable them to protect and promote those identities and cultures. However, this achievement is not unproblematic.

The process of developing international cooperation between indigenous peoples has not only strengthened the cultural identity of individual indigenous peoples, but created a new category of international actor. This iterative process of identity formation has meant focussing on cultural elements that bind indigenous peoples together as part of the trend

towards political solidarity. Almost inevitably, such a process results in an oversimplified picture of indigenous cultures that belie the richness and diversity that exist across them, and tends to overemphasize those aspects which are 'traditional' or 'exotic'.

As the international indigenous peoples movement evolved, so too did the understanding of what defines an indigenous people. Beyond the dictionary definition of having been present in their lands 'since time immemorial' prior to later settlement, the concept of indigenous has taken on additional cultural and political dimensions.

Many definitions of indigenous peoples, such as the working definition of the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations includes specific reference to indigenous peoples' "distinctive cultural characteristics which distinguish them from the prevailing society in which they live" (UN ECOSOC, E/CN.4/Sub.2/AC.4/1995/3, 1995).

The political actions of both states and indigenous peoples have produced a new institutional framework through a reiterative and reflexive discourse. Within this framework, indigenous peoples must fit into these normative understandings of both 'indigenous' and 'people', to meet the requirements for self-determination and other rights under international law.

Thus, to achieve cultural security through self-determination indigenous peoples have projected and reinforced identities which emphasize their distinctiveness from western cultures and those which have been directly undermined or threatened by policies of colonization and assimilation. As a result, however, indigenous cultures have been unrealistically cast in opposition to the 'modern' societies of the 'prevailing society'.

2. Being Too Secure: Achieving Cultural Security Through Legislation

The concept of security and the legal and political instruments that have been employed to achieve that security, are likely to concrete and static to effectively protect something as amorphous and dynamic as 'culture'. One cautionary tale was mentioned on Thursday by Noel. Successive Reindeer Grazing Acts in Sweden, while ostensibly enshrining the practice of reindeer herding as an exclusive

Sami right simultaneously denies Sami identity to non-reindeer herding Sami. While perhaps an extreme example, this case should serve as a warning how legislation and other regulatory instruments and institutions that claim to protect indigenous rights can narrowly confine indigenous culture and identity when the '**power to define**' is in the hands of others (Mörkenstam, 2002). 3

The current UN Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples has the full involvement and support of indigenous peoples from around the world. Nevertheless, the difficulty of creating a single universal framework that aims to protect the rights of the world's indigenous peoples is not without potential pitfalls. How can one single instrument possibly be sensitive to the particular histories and circumstances of all indigenous peoples, without being so broad that it is ineffective?

Parallels and Linkages with Environmentalism and Biodiversity

Because it is so difficult to articulate the concept of culture into a form where it can be effectively 'secured' through political and legal means, the pursuit of indigenous cultural security has often been advanced under the guise of biodiversity, sustainability and environmental security. This has occurred by borrowing similar justifications and arguments from the biodiversity discourse, by promoting idealized images of indigenous peoples resource managers, and through strategic alliances between indigenous peoples and environmental NGOs.

On the one hand, this is quite logical as access to land and resources is a fundamental basis of indigenous cultures, as their traditional livelihoods and cultural practices are inextricably linked to the lands they live on. However, these linkages are not without contradiction and conflict. Moreover, they can again limit cultural development by binding culture and identity only to certain 'traditional' types of resource use such as hunting or herding.

As an example of this linkage is found in the preamble to the **Convention of Biodiversity**, which recognizes "The close and traditional dependence of many indigenous and local communities embodying traditional lifestyles on biological resources, and the desirability of sharing equitably benefits arising from the use of traditional knowledge, innovations and practices relevant to the conservation of biological diversity and the sustainable use of its components."

While indigenous peoples and environmental NGOs have often formed alliances in pursuing international goals (the Alta dam case perhaps set the stage for this partnership), conflicts over whaling and sealing illustrate the potential conflicts of interest.

The linkages and parallels between the environmentalist/biodiversity discourse may promote stereotypical images of indigenous peoples that can inhibit the natural cultural growth and adaptation that comes with incorporating modern forms of resource use and economic activity and the assertion of a modern identity that is nevertheless strongly connected with their traditions and histories.

Concluding Thoughts

In conclusion, I would suggest that we…

1. Recognize the risk of oversimplification of indigenous cultures and overemphasis of 'exoticness' that can occur as a by-product of the construction of a political space for indigenous peoples in the international arena.

2. Ensure, insofar as possible, that the power to define one's own culture and identity rests within the people themselves and avoid dependence on legislative solutions alone to ensure cultural security. And,

3. Beware of too convenient parallels and linkages between environmental security/biodiversity discourse and that of indigenous peoples' cultural security.

In sum, what I see as the a 'best alternative' for indigenous peoples to achieve what we understand as cultural security is not a radical idea. It is exactly the kind of 'normalized' condition that indigenous peoples, particularly in the North, have been seeking through land claims and self-government agreements. Only by having a sufficient land and resource base to create economies based on both traditional and new forms of activity, as well as the political decision-making power to determine for themselves, especially through education, the pace and direction of cultural change in their own communities. As we know, however, achieving such conditions in a way that is

practical and just in current circumstances can
be a long a difficult process.
Thank You.

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