

Foreword

THE HISTORY OF THE WORLD is inseparable from the fate of indigenous peoples. From Australia to Amazonia, groups who occupied the fertile shores and river valleys have been pushed into far, infertile corners of their own worlds, or exterminated by explorers, colonizers and nation states. This means that the morality of our world is also bound up in their fate. How a 'modern' state views and deals with aboriginal peoples is revealing. The survivors may be in 'remote' arid, icy or hidden landscapes, but their significance lies at the center, not the periphery, of our world.

Lotte Hughes' remarkable book charts the histories and politics of indigenous societies. Some issues are complicated and unresolved: the notion of 'indigenous' is full of contention, with a maze of definitions. A strength of this *Guide* is that it acknowledges difficulties and refuses deconstruction, without obscuring the variety and complexity of indigenous societies.

The *Guide* describes the achievements, as well as the grief and oppression. It highlights the key feature of indigenous systems: a nurturing, respectful relationship to the land. Indigenous peoples wish to ensure that the land they use and the creatures they kill to eat will continue to sustain them. This is revealed in a fascinating intersection between religious and material relationships to the world. Many Europeans have taken inspiration from this, sometimes being derided as naïve and romantic. For indigenous peoples can be just as ruthless with their environment or with one another as the rest of us. In addressing romanticism, Lotte Hughes points out that indigenous societies need the world around them to stay the same: survival depends on the land and animals remaining as they are, with only minor changes. To note this is not to romanticize but to report social and economic realities. Environmental conservatism does not make people 'good', or mean

they are without human cruelties – but it does mean that they have tended to be good environmentalists. It also means that they have expertise that can benefit not just local territories, but all peoples.

The success of their environmentalism makes their displacement all the more poignant. For loss of land usually means the loss of the possibility to be themselves. They rely on the territory: where ancestors have nurtured the earth, cared for the animals, propitiated the spirits. A cruel irony of their displacement is that they have often been accused, by those wishing to displace them, of killing too many animals, over-fishing or neglecting the land. Hence many groups have been forced out of national parks in east and southern Africa, despite having ensured, by their customs and skills, the enduring beauty and abundance of these places. Elsewhere, mines, forestry and intensive agriculture have dispossessed so many.

But this *Guide* also tells of the fight back. Indigenous groups have formed international alliances, and have a permanent presence at the UN. They are battling to secure rights to live on their lands, to check logging, to preserve fisheries, to manage their own resources and to take effective part in government. These struggles may be versions of David and Goliath, without promise of miraculous outcome. But there have been successes. The challenge now is for indigenous peoples to define, and the rest of the world to respect, a development model that is neither an unrealistic ideal of times gone nor an acceptance of final assimilation in colonial nation states. Indigenous peoples ask that their voices be heard, their stories be told and that they take their place, on their own terms, in their own lands. This *No-Nonsense Guide* lays out the issues behind and within this challenge.

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