

## Book Review

Ismael Abu-Saad and Duane Champagne, eds.  
*Indigenous Education and Empowerment: International Perspectives*  
Lanham MD: Altamira Press, 2006

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

In 1597, Francis Bacon famously declared that “knowledge is power.” He was quite wrong. Power is power, which is to say that ownership and control of the means of production confers economic power, and control of the instruments of the state bestows political power. All else is cosmetics. Were it otherwise, societies would be controlled by scholars and saints, which hardly ever happens.

That said, knowledge is not without value. It can provide a solid base for understanding who we are and why we are in a certain circumstance. Knowledge may not enable us to overcome obstacles, but at least it can help us to identify them clearly, determine who has erected them and perhaps begin to dismantle or find a way around them. That would help.

*Indigenous Education and Empowerment* provides a substantial array of probes into the circumstances and the obstacles facing indigenous peoples. The product of a conference held in the Ben-Gurion University of the Negev in Israel with the able assistance of the Native Nations Law and Policy Center at the University of California at Los Angeles, it brings together scholars and activists mainly from North America, but also from Israel, New Zealand and the Philippines, who address issues of importance to indigenous people in their home and neighbouring countries.

The contributions are of uniformly high quality—both in terms of academic merit and practical analysis and advice. Of necessity, the subject matter concerns what might fruitfully be called the fundamentals of empowerment, namely the acquisition of control over cultural matters and questions of identity. Colonialism is largely a matter of breaking up indigenous social arrangements, marginalizing populations within the context of a newly dominant political economy, either destroying or co-opting local leaders and institutions, and undermining the arts, customs, languages, mores and religious traditions that once gave coherence to people’s lives. In the blunt words of Kurt Vonnegut, it has mainly to do with “busting up cultures.”

Once colonization is complete, efforts to win back political autonomy, economic self-sufficiency and cultural integrity are either suppressed or distorted, so that even new states that have succeeded in achieving the minimal elements of national self-determination and sovereignty regularly find themselves victims of neo-colonialism, and discover that their newly independent states are governed in accordance within a pattern of corruption and incompetence that rivals the conditions undergone in the prior period of abject imperialism.

Recovering from the legacy of colonialism is a difficult project for former colonies which at least have the basic instruments of governance at their disposal; nonetheless, the “third world” contains numerous stories of success where enlightened leadership and an energized population work coherently to forge a new path toward freedom and prosperity. Of course, an abundance of valued natural resources and an amply skilled and diligent population doesn’t hurt either.

The peoples considered in this book are not in that potentially promising position. They include North American first nations, Maoris and Tongans, Palestinians and the indigenous peoples of northern Luzon in the Philippine archipelago. Absent a prompt and responsible solution to the Israeli-Palestinian question, none of these groups are apt to achieve national independence and few are likely to win substantial political autonomy in the very near future.

A prior step must be taken, which is the reclamation of a cultural identity that is essential to any serious political, economic and social progress apart from accepting assistance from the very power structure that imposed cultural domination in the first place.

In the quest for empowerment, the authors have some significant things to say and some pragmatic suggestions about taking the first steps toward cultural recovery. Perhaps the most important is that no matter how much the hegemony of the dominant society may appear, and no matter how clearly the common objective measures of oppression might be (high poverty levels, low education rates, high crime and incarceration statistics, addiction and domestic violence statistics and all the other markers of a failed society), most indigenous populations retain the core elements of their traditional ways of living just outside the gaze of government officials and administrators. Traditional relationships to their land, to their heritage and to each other may not be recognized by the industrial capitalist ideology of the larger society, but are essential to cultural restoration.

An important early lesson, too, is the recognition that although there are experiential commonalities among indigenous peoples, as there are among the dominant cultures, there is a tremendous amount of diversity as well. A “one-size-fits-all” model of cultural regeneration of native peoples is simply not useful.

Instead, it is more instructive to gauge commonalities among the various strategies for assimilation that have been attempted by colonial, neocolonial or internal colonial administrations as a basis for identifying the kind of instruments which pose the greatest barrier to aboriginal empowerment.

Turning to the contributions of some of the specific authors, the main purpose of most of the articles is not to advocate independent and therefore isolated schooling, but it is to ensure indigenous power over curriculum and pedagogy while linking to Western academic formats without losing either community control or traditional knowledge. This requires considerable skill in walking fine lines. It also involves the superficially paradoxical project of learning new ways to teach old lessons. Innovation in the recovery of indigenous knowledge as a means to recover from colonial subjugation is no easy matter to formulate, much less to implement.

Successful discussion of these issues is presented by James V. Fenelon and Dorothy LeBeau, who present a method for integrating Lakota and Dakota skills, knowledge and holistic philosophical concepts to both traditional and modern schooling. At issue are ways of dealing with culture and dominance, including the matter of cultural genocide. Shifting attention to the south, Sylvia Marcos shows how indigenous women in Mexico have used an understanding of their own epistemology to help regain control over their culture and history despite indifference or open hostility of the larger society to their culture and traditions. Among the Dene of northern Canada, C. D. James Paci explains how education has assisted native peoples to press their perspectives and interpretation of aboriginal treaty rights within the institutions of the colonial authorities including administrative, legislative and judicial authorities. Although the process has not been without its set-backs, a remarkable record of success is being built and, of great international interest, circumpolar associations, places at the table to develop international treaties and work through the United Nations has brought aboriginal rights fully into the global discourse on human rights, with a growing number of practical benefits accruing to indigenous peoples.

Each of the contributors deals with a different issue and inevitably represents different outlooks, understandings and approaches. This inevitable diversity suggests not confusion or contradiction for necessary diversity. Their work goes a long way toward building the principled foundation for political action and a fundamentally new set of relations that will surely transform postcolonialism from a fashionable academic exercise to a powerful coalition of forces whose task will be to deconstruct centuries of abuse and to reconstruct patterns of colonialism, neocolonialism and internal colonialism.

### **About the Author**

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