

***Contemporary Society: Tribal Studies. Volume Five, Concept of Tribal Society*¹
Edited by Georg Pfeffer² and Deepak Kumar Behera³**

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This is a review of a new book entitled *Concept of Tribal Society*. Printed in New Delhi, India, the book would not normally reach many bookshelves of scholars in the United States unless it was specially highlighted. Thus, this review focuses on what is and is not contained in the book and what portions may be most useful to U.S. scholars who are interested in tribal society. In the U.S. tribal society is mostly like to mean Native American studies, but given that hundreds of thousands of people of tribal backgrounds who are from countries around the world currently reside in the U.S. the book may also be of use to scholars who study the ethnic identities of relocated peoples.

The concept of "tribe" has been discussed in, and has framed, anthropological studies for hundreds of years. During this time acceptance of the appropriateness and utility of the concept has varied widely. Some scholars have even tried to remove the concept completely from anthropological analysis; others have tried to greatly narrow the concept, making it all but useless in terms of its initial explanatory function. Despite its apparent weaknesses and many critiques the concept persists. In fact, given the current saliency of tribal relationships in Afghanistan and Iraq it seems that tribal people will not permit others to diminish the concept's validity. Both of these modern nation-states should have greatly diminished pre-existing tribal socio-political organization and identity, according to past scholarly thinking about the social changes concomitant with the rise of the nation-state. In fact, if such thinking was correct, these very old nations should have long since completely eliminated their more ancient tribal relationships and identities. Instead we see a contemporary secular dictator of Iraq framing his image as a powerful leader via a statute of himself wearing tribal clothing. So what is this concept of "tribe" that remains so persistent? Is it a concept that some kinds of traditional peoples use to contrast themselves with the functions of the nation-state and is, thus, more of a function of national pressures on local minority groups than the persistence of a former kind of pre-national social organization? If the term "tribe" is used in contemporary social debates about identity and scholarly analysis, does it actually convey common social, cultural, and identity characteristics

despite where it is being used? Potentially this book, and others in the *Contemporary Society: Tribal Studies* series of books of which it is the fifth volume, address some of these questions.

Concept of Tribal Society is an edited book with 17 chapters and an extensive Introduction. The book is divided into two parts; the first section, entitled "South Asia," is primarily about the contemporary tribal issues in the nation of India. The second section, entitled "Tribal Studies Abroad" (presumably abroad from the nation of India), contains tribal case studies from Iran, East Africa, Maine, Nebraska, Appalachia, and Mexico. The book's Introduction reviews how the concept of tribe has been debated by scholars and national governments and how the concept of tribal has national recognition and resource implications in India. This is an important point for understanding the persistence of the concept of tribe in a modern nation-state; it is unfortunate that a similar discussion was not developed for other nations represented in the book. This point alone could have given us some understanding of why the concept persists. While the Introduction provides a thorough review of the scholarly debate of tribe, it fails to address a very key issue – tribal people themselves often find the term "tribe" useful for conveying how they feel about themselves as a socio-polity entity and the robust value this term provides tribal people in their effort to contrast their lives and identities from others.

The book has no photographs and desperately lacks maps to guide the international reader to all these places in the world. A section on the contributors is valuable given their varied academic locations and backgrounds. The Table of Contents contains only authors and chapter titles and the index is short; a reader needs to read a specific chapter to get at its contents. Each chapter has a list of references and many have extensive footnotes. It is an academically orientated work which is technically solid.

The 17 chapters are case studies of tribal societies. Taken together they address a range of issues surrounding the concept of tribe while providing interesting local histories and ethnographic

descriptions of specific tribes. Chapters that comprise the "South Asia" section mostly include essays on India in a deliberate thematic attempt to illustrate the kinds of tribes in that nation. The other tribal chapters in the "South Asia" section do not contribute to any obvious themes other than serving to provide more local cases from the region. The 8 chapters in the "Tribal Societies Abroad" section have single cases from Afghanistan, Iran, and East Africa, and five chapters from the United States and Mexico. While the cases from Afghanistan and Iran potentially could be the foundation for knowing about tribal issues in that geographic region, they only address narrower issues. Tribalism in East Africa simply cannot be addressed in a single essay. So, while each essay individually conveys understandings about a particular area, these chapters remain not integrated in either the book or among themselves.

Scholars from the U.S. will probably find the most value in the five essays on tribes in North America. Among these essays are two strong studies of three specific Indian ethnic groups – the Micmacs, the Winnebago, and the Omaha. Van Horn's essay points out the need to distinguish between ethnic groups and tribes. Here we see that the Micmacs share language and culture but differ in part because of the nation-states in which they reside. Thus their status as Indian people and as organized social units varies depending in part on whether they live in Canada or in the United States. Van Horn's analysis focuses on two culturally specific Micmac characteristics, cooperation and individualism. Such characteristics exist in all human societies but receive different emphasis and definition among the Micmacs, thus helping to define them as a unique ethnic group. The extent to which such characteristics are shared among other Native American ethnic groups or tribes is not addressed. Suzuki's analysis is of the Winnebago and Omaha reservations in Nebraska. Today these tribes have separate legal and social identities, even though they derive from a common ethnic group. Suzuki's uses the prosecution of an Indian criminal case to illustrate how difficult it is to uniformly enforce national laws because of important differences in tribal conditions. The generalization that derives from this analysis is that "Indian Country" (which usually means those portions of North America that Indian tribes still control) is not a single place, even though federal law attempts to be equally present and applied. Clearly, tribal issues such as these exist in the U.S. and are addressed by this paper. Kohler's analysis of tribal people in Mexico

views them in the context of yet another North American nation. Here, more like Canada than the U.S., native peoples have been considered less sovereign. Unlike Canada, which has tended to not recognize aboriginal territorial rights and translate them into reservations and Indian Claims Commission repayments as has occurred in the U.S., native peoples were given semi-sovereign territories called *ejidos*. Kohler suggests that contemporary tribal identities derive in part from portions of traditional culture and language that survived Spanish/Mexican national occupation of Indian lands and people. His analysis also suggests that ethnic identities are useful tools for defining the "national other" and strengthening group solidarity in conflict situations. Gregory's analysis, which suggests that the people of Appalachia can best be understood as tribal groups, is perhaps theoretically the most important of the entire collection. If his arguments are agreed to by the other authors of this book, then the concepts of tribe, tribalism, and tribal identity have been greatly broadened and even redefined. If being tribal means living in a society with an emphasis on kinship, a cultural centrality for religion, extreme power differentials, value differences with the national society, alternative motivational patterns, distrust of outsiders and even of each other, and a great deal of difficulty achieving meaningful communication, then many peoples in the world are tribal. While I do not believe that Gregory made his point (for example, the people of Appalachia do not see themselves as tribal – a criterion that the people of all the other cases seem to meet), the attempt to add people to the category of "tribal" should sharpen the definition more than just talking about the lives of yet another group of people who are uncontested as being tribal peoples. It is unfortunate that all the other authors did not engage Gregory's arguments and tell him what "tribal" means, thus achieving the purpose of the book as well as its integration.

Notes

1. New Delhi, India: Concept Publishing Company, 2002. 424 pages: introduction, two sections, seventeen chapters, bibliography, index, notes on contributors. Cloth, \$38.00 U.S.

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