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“Making Place” at the United Nations: Indigenous Cultural Politics at the U.N. Working Group on Indigenous Populations

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The United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations (WGIP), established in 1982 by the United Nations Economic and Social Council in Geneva, Switzerland, has since its beginnings escaped anthropological attention to a large degree.¹ Yet it is a site where notions of indigenous culture have been articulated systematically and with striking consistency for nearly two decades. It is the only global institution at which indigenous identity has for years been discussed. It is also a place to which indigenous delegates have traveled in numbers that have increased dramatically over the last eighteen years. The WGIP has offered them the possibility to comment on local, regional, national, and international developments pertaining to the situations of indigenous peoples, and to participate actively in the development of international legal standards for the protection of their rights. No other global forum has ever enabled such a large and diverse group of activists and their organizations to fully articulate their problems on a regular, that is, yearly, basis, and to voice their opinion on how these problems should be solved. Indeed, the WGIP is a “unique exercise in international affairs” (Burger 1994:90) and “an exceptional U.N. forum in this regard” (Lâm 1992:617). The arguments brought forth by indigenous representatives are breathtaking in their breadth and complexity, while the host of actors and institutions involved directly or indirectly is virtually innumerable. As a site of particular discursive density where indigenous identities and cultures are generated and articulated during intense encounters between indigenous and nonindigenous individuals, groups, institutions, organizations, and state-representatives, the WGIP is a vital nodal point in the global “indigeno-scape” (Beckett 1996). If the transnational indigenous social movement is to be understood “from above and below” (Brysk 1993:259), the WGIP is a point from which to start.

In this article, I will analyze the core tenets of the *culturalist* arguments made by indigenous delegates between 1982 and 1999, and conceptualize them in a way that will enable us to grasp international indigenous activism as a transnational cultural political movement involved in a number of battles on a number of fronts.² The concept of “place-making” will be used throughout this article to help us understand the WGIP as a transnational locality where notions of indigenous identity and cultural difference are discursively “spatialized” (Gupta and Ferguson 1997:3). In contrast to recent work on “place-making” that focuses on the making of geographical space (Feld and Basso 1996; Kuletz 1998; Raffles 1999), this article shows how indigenous delegates are involved in the discursive production of “indigenous place” in the argumentative imagery of their interventions before the WGIP. Conceptualizing international indigenous activism in terms of the making of “indigenous place” will enable us to understand how indigenous delegates have articulated their specific way of being-in-the-world, and of having a particular place in it. “Indigenous place” is, in the way it is articulated, distilled and generic, as it is used as a *conceptual tool* in transnational political practice, developed for political use and effectiveness. It is effective because it functions as a category that is open enough to encompass differing indigenous views on where they come from and who they are, while at the same time being made up of recognizable, fundamental tenets that bind international indigenous delegates together in one fairly unitary argumentative thrust. The “indigenous place” indigenous delegates talk about, then, is usually based on specific, often equally generic concepts of the environment and nature, and indigenous relationships to them. This is not to say that place, or the people inhabiting it, are nothing but “invented” entities. Place, as Kirsten Hastrup and Karen Fog Olwig have pointed out, “is a source of life and a reference point which people may identify with from their particular position in the more global network of human relations” (1997:12). People, or the identification of a group as a people (to which notions of “indigenous place” are often intimately intertwined), are historically grounded, embedded in, and enabled by, specific meaningful everyday practices and activities. I will not be able to talk about these linkages here, and thereby risk not doing justice to many of the specifically grounded positions from which indigenous activists—as representatives of peoples—speak. But this is a necessity if one attempts to grasp the broad thrust of the interventions made by indigenous delegates over the years. By using the term *generic* I do not wish to imply stasis, either. As will be shown, we are dealing with a fundamentally dynamic international indigenous self-understanding hinging on a specific political and legal project.

My choice of “place-making” is more than merely conceptual, as it points to what international indigenous activism was and is always about, namely territory.³ The articulation of a specific meaningful relationship indigenous delegates portray their peoples as having to their territories, and the political solution that is advocated, namely the right to self-determination, is the fundamental basis upon which international indigenous activism must be analyzed. Equally

important is the specific international legal and political constituency toward which indigenous activism is directed, as are the discursive and other linkages existing between international indigenous activism and other transnational advocacy networks.⁴

While this article in general seeks to analyze articulations of “indigenous place” at the WGIP, it also aims at pointing to the specific dynamic that has characterized these articulations. After a historical overview of international indigenous activism at the U.N., I will show that, first and foremost, international indigenous activism has always aimed at articulating what has gone wrong in the world today. What has gone wrong is that many human relationships, and human relationships to nature, are marked by exploitation, oppression, and short-sightedness. Indigenous delegates have not only made this point the subject of innumerable interventions before the WGIP, but have articulated *alternative* values and types of being-in-the-world by infusing their representations of the natural world with specific notions of an “indigenous morality.” This morality is articulated via a representation of indigenous subjugation in ecogocial terms and ecological destruction in ethnic terms. The eco-political framework used by indigenous delegates sees territory as a “fundamental and multidimensional space for the creation and recreation of the ecological, economic, and cultural practices of communities” (Escobar 1998). In this light, indigenous delegates have discursively mapped a number of basic notions and meanings onto concepts of indigenous land. These notions of inter-relatedness, morality, myth, belonging, and sacredness will seem familiar to the reader. They make up part of an at times highly fetishized discourse on indigeneity voiced by both indigenous and nonindigenous actors today. Parts of this discourse are as old as colonialism itself and have, over the past five centuries, seen as many permutations and ramifications as there have been uses for and abuses of them. The politics of morality articulated by indigenous delegates at the U.N. are here understood as both a counter-attack and a visionary discourse juxtaposing “‘what is’ with ‘what should be,’ the gain of humans against the loss of nature, the power of states against the needs of peoples, historical expediency against cultural memory and vision” (Lâm 1992:617). With what has been called the “mobilization of shame,”⁵ indigenous politics of morality has fed directly into the current ambivalence and fluidity of Western epistemologies dominated by notions of modernity and development, progress, and profit.

In this article, I will analyze a significant shift that has characterized international indigenous political discourses since the early 1990s. It is a dynamic that coincides with the fact that at this specific historical moment “Euro-Americans are starting to speak of their societies as ‘information societies’ and of ‘knowledge’ as industrial capital . . . and when genetic and biological materials come to be treated as informational resources” (Strathern 1999:160). At the same time and in connection with this, a number of international legal instruments have begun to treat indigenous knowledge as connected to and enabling of biodiversity. In an age of ecological disaster and emerging models of

sustainable development, the concepts of biological and cultural diversity, hinging on notions of (the value of) local indigenous knowledge, have powerfully come to the fore. This has had a strong impact on international indigenous politics of place. Indigenous delegates have debated land claims with little success for decades, and have heavily relied on arguing the morality of their case. Indeed, George Manuel, the founder of the World Council of Indigenous Peoples and an indigenous leader active already three decades ago, stated in the 1970s that “aboriginal peoples can *only* argue the morality of their case” (Manuel and Posluns 1974, quoted in Wright 1988:376, emphasis added). Today, indigenous delegates at the U.N. are increasingly voicing their concerns in strikingly new, and perhaps more effective, ways. The indigenous politics of place, then, has shifted from a politics of morality to a politics that frames morality in a new terminology consisting of the notion of valuable knowledge in the service of biodiversity. As will be shown, this shift is also the result of the fact that new, “atypical” groups of indigenous delegates from Asia and Africa have increasingly appeared at the WGIP to voice their own specific set of claims.

In general, this article seeks to integrate the potential of an anthropology of such a “transnational mega-event” (Little 1995:265) with an awareness that has emerged in other disciplines about the richness of this particular site. Scholars in international relations, for example, have noted that the WGIP is worth a close look because it represents a “marginal site of political experience,” that is, a dynamic site of indeterminate meaning making with potentially revolutionary implications (Wilmer 1993:33; see also Maiguashca 1994; Roach 1987). In a similar vein, as will be shown, experts in international law and politics have noted that international indigenous political activism has placed itself squarely within the cracks, crevasses, and absences in these fields (Torns 1992; Lâm 1992; Tennant 1994). At the same time, anthropologists have documented and commented on the usage of “culture” in political arenas (Coombe 1999; Wright 1998), and are pointing to the chains of claims made, and the social identities concomitantly formed, in this concept’s name. In international law, Rosemary Coombe (1999) has argued, the concept of culture has become a new virtue as much as it represents an old vice in anthropology.

In relation to this last point, some final remarks need to be made. Indigenous cultural politics, often consisting of a politics of difference—not commonalities—are usually perceived as representing slippery, if not dangerous terrain. Typically, the dangers of “essentialism” are evoked, especially if “deeply metaphysical” assumptions “immobilize the native” by linking “people to place [and] nation to territory” (Malkki 1992:27). Yet a closer look at the WGIP reveals that the two pairs people/place and nation/territory can take on very different functions. In fact, indigenous delegates use the idea of the inextricable linkage between peoples and places to erode the commonplace notion of the “sacrosanct” nation-state as territorially integrated.⁶ This is what Barbara Thomson Godard has called a “double voiced rhetoric” (Godard 1990) in indigenous acts of self-representation, where tropes of a dominant language are engaged in order to subvert this same language. Subversion, of course, is

not easy to accomplish, just as difference is something that cannot simply be unilaterally claimed. It must be fought for and acknowledged by the actors and parties addressed. Indeed, the idea that indigenous peoples represent culturally different and distinct groups was at least until the early 1950s *rejected* by many North and South American states. They argued that all indigenous groups had already been assimilated into national, mainstream society, and thus did not exist within their borders (Wilmer 1993:212). Even if indigenous cultural difference was not denied, it was until the late 1970s seen as a transitory phase on the path toward acculturation and, by implication, emancipation (Wright 1988:378).

Today, we are in the midst of a historical juncture grounded in the complex workings of globalization and a concomitant decentering process where traditional sociopolitical structures are reduced in their power to control and protect social groups within state borders. As Terence Turner has argued, culture has in this context become a means for groups to mobilize themselves in quests for equality and social justice (1993:423). Clearly, indigenous delegates have voiced their claims with the awareness that culture “has become a source of values that can be converted into political assets, both internally as bases of group solidarity and mobilization, and externally as claims on the support of other social groups, governments, and public opinion all over the globe” (1993:424). In international law and politics, the political possibilities emerging from affirmations of culture must increasingly be taken seriously in that “those who can make the strongest claims to possessing a culture are more internationally empowered to protest local injustices” (Coombe 1999:16). The U.N. has had to face squarely challenges posed by indigenous delegates to the representative and protective capacity of “nation-states,” and debates have shifted from a denial of indigenous cultural difference to more than its begrudged acceptance. In fact, an emergent question today is whether “the protection and fostering of the human capacity for culture is a general human right” (Turner 1993:428). The WGIP has taken a lead in this regard by making indigenous difference its dictum. It has formulated the following preamble for the 1993 draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples:

We affirm that indigenous peoples are equal in dignity and right to all other peoples, while recognizing the right of all peoples to be different, to consider themselves different, and to be respected as such. [Draft U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples 1993:1]

Before we turn to the way culture has been mobilized by indigenous delegates at the WGIP, let us look at the background against which this movement must be understood.

The Global Indigenous Movement: Histories, Functions, and Claims

Speaking “on behalf of those that do not have a voice”⁷—nature and the future generations—indigenous delegates first appeared at the U.N. in 1977 to

protest the destruction of their territories, resources and, by implication, their cultures.⁸ The character of indigenous politics at the WGIP is shaped by the difficulties—as well as possibilities—of a transnational political movement involving people from vastly different cultural, economic, and educational backgrounds, with varying degrees of political experience on both national and international levels. When the WGIP was established in 1982 only 30 indigenous and nonindigenous participants attended. Over the years, indigenous representation expanded from initially being very much centered on the Americas, to one that increasingly included indigenous delegates from the northern regions of Europe, Australia, New Zealand, and finally Asia and Africa. Asian indigenous organizations from the Cordillera region in the Philippines and from the Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh, for example, first attended the WGIP in 1984. In 1987, representatives of the Ainu from Japan, the Naga from India, the Chin from Burma, as well as the Karen from Thailand joined the process. The attendance of Asian indigenous peoples at the WGIP has most significantly increased since the early 1990s, and they today represent a geographical region about as large in numbers as all the North American indigenous groups together. The first African indigenous group to attend the WGIP was a Maasai group from Kenya in 1989. From the 1990s onwards, African indigenous representatives such as the Twa from Rwanda, the San from Southern Africa and the Ogoni from Nigeria arrived in greater numbers, and they now represent a small but very vocal group of delegates. A small group of “small numbered peoples” from the Russian Federation has in the last years also marked its presence at the WGIP and has added to the diversity of delegations present at the U.N. each year. In the summer of 1999 the conference was attended by nearly one thousand participants, the majority of which were indigenous representatives from all five continents. Approximately 46 South and Central American indigenous groups, 40 Asian indigenous organizations, 31 U.S. and Canadian indigenous organizations, 23 African indigenous organizations, 9 Australian Aboriginal organizations, 6 Russian and Siberian indigenous organizations, 5 Pacific indigenous organizations, 4 Inuit indigenous groups, 2 Saami organizations, and about 6 explicitly international indigenous organizations attended.

As early as the late 1950s, the first international indigenous nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) were formed.⁹ In 1975, the formation of the World Council of Indigenous Peoples marked the emergence of an indigenous organization that aimed at linking together existing national and international alliances within a global framework. Important documents on the nature and meaning of indigeneity, written by indigenous activists emerged, and the elaboration of an ideology and praxis of the indigenous movement gained momentum (Wright 1988:376). At first, indigenous activists contemplated possibilities of alliance with other struggles such as those of other ethnic groups, political organizations, classes, and labor unions. They were rejected in favor of a “specifically indigenous identity as a viable and long-run strategy for liberation, equally viable but distinct from class-consciousness” (Wright 1988:377).

Crucial to the formulation of indigenous cultural politics were indigenous intellectuals, especially from Latin America, who produced statements on the philosophical and historical basis of what they called “Indianness” (Wright 1988:374). Clearly, indigenous cultural politics at the U.N. are the result of complex “struggles over meaning and the creation of . . . frames of meaning . . . [that become] part of the political culture—which is to say, part of the reservoir of symbols from which future movement entrepreneurs can choose” (Keck and Sikkink 1998:17). I cannot do justice to these complex historical processes here. Rather, I take as a starting point the striking unity of the indigenous arguments in the hundreds of indigenous interventions made before the WGIP. An overview of these interventions reveals a remarkable consistency in the cultural political arguments made by indigenous delegates since their emergence on the global scene. This is the case with statements made by indigenous veterans as it is with newcomers to the WGIP.

In part, this consistency has its roots not only in the histories of oppression shared by indigenous peoples, but in the carefully crafted discourse developed over time that has enabled them to speak jointly of this oppression. Consistency is further enabled by the fact that a “global indigenous caucus” has for a number of years met before and during the WGIP in order to agree on strategies and produce joint resolutions. These meetings are attempts to learn about the diversity of issues that need to be brought before the WGIP, but also to find common ground and devise an argumentative arsenal with which to confront the forum. Many, if not most indigenous delegates write their interventions at the conference itself, and are often seen pouring over half-written statements with their co-delegates. Statements are sometimes also produced in conjunction with what indigenist NGOs have to say, and are eventually translated and typed by the dozens of volunteers—many of them anthropology students—working with and for indigenous delegates. What emerges are discursive interventions that are products of successive stages of formulation, and of the channeling of ideas and concepts jointly generated.¹⁰ The U.N. itself has produced an official discourse on what constitutes “indigeneity.” In a groundbreaking report that was published in 1987, the U.N. special rapporteur Jose Martinez Cobo concluded that a working definition of what constituted an indigenous people would run as follows:

Indigenous communities, peoples and nations are those which, having a historical continuity with preinvasion and precolonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sections of societies once prevailing in those territories or parts of them. They form at present nondominant sectors of society and are determined to preserve, develop and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories, and their ethnic identity, as the basis of their continued existence as peoples, in accordance with their own cultural patterns, social institutions and legal systems. [Cobo 1986:1]

Indigenous politics of place originally fed into, and later modeled itself on, this definition. But the definition above has become more of a broad conceptual

tool necessary for U.N. procedure, rather than a definitive frame that has satisfied all actors in the field. In fact, indigenous peoples regard the right to define themselves as paramount, and as integral to their struggle for self-determination. Jose Martinez Cobo's definition thus remains an outline of variables that constitute indigeneity according to U.N. parlance, but conveys only part of the complexities and dynamics manifest in articulations of indigenous identity over the years at the U.N. This is not to say that the definition does not provide some of the basic tenets according to which indigenous groups can be identified and identify themselves. But it does not, as will be shown in the course of this article, convey the heterogeneity of issues raised by indigenous delegates, and the changing frames through which indigenous identities have been articulated over time.

The indigenous politics of place is intimately intertwined with the political aim of self-determination. According to a number of international legal instruments, all peoples are entitled to the right to self-determination, a right indigenous peoples have been denied so far.¹¹ Today, the overwhelming majority of delegates representing officially recognized states at the WGIP refuses to even say indigenous "peoples," rather than "people," "persons," "communities," "minorities," or "populations." This is the case despite the fact that international perceptions of colonialism, conquest, and even "internal colonialism" are changing (Maiguashca 1994; Stone 1979; Wilmer 1993), or perhaps even because of it. The language of the law on these issues is far from clear-cut and unambiguous, for the central terms in this ongoing debate remain vaguely defined. No international legal instruments containing references to the right of peoples to self-determination define the term "peoples." As a result, the meanings of both "peoples" and "self-determination" "remain contentious, and fluctuate within U.N. practice" (Lâm 1992:616).¹² These are the indeterminacies that make the WGIP a marginal site. James Tully argues that the representatives of established states act to reduce the indeterminacy of such terms by utilizing implicit "regular and customary agreements" as a "normative foundation for discussion" (1995:38–39). I argue that it is precisely this normative foundation for discussion—entailing notions of sovereignty, culture, and rights—that is being challenged by indigenous representatives.

At the heart of the refusal by state delegates to acknowledge indigenous peoples as peoples are, as Rebecca Tsosie lays out, the basic tenets of democratic liberalism—cultural neutrality, national integrity, and the value of a shared concept of community (1997:377). The basic liberal model of equal rights and freedoms does not allow for group rights to be claimed within state structures. As Franke Wilmer states, indigenous activists "challenge the normative basis for international politics by asserting that the right of sovereignty essential in order for a people to control their own political and economic development does not belong exclusively to nation-states emulating the European model" (Wilmer 1993:2). Indeed, the orthodox notion of sovereignty is "so conflated with the idea of statehood that it appears to have no separate existence" (Otto 1995:83). Indigenous peoples' efforts are only one facet of a

growing dissatisfaction with the dominant conception of the international community as a society of states. More and more voices have claimed that this current situation will “inevitably give way to more local realities of nonstate groupings” (Otto 1995:76), as it is “out-dated and needs to be rethought” (Unrepresented Peoples’ Organization [UNPO] 1993:1).

In the eyes of many state representatives at the WGIP, indigenous delegates’ claims are couched in too radical a legal language. Indeed, the language used by indigenous delegates is very much structured and configured by an overdetermined legal terrain whose terms were never really of their choosing (Coombe 1998:210). Rosemary Coombe states that “the law rips asunder what Native peoples view as integrally and relationally joined,” and that struggles for self-determination are actually responses to the limitations of legal categories for postcolonial struggles (1998:209). Indigenous politics of place are a manifestation of a struggle to articulate indigenous histories of economic, political, ecological, and cultural oppression, and their critique of late modern democracies as they exist today. But their hybrid, all-encompassing claims can not yet be contained in the current language of international law. Indeed, indigenous delegates have tested a number of international legal avenues, some with more, some with less success. The bulk of lobbying efforts by indigenous representatives has focused on U.N. human rights bodies, particularly the WGIP, while others have recently gone beyond that level to participate in bodies higher up in the U.N. hierarchy.¹³ Other U.N. institutions that are currently being lobbied by indigenous delegates—notably, the International Labor Organization, the World Intellectual Property Organization, and the World Health Organization—have all argued that the all-encompassing and interconnected claims made by indigenous delegates go beyond their organization’s mandate. At U.N. human rights bodies, in turn, indigenous delegates have voiced dissatisfaction with current liberal human rights regimes by arguing that they cannot do justice to the collective rights sought by indigenous peoples. Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, an Igorot activist from the Philippines, has stated that indigenous delegates have challenged the U.N. and other multilateral organizations to look beyond the rights of individuals and states (Tauli-Corpuz 1999). Other indigenous representatives have protested the exclusion of the right to a healthy environment from what are perceived to be basic human rights.¹⁴ Some indigenous delegates have gone even further by expanding this latter idea to the rights of the environment itself.¹⁵ Thus, it is not only the limited scope of human rights that has been questioned, but the idea of mere *human* rights as such.

Cultural rights have also hardly received any attention by the international community. David Cleveland and Stephen Murray (1997) discuss this field of rights in the (narrower) light of indigenous peoples’ intellectual property claims. Their point, that the claims of indigenous peoples to cultural rights fall outside the parameters of Western legal language, needs to be expanded to the indigenous cause as a whole. Many of the indigenous claims to their culture and cultural property—which in the politics of place include territories and all

natural resources—are rejected because indigenous groups function neither as state actors, nor as individuals whose claims could be heard in either international regimes governing cultural property, or in domestic regimes. Indeed, there exists one important conspicuous absence within the legal structures of the U.N. that relates to cultural rights. For what is being debated at the WGIP today is an echo of an issue long swept under the carpet. In 1948, the U.N. General Assembly debated the possibility of adding the notion of “cultural genocide” to the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide then being drafted. The right to cultural integrity was thus explicitly discussed by U.N. member states.¹⁶ Not surprisingly, however, member states such as the United States and France strongly objected to the inclusion of the concept, despite the fact that a significant number of state representatives found that “cultural genocide was no less serious an offense than other manifestations of the crime . . . as [the] loss of the specific characteristics of a group could lead to its disappearance without any attempts on the life of its members” (Thornberry 1991:72–73). Cultural genocide, or ethnocide, has thus not entered the U.N. record as an official term. Nevertheless, it has found its way into international indigenous political vocabulary and is used in the draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.¹⁷ In many ways it is this hidden legacy of the concept of cultural genocide that lies beneath the surface of what is debated at the WGIP. Indeed, as one indigenous representative put it, “ethnocide is really at the heart of our exercise in [the] Working Group.”¹⁸

The Politics of Morality

The critique indigenous delegates have launched against dominant conceptions of human rights illuminates much of what their politics of place are about. Their alternative visions—of the collective rights of peoples, of rights *to* an environment, and even of rights *of* the environment itself—reveal the basic tenets of international indigenous activism in stark terms. First, their claims always invoke the image of a cultural community investing in and living off a specific place, the land. Living a particular lifestyle in intimate interconnection with a specific place and without any unwanted interference is viewed as a people’s fundamental and collective right to self-determination. Second, the places with which indigenous delegates portray themselves as being meaningfully intertwined are either already, or on the verge of being destroyed, taken away, and/or polluted. The communities whose lives are portrayed as being inextricably linked to this place through quotidian practices thus claim their right to an (unpolluted) territory. And, finally, in claiming rights for “those that cannot speak,” a key trope that has been used for years is revealed—that of a natural world that means and embodies more to an indigenous people than merely the basis for the economic sustenance of the community. The relationship to territory is represented not only as meaningful, but as moral. It is this trope of morality that will be the main subject of this section.

Early on, indigenous leaders called “for humanity to reevaluate its beliefs and values, for the . . . institutions of the world to reexamine their own origins,

the beliefs which brought them into being, and the basis of integrity that lies beneath their formal structures” (Manuel and Posluns 1974, quoted in Wright 1988:376). This politics of morality continues as part of a larger global trend in which social movements have raised their voices “not only [against a specific type of] politics and democracy, but [against] a whole civilizational design based on modern reason” (Escobar 1992:41). This civilizational design, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno (1944) have argued, suppresses the “multitudinous affinities between existents by the single relation between the subject who bestows meaning and the meaningless object, between rational significance and the chance vehicle of significance” (1944:10–11). From this angle, indigenous “place-making” has fundamentally challenged this design. Attacking “the nucleus of all civilizing rationality,” namely the “denial of man that he is part of nature” (1944:54), indigenous “place-making” at the U.N. has made visible the multitudinous relations said to exist between indigenous “subjects” and a meaningful entity—nature. Thus, indigenous delegates have since their emergence on the global political scene insisted on the inseparability of two seemingly separable realms—ecology and ethnicity. The concept of “ecological ethnicity” (Parajuli 1996) is useful in understanding how place is discursively made at the U.N. Writing about indigenous Adivasi movements in middle India, Pramod Parajuli shows that “ethnic awareness has served ecological purposes and vice versa” (1996:16), such that in specific political contexts ecological destruction is “ethnicized,” and ethnic subordination “ecologized”:

For the people struggling for identity and autonomy, the territory of Jharkhand is not merely a biological entity—a repository of forests, minerals, and water—it is a social entity. . . . Their position as defenders of ecology derives not from the concept of “nature under threat,” as the conservationists define it, but rather from a relationship with the land, water, and forest as the fundamental basis for their own elemental struggle to survive. . . . Not surprisingly, ecological ethnicity has begun to figure in Jharkandi politics during the last decade. The first sign is that Jharkandis themselves have accepted the changing configuration of their own identity. Now a Jharkandi is defined not in terms of tribal identity alone but in terms of those who share a common territory and a common history of exploitation. [Parajuli 1996:42]

The global indigenous movement shows that the combination of these two seemingly separate realms is not a new phenomenon. In global indigenous cultural politics, the one realm has always been implicated in the other. Place, then, is infused with culture, and vice versa, so that all indigenous cultural politics are always also a politics of land, and a politics of rights to land. By implication, all struggles for and about land are always also struggles about identity and culture. This point has been made on countless occasions by indigenous delegates themselves. At the WGIP in 1997, Frank Guivarra from the National Aboriginal and Islanders Legal Services Secretariat stated that the “language of the land,” embedded in the “indigenous culture of the environment,” had always existed despite the differing cultural backgrounds and political situations of indigenous peoples around the world. Even as early as

1984, when the WGIP had only just begun its activities, some indigenous delegates framed their claims in these terms:

Madame Chair, it is important to note the following: Aboriginal societies existed in a dynamic relationship with the complete environment, developing their religious, legal, social, and economic institutions through and around this relationship. Accordingly, it is only for the purposes of analysis that “land” in the general sense can be separated from the people and their culture—this distinction is an incomplete and misleading abstraction. [Joint Declaration by the Australian Aboriginal Delegation at the WGIP in 1984]

Indigenous ecological ethnicity has relied on a discursive mapping of meanings and especially moralities onto places. These places, as will be shown below, are not only “indigenous,” but are those of the U.N. and Switzerland too. This acute sense of place, and of being-in-place that is thereby produced, powerfully evokes the relationships indigenous leaders describe their peoples as having to land, be it their own, or other peoples’. They regularly evoke the land and the life-sustaining practices enabled by living off land, as well as the histories and presences of oppression in indigenous communities. The land, and the right to self-determination on and over the land, are claimed as a moral right not only by virtue of the fact that indigenous peoples are “first peoples,” but that the relationship to the land is inherently moral—that is, nondestructive.

Discursive practices of this kind must be understood in light of the fact that indigenous peoples have often suffered long histories of “moral exclusion” whereby they, as “savages,” were perceived to be “outside the boundary in which moral values, rules and considerations of fairness apply” (Wilmer 1993:67). Though this boundary was (and still is) ambiguous and evolving rather than fixed, indigenous peoples have always been perceived as existing within a separate cultural, historical, and social realm (Wilmer 1993:67–93). Ironically, these boundaries have to a certain extent served the indigenous cause as much as they have harmed relationships between indigenous and non-indigenous groups. At the WGIP, indigenous delegates have managed to use this moral boundary to delineate indigenous moralities and philosophies, and to evoke the notion of an indigenous “moral community” (Wilmer 1993:67).

The mapping of morality onto place has been played out countless times via the controversial issue of indigenous prayers and ceremonies at the U.N. Indigenous delegates have always insisted on opening the WGIP with ceremonial prayers. This has again and again been a site of contestation. According to the rules of the institution, public religious utterances such as prayers are usually not permitted in, before, or after meetings. The U.N., then, is a prayer-free zone. Despite this, indigenous delegates have in the years of their work at the U.N. managed to remap this zone as one where moments of sacredness can be created. Indigenous delegates have been able to convince Professor Erica Irene Daes, the nonindigenous chairperson of the WGIP from 1984–2000, that prayers offered before important deliberations are vital to indigenous peoples who always pray and offer thanks to their elders, ancestors or gods, as acts of respect

and in order to be as level-headed and fair as possible in discussions. If the chair grants indigenous delegates the right to open and close the WGIP session with ceremonial prayers, the people present in the conference room either simply stand, or stand and hold hands while a prayer is said or chanted. In the early 1990s, Daes, during one session, forbade this procedure, whereupon indigenous delegates insisted with such urgency that she furiously left the room, only to return after the indigenous delegates had finished the prayer. Nowadays, the sight of the chair standing to indigenous prayer, with—however begrudgingly—all state delegates and even the translators in their glass boxes joining in, is as commonplace at the WGIP as it is unique to the U.N. in general.

Another type of this moral mapping occurs when place is explicitly understood as the territory one does *not* inhabit. Place is said to belong to a people, and vice versa. By implication, then, it does not belong to another. The use of the property idiom in these and other contexts has been debated by anthropologists who regard this move as a step toward a language of essentialism and possessive individualism (Coombe 1998:223; Handler 1991). Once again, the “double voiced rhetoric” of this ambivalent discourse needs to be foregrounded here, as it enables a critical rewriting of histories of colonization and contests the notion that indigenous peoples lack any understanding of, and thus any right to, the possession of territory. By using the property idiom, indigenous delegates have conceptualized colonial history as an act of crossing boundaries and borders that are acts of passing from one place “belonging” to a people, to another. And movement across borders into foreign territory necessitates the respect of borders. Historically, of course, it is precisely this respect for property and borders that was again and again breached during colonial conquest. Colonialism in this context becomes an act of trespassing:

We, the Indian nations, welcomed immigrants from Europe who sought to escape from oppressive regimes. We shared our lands, yet in return we have been isolated, dominated, deprived of our lands and fundamental freedoms, and placed in a state of enforced dependency and poverty. [Intervention by a delegate from the Coalition of First Nations at the WGIP in 1995]

Place and the idea of property are here intimately linked to the necessity of moral conduct. The disrespect of boundaries becomes an immoral act. Indigenous delegates have repeatedly stated that they from the beginning acted in good faith, wanting to share the land with the “immigrants from Europe.” Indigenous peoples present themselves as the generous hosts of a country they were to lose to immigrants who were themselves at one stage subject to immoral rule. Indigenous politics of place, then, have become a means through which the “savages” define what morality and immorality, property, and respect mean. Indigenous delegates have gone beyond defining morality and respect, and have practiced and performed it in place, that is, in the host country, by voicing thanks:

In accordance with our customs, we would like to thank the people of Switzerland for giving us permission to walk on their territory. [Statement by a delegate from the Kimberley Land Council from Australia, at the WGIP in 1992]

The morality of indigenous peoples' case can hardly be denied. The legal expert Catherine Iorns has argued that states have no moral basis on which to argue for their rights to their present territories. The existing distribution of territory and resources is "completely morally arbitrary" (Iorns 1992:332). Indigenous delegates have worked against this moral vacuum and have stated hundreds of times that they, as "first peoples," have the natural and moral right to their territory. They make these moral claims vis-à-vis a society "that has lost its human values, and that has lost all its friendship and love."¹⁹ In this light, indigenous nations with treaty agreements, that is, North American indigenous groups as well as Maori and Hawaiians, have claimed rhetorical high ground. In the light of treaties made and broken by indigenous peoples' treaty partners, the concepts of honor, right, and good faith have been regularly evoked:

We made a treaty as a nation. That is the treaty that still binds us. That treaty is our legal and spiritual relationship with Canada. It still amazes us, it still amazes me that this solemn undertaking can be so easily ignored and abused by the very government who signed it. Treaties guide us. We did not sign this treaty to break it. We gave our word, and that has great significance. When I say we gave our word, you must understand what this means to us. Our word was given as part of a spiritual ceremony which has great significance for our people. When a commitment is made under such circumstances, it cannot be taken back. There are three parties to our treaty: The State, our Nation, and God. You cannot back out of an agreement with God. [Statement given by a delegate from the International Organization of Indigenous Resource Development at the WGIP in 1991]

Of course, the treaties offer an argumentative foothold not many indigenous delegates have, as many indigenous peoples never signed treaties.

A strategy *all* indigenous delegates have powerfully made use of—and this brings us back to the concept of ecological ethnicity—is the mapping of moralities and meanings onto indigenous lands. Hundreds of indigenous delegates have made what I have called "indigenous place" in their interventions. Typically, the spaces called land, territory, and home are filled with notions of embodiment, history, and myth. Protests against specific types of encroachments are paired with explanations that aim at articulating the belief in the inherent interconnectedness of things, and in the specific morality that springs from this worldview:

In Maohi tradition, at the birth of a child, the placenta of the mother is buried in the ground to bond the child to the nutritive earth. On the same place a fruit tree is planted, usually the "Uru" (the typical and legendary bread tree of Tahiti). In the habit of doing this gesture we express the meaning of life. Thus the Maohi individual has an intimate connection with its environment since its childhood. This is the meaning of our struggle, a struggle for life, rather than a struggle against atomic death. By planting the bomb in the womb of Morura, France has set upon us most utterly [*sic*]. It has soiled mother earth, which will also be the nutritive earth of our

children and grandchildren. We are therefore talking about crimes against future generations. Please understand that we do not need any other explanation to justify our struggle against this murderous stupidity. [Hiti Tau, a Pacific indigenous NGO at the WGIP in 1995]

Note how the description of this practice is accompanied by an ethno-ecological interpretation. The child after birth is linked to the Mother Earth via the traditional practice of burying the placenta and the planting of a specific fruit tree. “The meaning of life” consists of practices that enable the symbolic conjunction between valuable and meaningful beings both human and nonhuman. In contrast, the “planting” of the bomb in the womb/mother Mururoa is represented as inherently destructive, disrespectful, shortsighted, and thus immoral.

The critique of short-sightedness, implicit in the notion of “crimes against future generations,” has proved to be a crucial tool in the protests voiced at the WGIP, and has fed into complex notions of both spatial and temporal holism. The notion of the protection of present and future generations—of both humans and nature in the case above—has simultaneously been accompanied by a powerful evocation of the past, and in particular of mythical acts of creation. These acts have often been described as ones where a creator charged a people with looking after and taking up responsibility for a specific piece of land.

The Newe have existed in our homelands since the time of creation. I shall speak to you of Creation in our own language. The creator carried a basket full of various people placing them in the different areas after crossing the big waters. Although dropping a few into the big waters, the Creator carried many over. The Newe were at the bottom of the basket. The Creator looked at us and said, Even though you do not look like much, you will be the strong ones and your way of life will be known forever. In whatever you do, do for the good of all. Respect every living thing on earth for this is the way of Creation. [Western Shoshone Nation at the WGIP in 1984]

These last two quotes employ notions of a complex moral and place-based interconnectedness amongst humans, and between humans and nature. Humans are also connected through time, via transgenerational links spanning the years “since time immemorial” and into the future. An Orang Ulu indigenous representative provided the WGIP with a poignant image of these links when he in 1997 spoke of the bodies of the elders who, as carriers of indigenous histories, are buried in the land from which these histories are derived. All people living and dead were thus represented as standing in an intimate relationship both to each other and to higher beings and powers, while the relationship amongst all these actors was said to be enabled and mediated through the land. The telling of stories of creation, the evocation of the ancestors, and the responsibility voiced toward future generations are strategies used by indigenous delegates to effectively convey concepts of interconnectedness, notions of morality, and respect, as well as what is lost once interconnectedness is forcibly destroyed.

Their consistent advocacy for the rights of future generations was mirrored much later in the notion of “sustainable development,” a term that received multilateral canonization in the so-called Brundtland Report (1987), a

widely cited study by the U.N.'s World Commission on Environment and Development. Clearly, then, indigenous delegates long anticipated trends that would later dominate political, developmental, and ecological debates. They did even more than that. "Sustainable development," the development expert Wolfgang Sachs argues, extends "the principle of equity among the human community along the axis of time." What it neglects is "justice in social space [in that] constraints imposed by the present generation on future generations are given prominence over constraints imposed by powerful groups on less powerful groups within one generation" (Sachs 1997:8). It is this lopsidedness that indigenous delegates have countered by aiming at both spatial and temporal equity. They have shown their struggle to be one that encompasses the aim of sociocultural, economic, political, and ecological justice in the past, present, and future. This is where the moral power of the indigenous politics of place, and the claims entailed, lies.

This complex chain of arguments was voiced concisely in 1996, when the WGIP dealt with indigenous peoples' health. Indigenous delegates univocally criticized the narrow notion of health that is prominent in discourses of, say, the World Health Organization, and linked up health with political issues such as land rights. Health, one Inuit delegate argued, was "not just the absence of disease, but must be linked to the impacts of colonialism and oppression. Health is in fact a delicate balance of one's physical, cultural, ecological, emotional and spiritual well-being."²⁰ Indigenous delegates jointly produced a statement containing the following:

The health of Indigenous Peoples is related to the spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical health of Indigenous Peoples who have suffered the effects of colonization of our lands, resources and our total being as a resource for the colonizers; Indigenous health concerns relate to the continued refusal by the colonizer states to recognize our right to self-determination to control our lands and resources and; Indigenous health issues relate to our rights as peoples and not as minorities within states. [Statement by the Indigenous Caucus to the WGIP in 1996]

The general thrust in indigenous representatives' arguments was thus that health was more than the mere absence of illness, and that the miserable health situation of the majority of indigenous peoples worldwide should first and foremost be linked to the loss of territory, which had led not only to the loss of self-determination over how land and resources are to be used, but also to the destruction of holistic cultural systems, including their traditional health measures. Suffering was thus articulated as "social suffering" (Kleinman 1995) resulting from structural violence rather than individual "malfunctioning." Indigenous delegates speaking were frequently interrupted by Daes, the chair of the conference, who repeatedly stated that speakers were to keep to the agenda item of "health" rather than talk about more general political issues relating to land.²¹ But that was precisely the point. Here, the issue of social, economic, ecological, and political injustice and the resulting destruction of culture—

epitomized in the loss of “health”—were taken to be separate items by the chair, while indigenous delegates insisted on the need to treat these issues as one.

Indigenous “place-making” at the U.N. has not only focused on the making of “indigenous place,” but also on its unmaking. Indigenous delegates have repeatedly pointed to the havoc displacement has caused in indigenous communities. They have since 1982 focused on the consequences of resettlement and transmigration policies involving the movement of nonindigenous people into indigenous territories, as well as of forced relocations. The consequences of *displacement* result in uprootedness, alienation, and the loss and destruction of a people as a previously grounded entity.²²

Indigenous delegates have shown how their people were sometimes not only physically removed from their lands, but literally made invisible and wiped off the map. When the 1992 Mabo decision in Australia overturned the legal principle of *terra nullius* (literally, nobody’s land) that had perpetuated the assumption that Australian Aboriginal peoples did not possess any legitimate legal land titles at the time of the invasion of Australia, a specific type of colonial mapping was exposed. Indigenous peoples had not only been displaced from their lands. These displacements had been legitimized by the assumption that aboriginal peoples never perceived the land as property, and thus could not be regarded as rights-bearing subjects from whom lands needed to be claimed. They had thus been written off the map as groups without notions of property, without rights, and without any negotiating power. The land was regarded as empty and ready to colonize. With the Mabo decision, then, indigenous peoples of Australia were granted, for the very first time, the recognition as the first legal inhabitants of the territory. Australian indigenous delegates have gone even further by stating that it is not only peoples that can be displaced from the land, but cultural property and heritage. The land, it is said, has become “empty” without this heritage:

We got to bring [cultural heritage] back to the country. We got no wicketty, no bush bananas, no honey ants. We are traditional owners for this country, and we need that Tjuringa [sacred wood or stones, many of which are today exhibited in ethnography museums throughout the world] to fix the country up. Homeland is empty. No Tjuringa. [*sic*] [Bruce Tilmouth, Central Land Council, Australia at the WGIP in 1992]

Articulated here, finally, is another link in the multiple webs said to exist between a people, its land, and the sacred “natural” elements peopling the land. As the statement above shows, indigenous delegates have argued that their land and its environmental riches have been largely destroyed, leaving not only an ecological, but also a cultural vacuum behind. Since the 1990s, however, cultural loss has increasingly been conceptualized as a loss of knowledge. The knowledge lost relies on the direct links existing between land and people. These links consist of ties that have been forged between the land—said to be an integral part of and prerequisite for indigenous religions and beliefs—and the people living on and with the land. Indigenous delegates have also consistently

argued that traditional indigenous knowledge is intertwined with the knowledge of one's surroundings, and can only be mediated, literally, through the land. The reproduction of culture and knowledge is thus not only tied to the land, but can only be transmitted if one is still linked to land. This new strand of arguments has provided indigenous delegates with a powerful and probably more effective discursive strategy at the U.N.

Knowledge, Culture, and Biodiversity: Reframing the Politics of Place

Indigenous "place-making" at the U.N. represents a complex chain of arguments binding together seemingly disparate realms whose interconnections and implications are only starting to be grasped by U.N. institutions. This section will discuss the shift that has characterized international indigenous activism since the early 1990s, and that has gained momentum in the second half of the decade. This shift from one common terminological currency based on an eco-cultural politics of morality, to one that integrates these discourses into a larger framework of valuable knowledge, cultural diversity, and biodiversity, must be viewed against a historically specific backdrop that is structured by forces both helpful and inimical to indigenous interests at the WGIP. I will contextualize this shift in light of environmentalism, shifting concepts of "value" in the global marketplace, as well as of new trends in developmental discourse, and then move on to take a closer look at the dynamics internal to the WGIP.

Global environmental destruction in its entirety and complexity is at least nominally being regarded as one of the top political priorities of most actors on the world-stage today. The dramatic loss of the planet's biodiversity, often provoked by "development" projects involving mining, logging, the construction of dams, and so on, has increasingly fuelled calls for sustainable development and, by implication, for democracy and accountability in developmental processes. This has meant that people, and especially people's applied local knowledge, have become important variables in this discourse. This shift in general awareness was made official by the appearance of the Brundtland Report mentioned above, and perhaps more importantly by the U.N. Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. The report remains a watershed in this context in that it identified indigenous peoples as one of the repositories of these knowledge systems. They, as farmers, herders, hunters, and gatherers preserved their "traditional way of life in close harmony with the natural environment" (Brundtland 1987:114). Indeed, "their very survival has depended on their ecological awareness and adaptation. . . . These communities are the repositories of vast accumulations of traditional knowledge and experience" (1987:114). At the UNCED the convergence between indigenous peoples and environmental sustainability was even more firmly established, and the legal documents containing references to these convergences have become important building stones for the articulation of indigenous politics of place at the U.N. For example, principle 22 of the *Rio Declaration on Environment and Development* (1992), a key UNCED document, states that

“indigenous people and their communities have a vital role in environmental management and development because of their knowledge and traditional practices” (1992:2). *Agenda 21* (1992), another document produced at UNCED, contains a whole chapter on indigenous peoples and local communities, and talks about the need to recognize indigenous knowledge systems and resource management practices in development projects. The idea that indigenous peoples possess alternative types of valuable knowledge located in and linked to their natural surroundings—knowledge about plants, animals, tenure systems, medical issues, biological processes, and whole ecosystems—has thus not only made the linkages between people, knowledge, and the environment clear. It has also implied that the destruction of ecosystems often entails the destruction of culturally specific knowledge systems practiced in, enmeshed with, and enabled by the sustainable use and preservation of specific territories. Conversely, the loss of indigenous cultures results in the loss of the knowledge needed to sustainably live in and with particular natural surroundings. Indigenous territories, then, have become nature(s) inscribed with culture(s), and the destruction of one has come to implicate the destruction of the other.

Some indigenous delegates have regarded this “pre- and post-Rio” terminological trend with irony and have stated that “indigenous peoples have always been at the forefront of the struggle to protect the sacred, interconnected web of life that we are now calling the environment”(International Indian Treaty Council at the 1997 WGIP). Still, the now wide-spread conjunction between “cultural diversity” and “biological diversity” and the realization that biodiversity is “territory plus culture” has enabled indigenous delegates to reframe their ecological ethnicities, and to “use the dominance of biodiversity . . . as a conduit to protecting their entire life project” (Escobar 1998:2). International indigenous articulations of place have in one way benefited from the emergence of these environmentally valuable hot-spots around the world that are being actively sought out by environmentalists, scientists, and especially pharmaceutical companies. The following statement is a reflection of this new terminological currency:

Biodiversity and cultural diversity are inseparable. As one whole dynamic, they protect the essential nature of continuing life on earth as it springs from each environment in the unique life forms of each place. This is the source of biological and cultural integrity. Future development must emanate from and protect this integrity. [Nalani Minton, Pro-Kanaka Maoli Independence from Hawaii, at the WGIP in 1996]

For many development experts, long ignored indigenous knowledge systems have become newly valued alternative sciences and technologies that, if salvaged from destruction, provide a potential solution for the havoc that decades of nonparticipatory and undemocratic developmental policies in the so-called Third and Fourth Worlds have caused. The number of developmental experts who have stressed the importance of indigenous knowledge systems for the future has risen sharply (Anani 1999; Dietz 1999; Sillitoe 1998). As the

quote by Minton above shows, indigenous delegates are part of this trend, and have contributed to the destabilization of dominant meanings of knowledge. Persistently displacing and replacing customary Western notions of knowledge, indigenous delegates have pointed to the reductionism of “objective” Western knowledge versus the “embeddedness and holism” of indigenous knowledge systems. The argument is that place-specific knowledge—and, by implication, cultures, biodiversity, and ecosystems—can only be protected if, unlike Western knowledge it remains contextually embedded and land-based. Indigenous knowledge has in this process constantly been reevaluated and redefined, and indigenous delegates have argued that they must be respected as “scientists and chemists, as managers of their environments, and thus ecological specialists, and as doctors in their own right.”²³ The following statement voices the complexities inherent in the production and reproduction of knowledge and “science.” This knowledge is embedded in indigenous lands and to indigenous practices linked to the land:

The sacred peaks on Mount Graham are part of our existence. Mount Graham is a foundation of Apache Culture, past, present, and future. The mountain has many meanings to the people because of its role in the cultural traditions. . . . We learn from our sacred land. It gives information about life. Sacred peaks are like altars, libraries. Th[ere] is sacred knowledge embedded in the landscape. Our teachings are passed through oral tradition. We depend on our land as an essential part of learning. We do not make the same separation between nature and people that is found in traditional Western thinking. [Ola Cassadore-Davis, a delegate from the San Carlos Apache Tribe in Arizona, Apache Survival Coalition at the WGIP in 1993]

Though new trends in developmental thought have emphasized sustainability and local knowledge, they have not effectively challenged the economic growth paradigm still structuring established approaches to development. *Agenda 21*, for example, still promotes trade liberalization as one way to bring about sustainable development, a fact that indigenous delegates, whose peoples have often suffered under projects promising “progress” and “growth,” criticize. In the meantime, commercial proposals to promote both cultural survival and biological conservation have emerged. Indigenous knowledge, treated as a form of intellectual property, is increasingly “seen to provide an incentive to indigenous peoples to maintain environmental stewardship and to increase their economic return for so doing” (Coombe 1998:92). The idea is that this would result in the promotion of both cultural survival and biological conservation. New developments in environmentalist and development thought must thus be linked to the related emergence of the notion of knowledge as a valuable commodity, and as “not simply a money-maker, but [as] *the* commodity of late capitalism” (Afonso 1998:122; Brown 1998; Coombe 1998; see also Strathern 1996). The implementation of the Convention of Biological Diversity in 1993 and the birth of the World Trade Organization in 1995 highlight the intersections emerging between biological diversity, cultural diversity, indigenous knowledge, and the new intellectual property rights regimes currently being formulated (Shiva 1994; Tauli-Corpuz 1999).

Much of the content of biogenetic diversity is still largely unknown to Western science. The value projected onto it has sparked off a global scramble to document these vanishing worlds in light of their potential as commercial—particularly pharmaceutical—products on world markets. With this scramble comes the emerging realization that the survival of these delicately balanced natural environments relies on indigenous cultural know-how about the environment and its biodiversity. The scramble is thus as much about genes as it is about disappearing isolated communities said to potentially harbor tremendously valuable knowledge. Today, Arturo Escobar has noted, “cultural and genetic diversity are so inextricably linked [for some] as to make both ‘gene and memory banking’ inseparable sides of the same strategy” (1998:1). Of course, many debates are being waged on the significance and consequences that the commercialization of indigenous knowledge might entail (Brown 1998). Whatever answers indigenous actors might choose for themselves, their use of a specific language of value has grabbed the attention of the parties addressed, most notably U.N. institutions such as the World Intellectual Property Organization where discussions on indigenous knowledge protection have gained momentum in the last two years.

At the same time a number of transnational indigenous organizations and networks have emerged that explicitly address problems arising out of these global developments. Indigenous groups attending the WGIP have mobilized themselves around specific issues transcending local struggles over territory and have directly addressed the problems arising out of the workings of transnational capital. In this light, organizations such as the Indigenous Peoples’ Biodiversity Network and the Indigenous Knowledge Program are new phenomena on the global indigenous scene. In the first intervention made at the WGIP by the Indigenous Peoples Network on Development, representative John Kawowo from Papua New Guinea concluded that

we are faced with environmental destruction and the loss of our livelihood because of the imposition of unsustainable development models. Nevertheless, we around the world are reinvigorating our traditional defense of our cultural and biological diversity. In April of this year, indigenous practitioners from Asia, Pacific, Africa and the Americas met in Ollantaytambo, Cusco, Peru to share our experiences in addressing the contemporary needs of our communities. Together we concluded that the sustainable livelihoods for the indigenous communities depend on successfully passing on our knowledge and practices to a new generation. As a consequence, there is an urgent need for international collaboration on ways to promote and protect traditional knowledge and practices and to apply it to development solutions. [Kawowo at the WGIP in 1997]

The quote above points to a further backdrop against which the new ecological discourse must be read. I am referring to a shift internal to the WGIP that has seen stark changes in the way and by whom the forum has been used. As I showed above, the increasing presence of indigenous organizations from Asia and Africa has changed the constellation of delegates from one that was originally dominated by North, Middle, and South American, as well as Australian

indigenous activists to one that is even more heterogeneous. Asian and African indigenous delegates began to mark their presence at the WGIP especially in the early 1990s, and have increased in numbers ever since. The WGIP, they have stated on numerous occasions, is the only forum where they can protest the abuse of their rights and claim their right to self-determination. These peoples' attendance has led to some controversy about the term "indigenous," and on the general applicability of the category. The question has been raised whether indigenous peoples necessarily needed to be "first peoples" in the narrow sense, and whether there is not a need to go "beyond the Columbus context" and into histories of non-Western colonization.²⁴

Some NGOs have reacted by producing definitions of indigeneity that fit the present constellation of participants at this international forum, and have de-emphasized the importance of "genes, blood, and the relationship to land as such" for a definition of indigeneity. Rather, it is argued, "the relationship to the nation-state in its present role, to colonial and postcolonial processes, and to the dominant population and nonindigenous groups, are the most important to consider" (Sjørøsløv 1996:2-3). This move has by no means gone uncontested, and a number of U.N. meetings dealing with indigenous issues have been obstructed particularly by Asian and African states who claimed that discussions should only proceed once the term "indigenous" had been properly defined. The situation has now been complicated by the fact that one of the members of the WGIP submitted a report in 1998 stating that most Asian, African, and Russian delegations attending the WGIP as indigenous peoples did not fall into that category and should be regarded as "minorities."²⁵ In contrast to this view, however, the current historical conjunction, fetishizing indigenous knowledge systems, represents a basis from which these groups can successfully claim an indigenous status that for long had been reserved for "classical" First Nations. Indeed, it looks as if these new indigenous groups at the WGIP are here to stay.

However controversial, the international indigenous movement has profited from the emergence of these new groups at the U.N. First, the politics of morality is now not only being voiced by veteran groups, but also by indigenous newcomers. The truly global scale of the problems addressed have thus become visible. And, secondly, and more significantly, these newcomers have vigorously taken up the new eco-political discourse to translate indigenous claims to land into claims to knowledge and (by implication) the land on which the production of this knowledge relies. This is the case not only because these newcomers emerged on the world stage at a specific historical moment but also because they look back on different histories of colonization. They needed to make arguments other than those relying on clear-cut histories of (European) settler colonialism, and on concomitant land claims. Indigenous newcomers have thus had the strong tendency to align themselves with the aim of taking "social control of the territory as a precondition for the survival and strengthening of culture [and I add knowledge] and biodiversity" (Escobar 1998:2).

The following statement, voiced by a Maasai delegate in his very first intervention at the U.N., poignantly exemplifies this language:

We have learned from our sisters and brothers that . . . we are indeed one extended family with a shared plight, a unified value system, and a deep-rooted determination to recover through restoration to humanity, the . . . respect to Mother Earth and the fundamental human right to cultural diversity. . . . There are peoples who have continued in the independent African nation states period to resist assimilation impositions. They have neither converted to cultivating cash crops nor have they been obedient to the well known state policy of compulsory village settlements, which became a must for all in rural Tanzania in the early 1970s. They have not become any more amenable to state control now than under European colonial regimes. For that defiance they received the stigma of resisting modernization and even of being incapable of adopting “civilized” ways. . . . It is specifically indigenous African cultures which are well known to have firm roots in value systems, languages, lifestyles . . . [that] are profoundly different from those of the mainstream population. [Moringe Parkipuny, KIPOC, Organization of Pastoral Peoples in Tanzania, at the WGIP in 1991]

Parkipuny goes on to state that Maasai indigenous culture is invariably land-based, and that the creation of “exclusive wildlife and tourist reserves, . . . carved out of Maasai and wildlife ecosystems” has resulted in the eviction of the Maasai and the denial of their right to “participate in the management of these reserves.” Indeed, it was the Maasai who had for centuries “protected their environment and its endowments so well that it has attained global recognition as a heritage of great value to humanity.” Indigenous “place making” appears here in all of its facets. The argument is enriched by the specificity of some of the issues raised, namely of ill-conceived wildlife conservation policies and the denial of the right of indigenous groups to manage the ecosystems they have lived in and with for generations. Indeed, the problem of displacing peoples from territory, as has been the case in environmentalist projects advocating nature parks with as little human disturbance as possible, have been subject to much debate lately, and not only in environmentalist circles. Indigenous delegates such as the Maasai from Tanzania and Kenya, the Vedda from Sri Lanka, and the San from Southern Africa have been active at the WGIP in bringing these problems to the fore. All have been confronted with wildlife policies that have tended to exclude people from nature that needed to be “protected,” and their protests have directly engaged international environmentalist organizations such as the World Wildlife Fund and the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources. With an acute precision, these indigenous newcomers have in their own ways defended their “fundamental human right” to the plurality of cultures by arguing that they represent a plurality of types of eco-management, which in turn guarantee a plurality of natural habitats, that is, biodiversity. The following statement, again by a newcomer to the WGIP, voices these concerns in precisely these terms.

The San or Bushmen People see land as their life. Land is the most important aspect for the San People. We used to move freely from place to place and there was an abundance of food. Now the Bushmen or the San lost their land and they are continuously losing the remaining ancestral land. . . . Some of the areas where the Bushmen live have been turned into game reserves by the government of Botswana because there is a lot of game and this is because the Bushmen people know how to take care of the game and the environment. They know when to hunt and when not to hunt. The bonus for keeping the environment is paid back by dispossession. [Kamana Phetso from the Kuru Development Association, Botswana, at the WGIP in 1997]

This statement argues that the abundance of wildlife is directly linked to centuries of specific and knowledge-based interactions between humans and their natural surroundings. Territory is not only important, but is said to constitute the life of indigenous groups. It is represented as a meaningful entity because important historical linkages exist between the land and its peoples both living and dead. More generally, Phetso alludes to the fact that careful indigenous custodianship of the land—manifest in the fact that many areas rich in biodiversity are areas that have been inhabited by indigenous peoples for centuries—ironically often results in the encroachment of these diversity-rich territories and in the destruction of indigenous ways of life.

In sum, this intervention reflects many of the core tenets of international indigenous activism today. It is an example of what George Marcus has called “stabilizations of identity” in situations of “great tragedy” and “liberation” (1992:327). The ethno-ecological stabilizations documented in this article—complete with notions of interrelatedness, morality, and sacredness—have emerged as stabilizations of a particular kind. They are consistent through time in their core tenets, but dynamic in that they react to broader global trends.

Culture, Self-Determination, and Places Made

Indigenous delegates have deftly exploited the particular historical conjuncture enabling claims to culture, cultural difference, and cultural rights. It has made those addressed listen more carefully. Indigenous delegates have argued that the loss of cultural integrity through violent interventions by outside parties represents an act of cultural genocide that is morally untenable, that the loss of cultural integrity results in the disintegration of cultural groups—that is, of peoples—and thus in the loss of cultural diversity, and finally that the loss of cultural diversity is more than a lamentable fact. It is a dangerous development in light of the fact that these cultures might harbor valuable knowledges linked to, enabled by, and preserving biodiversity. All these arguments, of both moral and pragmatic nature, have come together to enable the major challenges posed by international indigenous activism today. The concomitant claim made by indigenous peoples’ representatives, namely that national and international legal regimes are at present unable to deal with indigenous issues justly, is self-determination, a move that has powerfully challenged liberal democratic models of polity today.

These indigenous politics directly feed into nightmarish fantasies of *balcanization* and *apartheid*, state disintegration, and dismemberment. What has become clear in debates at the WGIP is that the majority of state representatives regard indigenous calls for the right to self-determination as incompatible with the basic norms constituting liberal democratic constitutions. But indigenous delegates at the U.N. have been careful not to convey a sense of what Terence Turner calls “difference fetishism,” where “culture reduces to a tag for ethnic identity and a license for political and intellectual separatism” (1993:414). On the contrary, indigenous delegates are aware of the fact that an exclusionary politics of difference would backfire on their agenda. Current political manifestations of self-determination take on a number of forms (Wiberg 1983) but always imply a people’s right to determine its political status freely, including the right to secede. Indigenous activists have insisted on their right to self-determination in principle and with all its implications. They argue that the fact that they are not being treated as equal to other peoples represents a blatant inconsistency in international law. However, many have in their statements explicitly denied any interest to secede from the states in which they currently live. Though they aim at a “reordering of the political nature” of the states they live in (Chief Jerry Fontaine, Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs, at the 1992 WGIP), indigenous activists seem “very willing to negotiate . . . for an arrangement that protects the state’s sovereignty while granting them freedom to determine their own way of life” (Maiguashca 1994:379). James Tully has made a similar point by stating that indigenous peoples most often argue for “inclusion into the society in a way that allows for cultural difference and unique patterns of tribal governance” (1995:376–377). A paper produced at the 1995 WGIP and called “Reclaiming our Identity” by the Confederacy of Treaty Six First Nations, Canada, stated that indigenous peoples “are distinct nations [who] have the right to be distinct (though not necessarily separate from) mainstream society.” When indigenous delegates claim the right to self-determination, then, they are using a language that to some degree distorts what most of them are striving for, namely a much more inclusionary model of self-determination and sovereignty than orthodox legal language implies. Once again, this reveals the WGIP as a marginal site where indeterminate shifting spaces in international law and politics are being exploited—and produced—by indigenous activists. It is thus not only the concepts of “self-determination” and “sovereignty” that are being questioned in their orthodoxy, but the future of state structures as a whole. The significance of the WGIP as a marginal site lies in the fact that it is not only meanings, but more importantly the norms governing them, that are made fluid and multifaceted (Wilmer 1993:33). Indeed, the WGIP is an event “occurring in the shadowland” and thus does not offer insight “in how things are but rather how things are becoming” (Wilmer 1993:39). Dalee Sambo Dorough from the Indian Law Resource Center has in this light presented a particularly succinct intervention:

Narrower conceptions of the term peoples (and self-determination) are flawed in their limited vision of a world divided into mutually exclusive “sovereign” territorial communities. This limited conception of peoples largely ignores the multiple, overlapping spheres of community, authority and interdependency that actually exist in the human experience. This vision corresponds with the traditional Western theoretical perspective that limits humanity to two perceptual categories—the individual and the state—and which views states according to a model of mutually exclusive spheres of territory, community and centralized authority. This conception obscures the human rights character of self-determination and diminishes self-determination values in a world that is in fact evolving differently from one concerned only with statehood categories. . . .

Properly understood, the principle of self-determination benefits groups, that is “peoples,” in the ordinary sense of the term throughout the spectrum of humanity’s complex web of interrelationships and loyalties, and not just peoples defined by existing or perceived sovereign boundaries. In a world of increasingly overlapping and integrated political spheres, self-determination concerns the constitution and functioning of all levels and forms of governments. [Quote from a statement presented at the 1997 WGIP]

This version of “peoples,” “self-determination,” and “sovereignty” is grounded in an understanding of human interaction as multifaceted and not reducible to the interaction between bounded groups separated by impermeable borders. Thus, even though individuals are understood as always already culturally constituted, both their identities and the identities of the groups of which they are part are not rendered as necessarily static and fixed. Articulations of place and polity such as the one by Sambo Dorough enable the envisioning of new legal and political regimes that do not rely on notions of rigidly bounded groups. Likewise, the people inhabiting these places are represented as mobile rather than “immobilized,” their identities relational rather than bounded, and their loyalties overlapping rather than defined by identities linked to bounded territories only. The place envisioned here is one that opens up a space of discussion about possible future political and legal terrains. Most importantly, it is not one that seeks a fixed definition of what “self-determination” and “sovereignty” should mean. Indigenous delegates have never defined the exact content of these concepts in the abstract and thereby imply that these terms call for specific local formulations. Their content would have to vary depending on the specific ways in which local groups mobilize knowledges, institutions, and organizational systems to determine their own present and futures in a nondominant way *vis-à-vis* other groups.

To conclude, I will dwell on the double sense in which the “making of place” must be understood. Indigenous delegates have managed to “make place”—carve out a space—for themselves within the U.N. system in a way that the attention directed toward their aspirations on the part of international institutions has risen dramatically in the last three decades. Of course, indigenous endeavors were aided by shifting debates on concepts such as “sovereignty” that are occurring at this particular historical moment, and that have made marginal “places” in the international legal imaginary emerge. At the same time, the representative legitimacy of the U.N. and its state-centric structure have

been questioned. In response to the strong lobbying efforts by NGOs in general, the U.N. has “made place” for NGOs within U.N. structures by changing accreditation processes before a number of conferences. These developments reached a peak with the open accreditation processes at the UNCED in 1992 which formally recognized the participation of about 1,500 NGOs. What is less known is that the WGIP was the unprecedented forerunner of this trend. Rules had been bent, and accreditation processes changed in 1982 “in order to open [the U.N.’s] doors to a large number of indigenous peoples’ representatives . . . in a unique mode of creative interaction ‘with the peoples’ ” (Stamatopoulou 1994:60–61). Indigenous delegates such as the Australian Aboriginal delegate Mick Dodson have called the WGIP a “small revolution in the U.N. system,” in that it is a highly visible platform that has “come to play a far more extensive role than its mandate would suggest” (Dodson 1998:62). The 1993 draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples has already now and despite major difficulties had a considerable impact on the world stage. Indeed, it is the proof that indigenous delegates have had the capacity to influence governments “to pursue or change policies not clearly in the government’s own interest” (Lâm 1992:604). Understood as a “soft law,” the draft Declaration is a document that lacks legal status. Nevertheless, “there is a strong expectation that [its] provisions will be respected and followed by the international community” (Posey and Dutfield 1996:120). At the same time, the concepts contained in the Declaration are circulating within international indigenous advocacy networks and have provided indigenous activists world-wide with an argumentative arsenal enabling them to voice their claims. Approved unanimously by the Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities in 1994, the Declaration has moved up the U.N. ladder to be approved by the higher organs of the institution. It, and in particular its references to indigenous peoples’ right to self-determination, is currently being hotly debated at the Open-ended Working Group on the U.N. draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, implemented by the Human Rights Commission in 1995. Even this Working Group, which under normal circumstances would have only allowed the attendance of a very limited number of indigenous NGOs, suspended its rules to allow any indigenous representative to speak in the forum. In July 2000, the U.N. General Assembly voted for the establishment of a permanent forum on indigenous issues on one of the highest levels of the U.N. hierarchy, that is, as a subsidiary organ of and an advisory body to the U.N. Economic and Social Council. The forum will have a strong decision making capacity and a series of other mandates the WGIP does not have. Again, indigenous delegates can participate in accordance with the procedures that had been applied at the WGIP. This is one of the many but surely not the last step taken by indigenous delegates in the international arena. And it is a significant continuation of the embryonic participatory democracy that is shaping the U.N., and changing the future of international law and politics today.

Notes

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1. The WGIP is situated under the U.N. Subcommission on the Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, which in turn reports to the U.N. Commission on Human Rights. It consists of five nonindigenous independent experts that are selected from the members of the Subcommission. Since 1984, it was open to indigenous groups, states, international organizations, as well as to scholars and other interested individuals. A draft U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples was debated at the WGIP for 12 years, and finalized in 1993, the year which was also declared the U.N. "International Year for the World's Indigenous Peoples." The draft Declaration is unprecedented in that "there has never been an international instrument discussed so intensely by the very people it is meant to benefit" (Burger 1994:92). On the limitations of the WGIP as a forum that cannot actually act upon gross human rights violations, see Manguashca 1994.

2. The emphasis on "culturalist" is important as the arguments that have been made by indigenous delegates are just as much legal and/or political. It is often not easy to analytically disentangle culturalist arguments from others made by indigenous representatives, but it is necessary in light of what is being analyzed in this article—the power of articulations of "culture" as a political tool on this international level.

My analysis is based on a selection and analysis of around half of the approximately one thousand official statements made by indigenous delegates at the U.N. WGIP since 1982, and on informal interviews I conducted at the Working Groups as well as at other conferences dealing with indigenous issues that I attended regularly between 1995 and 2000. The written interventions made by indigenous delegates at the WGIP are available at the Documentation Center for Indigenous Peoples (doCip) in Geneva, Switzerland.

3. "Territory" is used here rather than "land" as indigenous delegates lay claim to an all-encompassing space consisting not only of the land, but also its resources including water, the sea, the ice, the air, animals and plants, and so forth. I will use both "territory" and "land" interchangeably in this article.

4. The emphasis here is on claims, aims, and linkages, and not on the "authenticity" of the discourse used by indigenous delegates. This deconstructive move would risk trivializing much of what international indigenous activism is about. On the one hand, indigenous activism must be understood in light of the histories of oppression shared, and articulated as shared at the WGIP. On the other, indigenous self-representation must be understood in light of the fact that it is a transnational advocacy movement directing its politics toward a specific international legal constituency. This is, in the language of contemporary pragmatism, not an article on identities as essences, or identities and intrinsic qualities (Coombe 1998:226). It is also not an article about the "ambivalence of co-optation," as is the case in much of the work done on these issues (Raffles 1999:354). The highly organized and consistently voiced discourses are strategies of "place-making" that are difficult to trace and locate in their histories, origins and causalities as they are the result of a dynamic and complex movement of people, organizations, ideas, concepts, and keywords. These are processes that are much more complicated than what the meaning of co-optation entails. Like all "activists beyond borders" (Keck and Sikkink 1998) indigenous delegates have had to negotiate over time and agree upon the purposeful frames, effective symbols, and discursive strategies that have now come to characterize the transnational indigenous movement and its discourses. This article, then, is a pragmatic

one that “look[s] for purposes and effects, consequences and functions” (Coombe 1998:226–227).

5. This term was used by an indigenous delegate taking part in the deliberations of the global indigenous caucus at the 1997 WGIP.

6. Quote from an intervention by Moringe Parkipuny, a Maasai delegate from the KIPOC Organization of Pastoral Peoples in Tanzania, at the WGIP in 1991.

7. Quote from a statement made by Oren Lyons, a Joagquisho faithkeeper from the Onondaga Nation, at the 1977 Conference on Discrimination against Indigenous Populations, held at the U.N. in Geneva, Switzerland.

8. The 1977 U.N. NGO Conference called “Discrimination against Indigenous Populations in the Americas” recommended that a U.N. Working Group on Indigenous Peoples be established. A 1981 follow-up conference entitled “Indigenous Peoples and the Land,” as well as the founding of many indigenous NGOs worldwide increased the pressure on the U.N. to initiate the WGIP.

9. For more information see Wilmer (1993) and Burger (1994).

10. This points to the fact that the transnational indigenous advocacy network is made up of indigenous, but also nonindigenous voices such as scholars, government officials, and environmentalist and other advocacy movements. The language of indigenous delegates is thus part of a larger flow of interconnected global discourses, and feeds off and into broader global discursive trends produced and reproduced by new social movements in general. International peace movements, church-based organizations, feminist organizations, alternative development groups as well as, crucially, ecological movements are all posing epistemological challenges to capitalism, colonialism and neocolonialism, human rights, ecological abuses, and repressive state-systems while simultaneously propagating alternative political forms of action and organization worldwide (Ruiz 1992:4; see also Falk 1987).

11. A number of international legal instruments refer to the principle of self-determination of peoples, the first being the U.N. Charter of 1945. In 1960, the U.N. Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples made this principle a right. Two international covenants, both part of the International Bill of Rights which was born on the eve of World War II, refer to the right of peoples to self-determination, the first being the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the second being the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Both documents begin with “All peoples have the right to self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.”

12. Indigenous representatives have defined the term *peoples* as follows: “The term *peoples* is applicable to any group which is geographically and culturally distinct from the State administering its territory” (Quote from a statement given by a delegate from the Sante’ mawi’omi wjit mikmaq, Mikmaq Grand Council at the WGIP in 1987).

13. For a list of international conferences indigenous delegates have attended, and organizations they regularly lobby, see Tauli-Corpuz 1999.

14. In this light, the following statement is exemplary: “We ask the governments of industrial societies and the Working Group to extend their standards of human rights to include collective rights to an unpolluted environment when they think of the rights of indigenous peoples. We . . . want to urge the WGIP to recognize that for indigenous people, there is no separation of humans from environment, and that the standards of human rights must accommodate the relationship of human and environment. This is central to the identity of indigenous peoples and must be recognized if their survival, and indeed

the survival of the earth itself, is to be ensured. Inuit raise these concerns because there are fewer Inuit in the world than there are people in Geneva and we want to continue to survive” (Statement by the Inuit Circumpolar Conference at the WGIP in 1985).

15. The following is an example of this strand of thought: “On behalf of our mother the earth and all the great elements we come here and we say they too have rights. The future generations, our grandchildren and their grandchildren—it is our concern that they too may have clean water to drink, that they may observe our four-footed brothers and they may enjoy the elements that we too are so fortunate to have and that serve us as human beings” (Oren Lyons, Joagquisho faithkeeper from the Onondaga Nation, at the 1977 NGO Conference On Discrimination Against Indigenous Populations).

16. For a discussion of the drafting process and the notion of “cultural genocide” see Thornberry (1991:71).

17. Article 7 of the draft Declaration states that “Indigenous peoples have the collective and individual right not to be subjected to ethnocide and cultural genocide.”

18. Russell Barsh from the Sante’ Mawi’omi Wjit Mikmaq, Mikmaq Grand Council, at the WGIP in 1987.

19. Juan Condori Uruchi from the MINK’A organization, Bolivia, at the WGIP in 1982.

20. Sheila Watt-Cloutier from Nunavik in arctic Canada, speaking as the vice-president of the Inuit Circumpolar Conference.

21. Ultimately, however, the official U.N. report by the chairperson Erica-Irene Daes reflected indigenous peoples’ views. In fact, she would, in 1999, give a speech at the World Health Organization entitled “Land is Health, Oppression is Disease.” I thank Roger Begrich for this information.

22. “India has the largest human displacement rate in the world due to massive so-called projects like energy projects i.e., dams, mines, factories, industrialization, tourism, preservation of wild life sanctuaries and the defense establishment. . . . Indigenous peoples are deprived of their lands which results in inter-community conflicts. . . . Displacement of Indigenous people . . . results in the aberration of their culture and puts grave threats to their existence as one community” (Maria Mangte, Tribal Welfare Society in India at the 1997 WGIP).

23. Eusebio Condori, an Aymara delegate from Bolivia, at the WGIP in 1993.

24. Quote from Ram Dayal Munda from the Indigenous and Tribal Delegation from India at the WGIP in 1994.

25. Report on Treaties, Agreements, and other Constructive Arrangements between States and Indigenous Populations. Miguel Alfonso Martinez, 1998.

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