

Effectively Dealing With Indigenous Distinctiveness: Lessons From the United States

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Historically, the United States sought to integrate its indigenous peoples into mainstream society using tactics designed to weaken traditional cultures and re-educate their members in ways that reflect the national culture of the dominant majority. This strategy did not prove to be highly successful or equitable. When the United States abandoned (or at least reduced) such efforts, more effective and harmonious relationships with indigenous peoples emerged. These trends provide useful examples to other countries, regions, or intrusive organizations that seek to influence or transform distinctive minorities so they are better aligned with the dominant society and economy.

Keywords: Dawes Act, boarding schools, termination period, self-determinism, indigenous rights

INTRODUCTION

The United States (as many other countries) has a long history of dealing with indigenous peoples and distinctive minorities. Although the range of choices made by the United States have often been far from perfect and sometimes brutal, they showcase rival and evolving tactics that provide clues regarding an assortment of effective and ineffective strategies and tactics. An anthropological approach combined with a pragmatic orientation will be used to suggest policies that have the potential to be practical, effective, and equitable.

In a variety of ways, the United States has attempted to integrate its indigenous peoples into mainstream American society. A frequent tactic for doing so involves weakening or replacing the heritage and traditions of indigenous cultures in a quest to establish greater social harmony and economic productiveness. To this end, policies for undercutting or even exterminating existing beliefs and ways of life have often been implemented.

Alternatives to such agendas have also existed; on other occasions, the United States has acknowledged the value and legitimacy of local cultures and developed guidelines for strengthening them. As a result of these varied approaches, the United States can be viewed as a social, economic, and political laboratory where rival strategies and tactics regarding indigenous and distinctive peoples have been showcased. Other countries that seek appropriate strategies for dealing with similar situations can learn from this legacy of trial and error.

Disciplines such as anthropology and business anthropology have a significant role to play as strategies and tactics regarding indigenous/Native people are developed and evaluated. This paper does not deal with the full complexity of issues involving indigenous people (such as the full array of normative and ethical issues that invariably arise when such topics are discussed). The focus, in contrast, is upon developing

strategies that enhance and stabilize distinctive cultures in ways that encourage cooperation with the central Government or other powerful intruders.

INDIGENOUS POLICIES IN AMERICA: AN OVERVIEW

Indigenous peoples are mentioned in the United States Constitution: proof that they existed and were recognized before the country was established. In the early years of the United States, furthermore, the Supreme Court of Chief Justice John Marshall acknowledged the special status of the tribes (that were dealt with as subjugated nations that, nevertheless, retained certain rights). The foundational Supreme Court Decisions involving indigenous rights (*Johnson v. M'Intosh* 1823, *Cherokee Nation v. Georgia* 1831, *Worcester v. Georgia* 1832), conclude that the Indian nations existed before the founding of the United States and as a result they should continue to enjoy a range of authority. Because of this special status, the tribes are only subject to the United States Federal government, not the states within which they are located (although the details of such arrangements continue to be hotly contested).

The first six presidents of the United States respected the rights of American Indians who resided east of the Mississippi River as long as they practiced a way of life that fit in with the mainstream economy and society of the United States. Andrew Jackson, in contrast, demanded that many of the remaining Eastern Indians (such as the Cherokee) relocate west of the Mississippi River. Jackson's edict resulted in the brutal and shameful expulsion of the Cherokee in what has come to be called the Trail of Tears (Ehle 1988).

As time went on, the rights afforded to indigenous people were systematically reduced. Such policies continued throughout the rest of the 19th and early 20th centuries and, on occasion, have been reasserted in later times.

Once the economic and military power of the Indian peoples had been crushed (both east and west of the Mississippi River), the United States government sought strategies regarding how to transition these people into productive members of mainstream American society and economy. The initial approach, represented by the Dawes Act, sought to "Americanize" the Indians by replacing their heritage and traditions with attitudes, beliefs, and skills that were reflective of mainstream American life. Strategies included (1) providing economic incentives to those who acted in appropriate ways and (2) the Boarding School system that was designed to both weaken traditional indigenous cultures and socialize young children in ways that reflected mainstream America while simultaneously developing job skills.

After the election of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, new strategies for dealing with indigenous people were developed. The 1934 Indian Reorganization Act, for example, emphasized stabilizing, and encouraging tribal cultures and Nations (see Rusco 2000). The policy of snuffing out the heritage of the indigenous peoples was, for a time, suspended.

The era from the 1950s to the 1970s, in contrast, saw the rise of the so-called Termination Period (Getches, Wilkinson, Williams 2005) that sought to extinguish indigenous identities, rights, and even the existence of tribes as formally organized social and political entities. This initiative, however, was eventually replaced with a renewed emphasis upon self-determinism (Champagne 1997). This culturally friendly approach remains in effect today although debates and challenges remain.

By embracing an anthropological and culturally-oriented perspective, the full implications of rival policies and strategies supported by such decisions can be evaluated. Key topics of discussion include the relationship between (1) the degree to which people are able to maintain their identities and heritage, on the one hand, and (2) their degree of loyalty to and/or their willingness to cooperate with the central government, on the other.

THE DAWES ACT

By the late 19th century, the Indian Wars in the American West were drawing to a close, and the United States needed strategies for dealing with indigenous communities and nations that had been socially, culturally, and economically disrupted. Clues regarding how the federal government hoped to do so can be gleaned by reviewing the Dawes Act of 1887 (Carlson 1981). The government appears to have been

concerned with two aspects of Indian life: one from the past with the other looking towards the future. Many of the tribes of the Great Plains had long lived a nomadic life of subsistence hunting and gathering that required a large and diverse territory that was undisrupted, unregulated, and available to all. Other indigenous peoples engaged in communal farming supplemented by hunting.

These indigenous lifestyles and economic strategies conflicted with the emerging settlement patterns and economic strategies employed by the 19th Century immigrants who established privately owned farms that were managed as independent economic units. Subsistence hunters and gatherers were not welcomed on these lands. This new settlement pattern made the region unsuitable for subsistence hunting, gathering, and the type of agriculture long practiced by the indigenous people.

After the Indian Wars, furthermore, many survivors were sent to Reservations. Defeated and denied their traditional way of life, many people quickly sunk into desperation, despair, and alcoholism. As a result, the people came to rely upon the Bureau of Indian Affairs for the essentials of life. Not only were conditions horrific, the reservations drained the financial resources of the central government. To address these problems, strategies were developed to (1) wean the Indians away from their now defunct traditional ways of life in order to (2) reduce government subsidies by (3) providing tribal members with economic motivators to embrace the new economic and social realities. The Dawes Act arose under these conditions.

The overt purpose of the Dawes Act was to provide incentives for tribal members to assimilate. It did so by granting eligible Indians an allotment of land outside of the Reservations that could be farmed in the conventional Westernized manner (that immigrants had introduced). To further integrate these people, Indians who accepted the land and moved off the reservation were granted full United States citizenship.

The United States government was motivated to enact this law because it (1) favored eliminating tribal and communal land ownership, (2) sought to assimilate the Indians into mainstream American society, (3) in ways that raised them out of poverty and, thereby, (4) reduced the federal government's financial obligations to the tribes.

There are, of course, other implications and/or hidden agendas. Thus, after the eligible Indians claimed the land they wanted, the United States felt free to sell the so-called "surplus land" to non-indigenous settlers. The inequities and the self-serving implications of these actions have long been noted. In any event, the Dawes Act is an example of the United States government engaging in social engineering aimed at undercutting the traditional heritage of the people so tribal members would better fit into mainstream American society and become "productive" citizens.

The Dawes Act, however, has been criticized for exerting hurtful side effects including undercutting the social links and relationships between members of indigenous communities. Regrettably, many who accepted the offer of land failed because they were not adequately prepared for mainstream life and conventional farming. Those who stayed on the reservation, furthermore, faced conditions that were increasingly harsh.

THE BOARDING SCHOOLS

While the Dawes Act was largely an example of economic intervention, other strategies of the United States Government were overt exercises in social engineering designed to strip people of their heritage in order to transform them into clones of the mainstream society. In the words of Captain Richard H. Pratt, the goal was to "Kill the Indian, Save the man" (1892).

Pratt made this statement as the superintendent of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School at Carlisle, Pennsylvania. In some ways, Pratt was advocating a humane alternative to brutal and inhumane sentiments such as "A good Indian is a dead Indian", because the basic humanity of the Indian people was recognized. By justifying, extolling, and even glorifying cultural genocide, however, such policies have dark and hurtful implications. Largely embracing the Pratt model, a network of Boarding Schools funded by the Federal government arose to bring American civilization to the younger generations of indigenous communities.

During the Boarding School era that stretched from the 19th century until the 1960s, children were removed from their homes (and denied parental and cultural influences) in order for the schools to systemically undercut the students' culture and heritage. The overt goal was to socialize these young people

in the image of mainstream American society. Tactics included destroying the indigenous possessions the students brought to the school, forcing to wear mainstream clothes, and demanding that they receive mainstream haircuts. Speaking indigenous languages was forbidden and punished. Those who retained and exhibited remnants of their traditional heritage were shamed. English and Christian names replaced their indigenous counterparts. Religious conversion to Christianity was encouraged. The process involved coercing the students to abandon their indigenous heritage and identities. The long term goal was for these “Americanized” Indians to return home, emerge as the next generation of tribal leaders, and transform their communities accordingly. By encouraging such trends, the United States hoped the old ways would fade as the older generations died.

This approach was not as successful as it might have been. Being caught between two worlds, graduates of the boarding schools often became alienated, psychologically dysfunctional, and prone to maladies such as alcoholism. Ironically, many graduates reasserted their indigenous identity and used the knowledge they gained at school to challenge the very system they had been groomed to support (Walle personal communication 2022). Because the schools continued to operate until the 1960s, many alumni of the Boarding Schools remain active.

CULTURAL GENOCIDE IS RELAXED

In the 1920s, Lewis Meriam was commissioned to oversee investigations regarding the social and economic conditions of the American Indian peoples. The report regarding this research was highly critical of the Dawes Act. Among other objections, The Meriam Report (Meriam 1928) complained that the Dawes Act had taken large sections of land that had been collectively owned by the tribes and transferred them to individual tribal members who, thereby, had to pay taxes that otherwise would not have been due. When land was transferred to individuals outside of a tribal context, furthermore, it lost legal protections that a tribal connection would have maintained. Other lands, not immediately claimed by tribal members were sold to the general public.

Ultimately, many indigenous people lost their individual landholdings and large sections of communal Indian territories fell out of indigenous ownership and control. The Meriam Report concluded that the quality of life on the Reservations continued to spiral downward. Thus, Meriam depicted the Dawes Act as a failure and as a counterproductive force.

Progress was made, however, when Franklin Delano Roosevelt, became President in 1933 and appointed John Collier as the Commission of Indian Affairs (serving from 1933 to 1945). Collier is closely associated with the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, that reversed Federal policies designed to actively and forcefully assimilate the indigenous peoples of the United States. Collier (Schwartz (1994) was a social scientist, not a professional politician. Under his leadership, the Indian Reorganization of 1934 was passed. The full title of the Act demonstrates its breadth:

An Act to conserve and develop Indian lands and resources; to extend to Indians the right to form business and, other organizations; to establish a credit system for Indians; to grant certain rights of home rule to Indians; to provide for vocational education for Indians; and for other purposes.

The act was not perfect; it and Collier have their detractors (see Giago 2009). The complaint has been made, for example, that white politicians, not members of the Indian community, were instrumental in developing its policies and strategies. Nevertheless, this new law largely reversed the excesses of the Dawes Act and it was designed to strengthen the power of local tribal governments. Efforts were made to draft tribal constitutions and affirm tribal court systems. The Act encouraged tribes to do so in writing.

During this period, the policy of selling tribal lands to outsiders ended and many tribes re-acquired lands that had been lost. A significant aspect of the Act involved preserving and developing tribal lands and resources and providing tribes with greater control over their own affairs.

As a result of these policies, many indigenous peoples (and individuals) became more comfortable with the United States government and less threatened by it. Situations, of course, did not universally improve,

but a degree of progress emerged. Collier remained on the job and his policies continued to dominate until his retirement in 1945 and for a short time thereafter.

THE TERMINATION PERIOD

After this era of greater autonomy for tribal peoples, the situation was reversed with the rise of the Termination Period that dominated from the late 1940s until the early 1970s. The appointment of Dillon Meyer as the new Commissioner of Indian Affairs in 1950 was an indication of things to come. Meyer first gained public attention as the head of the United States War Relocation Authority that was responsible for removing Japanese Americans from their homes and placing them in internment camps during World War 2. In this position, he undercut the rights of a racially distinct group of United States citizens in accordance with the national policies of the era.

Meyer served in a similar manner as head of the Bureau of Indian Affairs from 1950 until 1953 (when he resigned because Democratic President Harry Truman who appointed him was replaced by Dwight D. Eisenhower, a Republican). The era he influenced (that lasted until the early 1970s) is known as the Termination Period of American Indian history. Basically, the goal of the central government was to fully integrate the American Indians into mainstream American life by, among other things, extinguishing the existence of tribes as formal political entities and putting an end to the special rights and privileges enjoyed by indigenous people.

Actions that Meyer took or attempted to take include: (1) withdrawing federal recognition of tribes, (2) relocating individuals to urban centers where more mainstream jobs were available, (3) abandoning educational and agricultural extension responsibilities and transferring them to the states, and (4) closing down health centers that serve Indians. The tribes and their members correctly reasoned that they, their indigenous heritage, and even their status as distinctive people were under attack.

Myer supported termination so avidly that Harold Ickes (longtime Secretary of the Interior under President Roosevelt and a strong advocate of civil rights for all) referred to Myer as “a Hitler and Mussolini rolled into one” (Prucha 1984). During this period, the American Indian Movement (AIM), a civil rights activist organization that sometimes relied upon extreme and violent tactics, emerged as a powerful force with leaders such as Dennis Banks, Russell Means, and the Bellcourt brothers emerging as figureheads who embraced different philosophies and advocated rival tactics. In any event, an indigenous movement that sometimes resorted to conflict and violence arose in ways that responded to bureaucratic attacks upon indigenous people and cultures that emerged during the Termination Period.

THE ERA OF SELF-DETERMINISM

As time went on, the failure of the Termination policies became apparent. In addition, highly organized campaigns against termination policies emerged, such as those developed by the American Indian Movement. As a result, questions arose regarding the appropriateness of systematically and unilaterally extinguishing the tribal rights of indigenous peoples. This trend led to a shift away from strategies based on (1) tribal extinction coupled with (2) the complete cultural assimilation of indigenous peoples. A new era of strengthening tribes and encouraging self-determinism was on the horizon.

An early indication regarding a willingness to extend rights to indigenous peoples came in 1968 with the passage of the “Indian Civil Rights Act” that guarantees that on Indian land tribal members would enjoy the full rights guaranteed to people by the United States Constitution. President Richard Nixon, in particular, emerged as a strong champion of indigenous rights. In 1970, for example, he observed in his “Special Message on Indian Affairs”:

Forced termination is wrong... First, the premises on which it rests are wrong. ... second... the practical results have been clearly harmful... third... concerns the effect it has had upon the overwhelming majority of tribes... We are proposing to break sharply with past approaches to Indian problems.

The growing popularity of such sentiments resulted in the Indian Self-Determinism Act being passed in 1975. This law, harkening back to the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, sought to strengthen the tribes in ways that went far beyond that earlier law. The 1975 act granted greater autonomy and responsibility to tribes in regard to programs and services administered by the Department of the Interior. The Act also emphasized that tribes would be more directly involved in deciding how the central government would provide services to indigenous communities.

Although Richard Nixon was a member of the Republican Party, the Rival Democratic Party also advocated greater rights, autonomy, and self-determinism for indigenous tribes. In 1994, for example, Democratic president Bill Clinton distributed the executive memorandum "Government-to-Government Relations with Native American Tribal Governments" which states "the United States government has a unique legal relationship with Native American tribal governments" based on laws and treaties. In addition, years later Clinton issued the executive order entitled "Consultation and Coordination with Indian Tribal Governments" (November 6, 2000) that demanded tribes have greater involvement when decisions regarding them are being made. Such advances demonstrate the degree to which the United States central government pulled back from dominating indigenous peoples. The emerging policies ceased to be centered around the goal of dismantling indigenous political organizations, cultures, and traditions.

Today, the vast majority of American Indians and their tribes, while working hard to maximize their benefits and special rights, pose little threat or challenge to the United States. While emphasizing that they are distinct and independent, most tribes simultaneously accept that they are part of and subject to a larger and more powerful nation (the United States). This tends to be true even when the status quo and specific situations are criticized and lamented. Some more militant activists, (largely holdovers from the Termination Period) survive but they are not in the mainstream. The tribes and tribal members (individually and collectively) jockey for power and position just as other vested interest groups routinely do; these actions, however, are characterized by working within the system. As a result, indigenous communities pose little threat to the central government.

This is true even if the advocates for indigenous Americans are on the lookout for abuses to correct and opportunities to pursue. A classic discussion of such fears is presented in Elizabeth Cook-Lynn's seminal article "Who Stole Native American Studies?" (1997). Cook-Lynn complains that on many occasions, outsiders and those with self-serving interests have coopted thinking originally devised to serve Native people and used it for their own purposes. She argues that such trends should be resisted.

THE LESSONS

First, it must be emphasized that the policies of the United States regarding indigenous people are imperfect works in progress that are still in the process of being developed and fine-tuned. The fact that advances have been made, furthermore, does not undue the insensitive and hurtful actions of the past.

Nevertheless, lessons can be learned from the experiences of the United States. They include:

1. The undermining or destruction of tribes and their cultural heritage tends to trigger internal dysfunction and can serve as a catalyst leading to opposition to the central government. When the United States sought to extinguish indigenous cultures, traditions, and tribal governments, the resulting psychological dysfunction (1) tended to add increased public sector costs and (2) reduce the productivity of indigenous communities. When indigenous people believe the actions of the central government are unfair and hurtful, furthermore, their loyalty to it decreases.
2. Immediately after the Indian Wars of the late 19th Century, many tribes and their members were alienated and disheartened in the belief that their way of life was under attack by forces beyond their control. Under the policies associated with President Franklin D. Roosevelt, in contrast, indigenous people began to believe that the central government was emerging less of a threat to their heritage and way of life. During the Termination period that followed, however, many indigenous tribes concluded, once again, that the central government was unwilling to provide equitable and culturally sensitive treatment that bolstered their heritage. Such attitudes led to

the growth of resistance, such as the American Indian Movement, and its adversarial and militant initiatives, some of which were violent and disruptive.

3. The end of the Termination Period led to the contemporary era in which the central government encourages a greater degree of self-determinism among indigenous peoples and a greater respect for their cultural heritage. Under these conditions, resistance to the central government and disruptive opposition to it has declined.
4. When policies have been friendly and more equitable towards indigenous communities, the tribes and their members have tended to be more cooperative and willing to accept outside authority. Although these people continue to challenge the government in the quest for maximum rights and privileges, such actions increasingly take place within established and sanctioned legal frame-works (such as structured negotiation and the court system). As a result, these efforts pose fewer threats to the central government and lead to less disruptions.

These observations are graphically presented in Table 1.

**TABLE 1
LESSONS FROM THE UNITED STATES**

ISSUE	ANALYSIS
Cultural Stress	Cultures are put under great stress when they endure attempts to undercut or diminish their heritage. They are likely to (1) become weakened and less productive and/or (2) develop hostility to the central government.
Triggers for Opposition	When people fear that their heritage, beliefs, culture, religion, etc. are under attack, they are more likely to rise in opposition to the threat.
Reducing Resistance	When the people's heritage, beliefs, religion, etc. are perceived to be at less risk, resistance to the central government tends to decline.
Building Loyalty	Loyalty and cooperation can be built by reducing threats and demonstrating to people that their way of life is not threatened,
DISCUSSION	
When building relationships with indigenous peoples and distinctive groups, it appears that "less is more." By less, we mean reduced control over people and their way of life. By more, we mean increased loyalty, cooperation or at least tolerance of the central government, enhanced productiveness, and stronger mental/social wellbeing.	

Over the years, the United States has dealt with its indigenous people in a variety of ways. In general, when the government has attempted to tightly control indigenous people and strip them of their cultural heritage, the result has been increased resistance. When the central government chooses policies that acknowledge and strengthen indigenous cultures, (1) the loyalty to and cooperation towards the central government tends to rise, (2) less social and individual dysfunction is experienced, (3) while the community and its members emerge as increasingly productive.

GENERALIZING THE OBSERVATIONS

The United States is not the only country to face obstacles when dealing with its indigenous and distinctive peoples; many countries face parallel challenges. One legitimate concern is the need for sovereign nations to protect themselves and ensure that their authority is not improperly challenged. From an operational point of view, how can this goal be most effectively achieved?

Over the years, the United States has experimented with a number of conflicting strategies when dealing with its indigenous peoples. On some occasions, the dominant methods have focused upon strong

governmental interventions designed to systematically weaken indigenous people, their political authority, and their cultural heritage.

The basic strategy for doing so has often involved some sort of “re-education” of people when they failed to adequately mesh with the dominant society. The logic for doing so was based on the assumption that if people are socialized to accept the prevailing status quo of the dominant society, they will be less opposed to it. The intended results of the process are greater harmony and a more homogeneous population that will be less prone to conflict and tension. These were the apparent goals of the Dawes Act, the Boarding School movement, and the Termination period within the United States. Such strategies and tactics did not prove to be particularly effective.

During other eras, policies designed to nurture and strengthen the distinctive cultures of indigenous people appear to have reduced hurtful tensions between indigenous people and the central government. In a manner that may seem to be counterintuitive, when indigenous people gain greater rights and autonomy, they tend to emerge as increasingly loyal to the dominant society and more willing to abide by its demands. When attempts have been made to reduce these rights and/or weaken the culture, in contrast, increased tensions and resistance have often arisen.

Countries, such as Brazil and China, might want to consider the lessons that can be learned from examining the experiences of the United States. Like the United States, Brazil and China have a large number of indigenous peoples that exhibit distinctive cultures, economies, beliefs, religions, and ways of life. In Brazil such people are referred to as “Uncontacted Tribes” of the Amazon (River); in China they are labeled “Ethnic Minorities”.

Over the years, unfortunately, Brazil and China have experienced difficulties in dealing with some of their indigenous populations. Apparently, central governments have felt that if these groups (1) are given too much freedom or (2) if they venture too far from the mainstream, disruptive conflict will be the result. To counter such potentials, governments sometimes take forceful steps to control or eliminate indigenous distinctiveness. Such actions include various tactics that parallel, in some ways, the failed policies that the United States once used when dealing with its indigenous tribes.

Although all nations have a legitimate right to protect their sovereignty and to encourage economic development, they need to choose alternatives that are both effective and humane. In this regard, the United Nations issued the “Declaration of Rights of Indigenous Peoples” as a non-binding resolution in 2007. The resolution states that Indigenous peoples have a right to maintain and strengthen their cultures traditions and institutions. It also emphasizes that indigenous people have the right to pursue economic development in ways that are meaningful to them. It prohibits discrimination against indigenous peoples and acknowledges that they should be active participants in affairs that concern them. Thus, not only does the example of the United States suggest that providing additional authority to indigenous people is effective and mutually beneficial, doing so is also normative, moral, and in accordance with the standards set by the United Nations

The example of the United States appears to indicate that distinctive peoples will gain increased loyalty to the central government if they are allowed to embrace their cultures, heritage, religions, etc. with limited interference from the central government. With reference to the “less is more” mode of evaluation, less control and coercion can lead to more loyalty and cooperation.

When the past failures and the United States regarding indigenous peoples are compared with the more positive results associated with reducing governmental coercion and intervention, clues emerge that other countries can use when seeking effective and equitable strategies regarding indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities living under their jurisdiction.

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL SCIENCE

The assumption is sometimes made that cultural harmony and reduced tensions will emerge if the population of a country is largely homogeneous in regard to beliefs, attitudes, and so forth. Those who harbor such opinions can easily conclude that governmental policies that groom distinctive people to merge with the larger population are beneficial. Ironically, such initiatives can actually increase tensions and

reduce the loyalty of indigenous people because if the central governments that seek to strip people of their heritage can easily be viewed as enemies.

The United States long dealt with these problems using trial and error. Today, it has abandoned strategies that aim to homogenize indigenous populations; by doing so a greater degree of self-determinism is encouraged. By doing so, a significant source of tension and opposition has been reduced.

Although significant disagreements remain, differences tend to be pursued in peaceful ways using recognized legal and political techniques to settle differences. As a result, indigenous peoples feel less threatened by the central government and, in tandem, the central government has less to fear from indigenous peoples.

THE DONG: A CASE STUDY

Even when ruling with a heavy hand that fails to be culturally sensitive, governmental leaders tend to have good intentions. Such decision makers, furthermore, are usually capable and effective within their own spheres of expertise. When they venture beyond their range of proficiency, unfortunately, unintended and hurtful mistakes or miscalculations potentially arise. The example of the Dong, a distinctive ethnic minority in China serves as a good example of this possibility.

The Dong are a group of people in China who over centuries of trial and error developed an economy based on tree farming coupled with subsistence agriculture (Luo and Walle 2014). The trees were allowed to grow for eight years before being cut down as a cash crop. After the trees were harvested, the land would be farmed for food crops for two or three years until the fertility of the soil began to decline. After that, the land would be used to farm trees once again in a never-ending cycle. Because the Dong had many plots of trees, a constant supply of its cash crop was always available. The farm land, furthermore, was sustained because it was able to periodically “rest” and regained its fertility during the tree production phase. This folk method of production was efficient, sustainable, and renewable.

The economic planners from the central government, unfortunately were not social scientists with an eye towards cultural and economic distinctiveness. They had formal training in the economics of the modern world. As a result, they believed that eliminating tree farming and putting all the land into food production was the most effective and beneficial strategy. These recommendations were implemented. The optimistic projections of bountiful harvests initially proved to be accurate.

Because the land was unable to regenerate its fertility during the tree growing phase of the cycle, unfortunately, the yields quickly declined. In addition, the new methods of agriculture led to significant erosion of the farmland. Not only was the food supply reduced, the people no longer had a dependable cash crop to take to market.

The moral of this case study is that on many occasions, outsiders and mainstream governmental officials or consultants lack a subtle understanding regarding distinctive people and their way of life. Although the Dong example centers upon economic issues, equal concern needs to be embraced with dealing with a wide range of cultural and emotional characteristics. As a result, mainstream policy makers and consultants potentially lack the insights needed to make informed decisions about distinctive peoples.

CONCLUDING STATEMENT

Social scientists, such as applied anthropologists and business anthropologists, have a vital role to play when social and economic policies involving indigenous people policies are developed. In the past, a common tactic involved seeking to homogenize distinctive people so they would be reflective of the National Character of the country in which they lived. Strategies that seek to strip people of their heritage, however, have the potential to trigger a hurtful backlash. An alternative involves the central government accepting that indigenous peoples are distinctive and recognizing that these differences are not necessarily a threat to be challenged and opposed.

Because social scientists possess insights and skills regarding indigenous people and the complexities of their cultures, they are in a position to help central governments forge effective strategies that are

harmonious, equitable, and sustainable, and mutually beneficial. By doing so, they can reduce tensions and build cooperation in the hinterland and elsewhere.

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