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Imagining American Indians and Community in Southeast Asia: Resistance, Experience, and History

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Abstract

Although geographically distant, the histories of Indigenous North America and Southeast Asia contain a series of parallels in colonial experience. This article traces these historical similarities between these two geographic regions in colonial and counter-colonial movements. It then focuses on American Indians and Indigenous communities in the Philippines and Indonesia and their perceptions of one another, recorded during fieldwork by the authors in Southeast Asia and the United States. Additionally, it elaborates on the similarities between these two groups in their expressions of solidarity and sympathy as parts of settler societies. Beyond views of dispossession, these communities place importance on one another's environmental stewardship, retention of community in the context of a 'modernising' settler society, and government-to-government relationships that are often eclipsed by settler societies who perceive Indigenous populations as racial minorities rather than self-determined polities. This analysis provides a greater understanding of how Indigenous groups in North America and Southeast Asia understand each other's experiences.

Keywords

Southeast Asia, North America, imagined communities, transregional Indigenous peoples, comparative ethnic studies



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Introduction

Indigenous North America and Southeast Asia are not often locations of comparison when considering Indigenous experiences. Although there has been a growing interest in the interconnected and shared experiences of Indigenous peoples around the world, there are more well-trodden comparisons—such as between Oceania and North America (Ford, 2008; Hall & Fenelon, 2009; Havemann, 1999)—than those of American Indians and Indigenous peoples in Southeast Asia. Yet, these regions share both colonial experiences and colonising personnel. During the ‘Age of Exploration,’¹ Magellan, Del Cano and Drake explored both regions. Indigenous communities during the early colonial period were enlisted as proxies in wars between English, Dutch, Spanish and Portuguese colonialists. For instance, the Seven Years War was fought simultaneously in North America and Southeast Asia and, before undermining the Philippine Independence movement in the early 20th century, leaders of the U.S. Army—Arthur MacArthur, Joseph Wheeler, John Pershing and Leonard Wood—fought in the final ‘Indian Wars’ against the Apache and other southwest Native nations (Miller, 1983). Each region also saw the emergence of anti-colonial movements in the 1960s with Indigenous activism (Go, 2003).

There is therefore a growing interest by scholars to examine the extent and terms of Indigenous intercommunity engagement. By ‘Indigenous intercommunity engagement’, we mean the contact, but also awareness, that Indigenous peoples have with each other, which crosses tribal, ethnic, linguistic and regional boundaries (Cornell, 1988; Lightfoot, 2016; Lima, 2013; Muehlebach, 2001, 2003; Rigney, 2018; Vivian et al., 2016; Wiessner, 1999). Work emphasising this engagement has multiple origins. In a broad sense, and one that emphasises the need for further empirical exploration, such scholarship brings to the forefront the complexity of Indigenous cultural (Forte, 2002), literary (Piatote, 2013) and political life (Alfred & Corntassel, 2005; Baracco, 2017; Singh, 2018) that was likely overlooked or simplified in the past. For instance, Indigenous peoples have collaborated and shared strategies in efforts toward greater self-determination; therefore, scholarship attends to these engagements in order to understand the nature of emancipatory agency (Baracco, 2017; Stastny & Orr, 2014).

Research on Indigenous intercommunity engagement also demonstrates an awareness that exists between Indigenous peoples that harkens to a shared experience. We label this an *imagined transnational Indigenous community*, borrowing from Benedict Anderson’s notion of ‘imagined communities’ (Anderson, 1983). In defining these communities, Anderson identifies the role of symbols, such as popular media, in creating social relations. This might not be considered ‘contact’ in the direct or physical sense but a realisation of a shared Indigenous historical experience and contemporary condition between Indigenous peoples that transcends tribal, ethnic, national and regional distance. This article focuses on such an awareness among Filipino/a, Indonesian and Papuan communities in Southeast Asia as they understand American Indians through a shared history of colonial experience, dispossession and material culture. This work follows previous research on transnational understandings of Indigenous peoples’ experiences and reflections (Medak-Saltzman, 2015; Muehlebach, 2001, 2003; Tilly, 2002). We seek to further this literature by elaborating on perceptions of American Indians among Indigenous peoples in Southeast Asia and therefore add to the growing literature on Indigenous transnationalism.

This article’s origin differs from most as these research themes were not the goal of our fieldwork. The material in this article was collected from several periods of fieldwork in Southeast Asia and the United States among tribal communities (2004–2011). This social science research was not focused on international indigenous studies, or perceptions of

American Indians in Southeast Asia, or the reverse. The parallels between American Indians and their own communities that were found by informants inspired this paper and is reflected in its composition. We did not incorporate a research design that specifically attended to the perspectives Indigenous peoples have for each other because the primary goal of the interviews was to explore other questions. Our research was open-ended and qualitative, through which we sought to understand meaning-making among our participants and their individual and communal narratives. Therefore, this paper utilised qualitative phenomenological methods whereby we could look for the ‘thick descriptions’ (Geertz, 1972; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and the context in which they were embedded. Davidsen (2013) described phenomenological methods as emphasising ‘interpretation [as] being inherent in experience’ (p. 318). Blended within phenomenological approaches, we used a narrative method (or narrative inquiry) whereby individuals relate their own story. Clandinin describes the narrative method as one in which, like phenomenological approaches, experience ‘serves as “the cornerstone” of [...] analysis’ (2007, p. 2). We feel that combining narrative and phenomenological methods to this material is congruent with our overall research aim, which is to understand how participants see themselves within a greater context of similarity or difference.

We have organised this article into three sections. The first section discusses why focusing on imagined transnational Indigenous communities challenges certain 20th century tenets in the social sciences. In particular, we suggest that Indigenous peoples’ engagement with one another refutes the assumption that Indigenous peoples were isolated from each other. The second section focuses on Muslim (Moro) communities in the southern Philippines and their understanding of American Indian colonial experiences. Here we emphasise the U.S. military personnel who fought in the later ‘Indian Wars’ in the American southwest in the 19th century, who later were involved in colonising Moro populations in the early 20th century. This analysis also relies upon contemporary ethnographic work among communities still engaged in anti-colonial resistance. The third section examines Papuan communities in Eastern Indonesia and how they draw similarities between their experiences and those of American Indians.

Imagined transnational Indigenous communities

Classical works in the social sciences often portray or assume non-Western communities, especially Indigenous ones, as remaining fixed within a geographic region and thus isolated. Foundational theories in the social sciences in the 19th and 20th centuries, such as Marx (1867/1992), Weber (1922/2013) and Durkheim (1912/1915), drew from ethnographic research that assumes social systems are insular. Portraying Indigenous populations as isolated from each other facilitated gradation in civilisations, as interactions between groups assume complex commerce, travel patterns and multiple forms of exchange that colonists were eager to dismiss so that Indigenous peoples could remain ‘exploitable’ (see Usner, 2009, for a colonial conception of Indigenous labor and its misrepresentation).

Criticisms of the academic literature assuming isolation are plentiful. These critical works typically centre on the material and ideological connections among Indigenous communities, between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities, and such groups’ interactions with international agencies, broader historical processes and the state. Research that has been critical of the isolation assumption, such as Wallerstein (1974) on world systems, Wolf (1982/2010) on the history of local interactions with global processes, Scott (1985) on resistance to the state, and Ferguson (1990) on contemporary development practices, became many of the new foundations for contemporary social

science. This new perspective questioning the isolation of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities often took materialistic approaches such as political economy at global, national, regional and local scales.

During this re-evaluation of communities, a literature developed arguing that local small-scale communities were connected with one another, but this was a relatively new development. The most influential of this literature were Eugen Weber's *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France 1870–1914* (1976) and Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983), which placed nations as recent rather than longstanding social units. Nations were based on a common vernacular and identity, which was spread through schools, mass printing and modern mobility, as well as the technological projects undertaken to make these changes possible. Weber's analysis rests on both the material changes in France such as roads, railroads and military conscription, as well as the spread of a Parisian-based common culture through media and schools to what were at the time provincial regions. Anderson's work followed such an approach but focused on the creation of states as communities in Southeast Asia through historical comparisons with other forms of community such as a tribe or religious sect.

An element to these highly influential works² was the indispensable role of the state in creating a new identity in which other existing local identities based on kinship, religion, history and quotidian experience can merge into geographically and demographically larger units (Weber, 1976). Under this model, Indigenous communities came into contact with communities distant to their own, including other Indigenous communities, indirectly through the state, at the same time Indigenous peoples were pushed toward assimilation into a national, non-Indigenous culture (Adams, 1995; Armitage, 1995; Haebich, 2008; McGregor, 1999; McKenzie, 1914). Domestic examples in the United States are plentiful and would include residential boarding schools in the 19th century (McBeth, 1983) and urbanisation efforts (Cornell, 1988) in the 20th century. An international example comes from Medak-Saltzman (2010), who outlines an instance of this in the late 19th century and early 20th century world fairs, when Innu (Indigenous Japanese) and American Indians were housed together while on 'display' to the public.

According to Anderson, communities are '*imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion' (1983, p. 6). We suggest that as the emergence of the state as a community rests on the imaginary, it has also produced an international imagined community of anti-state Indigenous communities.³ Yet, this other imagined community does not solely rest on a shared experience of resistance to settler states. As Merlan (2009) has found, Indigenous peoples in transnational spaces have also relied on analogous characteristics such as appearance, material culture and stylised behaviour to build an imagined community.

In the three Southeast Asian communities where we conducted fieldwork, individuals identify with American Indians by using the concepts of locality, relationality to the state, race and marginality. These forms of identification also reflect scholarship that defines indigeneity as racial (Marks, 1995), marginal (Bell, 2014; Medak-Saltzman, 2010), relational to the state apparatus (Biolsi, 2001, 2004; Merlan, 2009), as a locality (Basso, 1996), or as a combination of these (Cabo, 1986). The source of our material comes from our experience conducting field research in Southeast Asia in periods from 2003 to 2011 on the islands of Mindanao and Jolo in the Philippines and New Guinea in Indonesia.

Colonial histories, geographies and personnel: Moros and American Indians

We conducted fieldwork on the islands of Mindanao and Jolo with the Maguindanao and Tausug ethnic groups during parts of 2003–05. Based on the literature on resistance to the state (Dove, 1996; Scott, 1985, 1990; Wolf, 1969/1999), this study investigated the history of the rebellion by Muslim Filipinos, who referred to themselves as *Moros*, a word derived from the early colonial Spanish word for ‘Muslim’. We also examined how economic change has shaped this conflict. This work brought us into contact with hereditary elites, including chiefs (*datus*) and descendants of sultans, as well as farmers, governors, senators, and former members of the rebel armies of the Moro Independence Liberation Front (MILF) and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). In conversations about the Moro rebellion against the Philippine state that began in the 1960s, many of our informants placed their conflict for independence into a larger global movement that included American Indians. Our informants, therefore, echoed Williams’s (1980) criticism histories of American colonialism in the Pacific which had ‘a mistaken consensus [...] that the United States did not have a tradition of holding alien peoples as colonial subjects before 1898’ (p. 810). Before we examine how American Indians were part of an imagined community of Moros in the South Philippines, we will construct how Moros understand themselves as Indigenous and give an account of how colonisation in this region was part of a similar history to that of American Indians, which included the same personnel undertaking both colonial projects.

When working with the concept of Indigeneity, it is inevitable that one runs into complexities in how to apply the term, as scholars differ regarding its conceptual boundaries. An analysis of the term and its usage can be found in Beteille (1998), Trigger and Dalley (2010), or Plaice (2006), but in these attempts to define the term, a tension remains between allowing for multiple forms of Indigenous existences while retaining a cohesive concept. Indigenous peoples themselves engage with the concept of Indigeneity differently. Many—but not all—American Indians see their Indigenous identity in their original relationship with space and place as the initial occupants of a region. This perspective, as discussed by Borrows (1999), presents potential limitations that rely on the ability to identify no earlier peoples occupying a territory. Indigeneity is not always connected to an initial occupation or connection to certain land. Maori, who consider themselves Indigenous peoples of Aotearoa (New Zealand), do not state that they originate from New Zealand but from a distant island they call Hawaiki (Hanson, 1989). Their claim does not result from an original inhabitancy from ‘time immemorial’ but that their claim is relative to that of the non-Maori New Zealanders.

Indigeneity in Asia is recognised as an unclear concept. Whether it be the absence of state recognition (Erni, 2008) or the notion of ‘saltwater colonization’ (Baird, 2016, p. 501), what constitutes a settler or Indigenous person is ambiguous. Moro identify their Indigenous status within the context of extended habitation, the long process of political colonisation, and being subject to settler communities. Moro recognise groups (such as the Sama and Atta) that predate their own communities in the area but cannot conceptualise that their own communities belong anywhere else. Undoubtedly, religion plays a considerable role in the distinctions they make between themselves and other parts of the Philippines, but it is the claim of being an autonomous people that has led to the confrontations in the northern Philippines and with the United States. Yet, Moro resistance has not been characterised by a rejection of other religions but has responded to their forced relocation from their lands by ethnic groups from other parts of the Philippines through the Homestead Act (McKenna, 1998). For example, Christians have been well tolerated in regions such as the Province of Sulu, where they consist of converts from among the local population rather

than migrants. Instead, their perspective on indigeneity and their relationship with other such groups developed in a deep history of colonialism and settlement, and is grounded in their autonomy over land (Jubair, 1984).

Despite the Spanish colonisation of the Northern Philippines in 1565, Muslim communities and Sultanates in the southern island of Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago remained independent (McKenna, 1998). Tensions over Spanish incursion into Muslim territories resulted in a series of wars spanning several hundred years. The Sultanates of Mindanao and Sulu, which were the major Muslim political entities in the region, remained independent of Spanish rule during this period, although there were both Spanish military installations, settlements, and missions in the Southern Philippines (Newson, 2009).

Following several revolts and rebellions against the Spanish colonial government by native Filipinos, including the Moro and the non-Muslim indigenous Lumad people of Southern Philippines, and Chinese and Indian ethnic groups as well as Philippine-born Spaniards or Insulares, the Treaty of Paris of 1898 ceded the Philippines and many of Spain's other colonial territories to the United States after the Spanish American War of 1898. This included the surrender of Muslim communities in the Southern Philippines even though many were not under the control of Spain, as they largely identified themselves as Indigenous and made their claim to their land through long-term habitation (Caballero-Anthony, 2007). However, with the treaty, they were ceded to the United States as concessions made by Spain to provide an additional pretext to controlling the entire archipelago (Linn, 2000).

After establishing control over the Northern Philippines during the Philippine-American War (1899–1902), the U.S. military moved into Mindanao and Sulu to subjugate the entire Philippine Archipelago. Many of the U.S. military leadership in the South Philippines had fought in the final Indian Wars in Arizona and New Mexico. All four of the U.S. military governors of the Philippines were veterans of frontier campaigns against American Indians before their arrival in Southeast Asia. John Persing and Leonard Wood, officers who served in both North America and the South Philippines, made comparisons between American Indians and Moros in their personal and official records of their time in the South Philippines (Wood, 1904).

During the lead author's fieldwork on the island of Jolo in the Sulu Archipelago (2003–04) this colonial history was not only recounted by many residents, but often they drew comparisons with the subjugation of American Indians. In pointing to the caldera in the centre of the island of Jolo where the Battle of Bud Dajo (1906) was fought between Moro troops and the U.S. military, they mentioned how the U.S. Army commander, Leonard Wood, was also the individual who captured Geronimo, the Apache resistance leader. Additionally, Tausug made comparisons to the killing of women and children who were hiding in the caldera with the massacre of American Indian women and children: 'this is where the American Army killed our people ...' (Interview, 2004). Individuals recounted details of Wood's life, such as his medical degree and education at Harvard. They also described with admiration the American Indians' militant resistance to American colonialism, which was also a point of pride with their own history. Muslim communities of the Southern Philippines cite their bravery within the context of the U.S. military's need to invent a larger calibre sidearm and the use of repeating rifles. Officers found the current calibre of sidearm insufficient to stop Moro fighters before they reached U.S. lines (Avery, 2012), and infantry men needed the faster volleys to suppress attackers. Although it is unclear whether the shipments of larger calibre sidearms arrived for campaigns in the

Philippines, Tausug and Maguindanao take satisfaction in requiring the U.S. military to raise its firearm standards.

Often during fieldwork interviews, individuals would present photocopied documents while speaking with us: copies of historical agreements between the Muslim Philippines and the U.S. Government dating back to the late 19th century. Most commonly, they would present The Bates Treaty of 1899, a conditional treaty between the United States and the Sultan of Sulu giving partial autonomy to the region in exchange for the free movement of U.S. troops in the area. Other documents that were displayed included a request by Moro noblemen in the 1920s that if the Philippines were given independence, then Muslims wished to remain part of the United States as a territory instead of being made part of a same country as the Northern Philippines. A retired congressman from Sulu made sure to inform us that this request was still standing: 'please, will you take this letter to your government and tell them that we still want to join the U.S.' (Interview, 2004). Both documents were brought to our attention for two purposes: to indicate that the Muslim Philippines had been treated as a political unit with autonomy rather than part of the Northern Philippines, and that such treaties had been either broken by the United States or that requests for further autonomy had been ignored.

Moro communities made these claims to moral and legal standards within a broader community of marginalisation during the colonial period. This imagined community specifically included American Indians. Informants would describe a history of treaty violations that occurred in North America between the U.S. government and American Indian tribes. Most specifically, they would include tribes from the western United States, such as the Apache and Comanche, as their colonial histories coincided most directly with those of the Southern Philippines, and the images of resistance were more salient. These referential acts, in which one's status or lack of status is identified or placed with other histories, are also practised in similar ways in American Indian communities. For instance, in the tribal meetings of Citizen Potawatomi, accounts of treaties between the Potawatomi and European and U.S. governments, as well as violations of those treaties, are used to explore the condition of the Potawatomi community and its broader outlook toward sovereignty. This history of broken treaties is central to how the tribe understands its history. A large part of the Potawatomi's contribution to the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington D.C. involves the history of treaty violations by the U.S. government. However, unlike in Southeast Asia, broader global context is not often provided. For instance, rarely do members of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, in recounting European involvement in their tribe's history, reference the Philippines or other colonised peoples as part of a global community.

Although there have been multiple cases of American Indian activists engaging with other Indigenous groups (Muehlebach, 2000), we have experienced few examples of this at quotidian levels on reservations. However, one example of American Indians imagining the similarly marginal status of Southeast Asian communities was in a story about the Vietnam War told during fieldwork with American Indian communities in 2008. A Pueblo Indian in New Mexico recounted how his platoon was captured during the Vietnam War. Most captives were executed, with the exception of the American Indian and a Mexican American, who were tied to posts because the Vietnamese were unsure about their status as 'Americans'. During an attack by Americans on the village where they were being held, the Mexican American soldier was killed by the shelling of their location but the Pueblo Indian escaped. Now a medicine man in his tribe, his experience has been recounted by others within his community (personal communication, 2008). The several times the Pueblo veteran's story was mentioned by the authors in Southeast Asia in discussions with

villages, communities mulled over the moral meaning of the story in which an Indigenous person was conscripted and then spared by another repressed group later to serve his community. This potentially became a meaningful story of marginalisation and recognition across two Indigenous peoples.

As a primarily imagined community, we did not hear of Moro in the Philippines and American Indians directly engaging each other as physical community. One such occasion took place when a Moro *Datu* (chief) was awarded a fellowship for emerging leaders to come to the United States to broaden his understanding of the U.S. government and people. Organised through the Eisenhower Foundation, Datu Ibrahim 'Toto' Paglas, from the island of Mindanao, visited officials and communities throughout the United States in 2005, in which the authors accompanied him. In addition to trips in Washington DC, New York and California, his itinerary took him to meet Navajo communities in Utah and Arizona. Datu Paglas spoke with intensity about his experiences on the Navajo Reservation and with the communities who hosted him. He described the similarities in the plight of American Indians and the Moro. The concept of the 'reservation' seemed of particular salience to Datu Paglas. Reservations do not have direct correlates with the political units of Muslim communities in the South Philippines, which are geographically associated with Muslim tribes instead of having defined rights and locations. However, in discussions with Datu Paglas, he reflected on the sense of his community and culture being diminished geographically as well as 'trapped'. Datu Paglas also admired the continuity and diversity of political powers of American Indian tribes and wished that such authority existed in his own community. Unlike American Indian tribes, power rooted in longstanding cultural norms among Moro communities is not recognised by the Philippine government.

Datu Paglas and other Moros' identification with American Indians was not absolute in the context of the American 'West'. Other symbols and culture of the American 'Wild West' is highly visible in the South Philippines today. Cowboys are associated with masculinity and ruggedness. Datu Paglas preferred to dress in Western ware with jeans, Concho belts, cowboy hats and boots. When required to wear formal attire for meetings in the United States, he would wear suits that had leather embroidery on the shoulders, appearing somewhat similar to the Lone Ranger. The local shipping company that he started was called 'Cowboy Transportation'. In the Southern Philippines, the association with cowboys and masculinity was stronger than other parts of the country. Forms of comportment fetishes (Orr, 2012) and displays of masculinity could be found in the form of carrying guns on holsters like cowboys throughout the Muslim Philippines. Masculinity, cowboys and violence were strong components of 'minimal alliance groups' in the Sulu Archipelago that behaved, according to their own definition, something like outlaws in the American West. The double identification of being both victimised and empowered also tethered imagined community between Moro and the Wild West of cowboys and Indians.⁴

Indigeneity, race and material culture: Papuans and American Indians

Although there is a strong identification in experience with American Indians among Moro in the Philippines, Moro communities do not emphasise racial differences between themselves and the people of the Northern Philippines, whom they consider their contemporary colonisers. However, ethnic and racial differences are central to how Indigenous communities in other parts of Southeast Asia identify with American Indians in the context of hegemony. The Indonesian archipelago consists of approximately 17,000 islands, stretching a distance wider than the continental United States. Although Bahasa Indonesia (a variant of the Malaysian language that was historically used as a trade

language in the region) is the national language, over 300 different languages are used by different communities in the country. There are major ecological and social divisions splitting Indonesia. These differences were first written about by Westerners as part of scientific expeditions in the area. English botanist Alfred Russell Wallace, in the 19th century, attempted to codify racial differences in what is now Indonesia in the same way that he divided the flora and fauna shift (see Vetter, 2006, for a description of Wallace's epistemology that attempted to cover botany and human cultural groups). Wallace's organisation drew from 'types' that were found on mainland Asia compared to those common in Oceania, with islands in the Indonesia archeology representing a graduate transition between the two. This distinction also marks a change from Austronesian to Papuan and Melanesian languages and cultures. The Austronesian migration began approximately 5,000 years ago from Taiwan or Southern China (Lansing et al., 2011), and communities that descend from them are phenotypically lighter in complexion than surrounding communities. This physical or racial distinction impacts how marginality and thus how identification with American Indians is constructed.

While a consultant in conjunction with a development and health NGO in the Indonesian province of Western Papua, the lead author worked with Indigenous tribal communities. Although part of the Indonesian Republic, West Papua was part of the island of New Guinea and its population often considered themselves colonised by Indonesia (Rutherford, 2012). Although the social fault lines between Papua and the political centres of Indonesia such as Java included religion, it was not the sole or central means through which Papuans described their status as Indigenous people or their distinction from Indonesia (Mote & Rutherford, 2001). The Papuan communities with whom the lead author worked were both negotiating and resisting engagement in national and global political and economic forces. Their interaction with what they viewed as colonial processes centred on an active mine in the region that brought international and national migration and investment beginning in the 1970s. During this period, there were several labour disputes and strikes of contractual workers who were mostly from local Papuan communities. These strikes were contextualised by workers and the union not only in terms of labour rights and fair treatment but also within the framework of international Indigenous rights. During periods of strikes, they would ask for assistance and recognition from U.S. government officials from the territories in the Western Pacific whom they considered to be sympathetic to their plight as Indigenous Pacific Islanders.

Indonesian Indigenous communities often conceptualise colonialism as a double process (Tajima, 2014). The original colonial period took place during European expansion into the region, which was followed by Indonesian 'independence' after World War II. However, the national period is often seen as an additional colonial period under the control of the island of Java where the majority of the population resides. This centralisation of power in a distant region for many Indonesians was exacerbated by the 53 years of dictatorships following independence. This centralisation also was conceptually overlapped with the physical characteristics of Javanese people, who are considered to be of lighter complexion than non-Javanese (Prasetyaningsih, 2007).

The combination of a centralised and racialised hierarchy in Indonesia is how many Indonesian communities both experience contemporary colonialism and relate to other such groups, including American Indians. An aspect of this difference between hegemonic Javanese and non-Javanese is expressed in the concept of 'indigeneity'. In the Indonesian language, the concept is expressed as *orang asli*, which directly translates as 'original person' (*orang* = person, *asli* = original). Although Indonesian is a second language to almost all of its speakers, and command, grammar and vocabulary differ greatly

throughout the country, *orang asli* is a recognised and understood concept in most regions of Indonesia. Despite the fact that the ability to speak Indonesian decreases as one moves further from the centre of power in Java, the importance of *orang asli* as a concept increases and thus it is perhaps more widely used the further one is from Java. The term is applied to Indigenous communities outside of Indonesia and Southeast Asia as well. It is used to describe American Indians of both North and South America, though it is less commonly used to describe people in Africa or East Asia. Even though there are Indigenous communities in these areas, *orang asli* is selectively used by Indonesians to describe North American and Southeast Asian Indigenous communities. The reasons for the selective use of *orang asli* is not completely understood. The role of American Indians in popular media, especially film, have probably contributed to this.

This imagined global community of Indigenous people is set against the more regional concept of *bumiputra* in Malaysian and *pribumi* in Indonesian. At least linguistically, this adds a complication to a ready aggregation of Indigenous community from local to global. Both terms are derivations of the Sanskrit words *bumi* (earth, soil) and *putra/pri* (prince, son). Thus the terms translate into something similar to native or Indigenous person akin to *orang asli*. However, *bumiputra* and *pribumi* do not connote a global sense of 'Indigenous'. Instead, they are linguistic stand-ins for being of or descendants of Southeast Asian culture distinct from foreign cultures. In Malaysia, the Constitution (Article 153) emphasises the importance of Islam for defining *bumiputra*, yet it also allows for non-Islamic Indigenous communities in Eastern Malaysia into this status. More broadly, in Indonesia *pribumi* and *bumiputra* are used to distinguish Southeast Asian culture and communities from longstanding Chinese and Indian communities who have resided in Southeast Asia. The terms are also used to signify the Indonesian or Malay elements within a syncretic cultural system that includes Middle Eastern, South Asian and East Asian components. These terms, in contrast to *orang asli*, reflect an insular perspective on being Indonesian or Malay apart from others, rather than using indigeneity as a link with other cultural groups. This difference in these meanings is apparent in interactions with communities in Indonesia. While speaking in Indonesian, the lead author described his background as *orang asli* from the United States. Communities understood that this meant 'American Indian' and accepted that the term was used outside of Indonesia, but when *pribumi* replaced *orang asli*, informants found it amusing. They explained that it is a term that although meaning 'son of the soil', it is highly Southeast Asian in meaning and applicability (Balasubramaniam, 2007).

In the communities of West Papua, the distinction between Javanese (Austronesian) and Papua (Melanesian) phenotypes was central to how indigeneity was understood. Papuans described how they were stereotyped in broader Indonesian models of appearance that favoured lighter skin. The abundance of personal care products such as soaps containing bleach or *keputian* (whitening) agents and the advertisements for these products supports Papuan claims. Additionally, Indonesians, like other Southeast Asians, avoid sun contact because of the potential darkening of the skin.⁵ Discrimination based on outward appearance is how Papuans describe the experience of being American Indian. Interpretations of old Western films follow this line of thought (Kelly, 2017). According to Papuans, 'dark' Indians were treated poorly by 'white' military officers. Papuans also described depictions of wars or battles between American Indians and European settler populations through the idiom of *berburu* (hunting) rather than *berperang* (to wage war), though we failed to clarify whether the accounts mentioned were from cinema or based in historical accounts. This is also how they described their longstanding conflict with the Indonesian government and, in particular, its military, whom they describe as 'hunting' Papuans. This diverges from how they describe violence between two Papuan tribes,

which is given the term *perang suku* (tribal war). The use of *berburu* in Papuan parlance follows a pattern suggesting that they see hunting as existing between two groups in which there is a considerable technological advantage of one over the other. Moreover, they use 'hunting' to describe an ongoing and culturally accepted attack on a group of people to remove them from land or extinguish their existence, which might also be coterminous with 'genocide.'

The technological difference between broader Indonesian societies and Papuan communities has also been a source of imagined community shared by American Indians and Papuans. Although technological and social gulfs have been produced in settler societies to legitimise colonial activities (Williams, 2012), such narratives of perceived backwardness can also become symbols connecting marginalised communities. Traditional Papuan comportment has involved the covering of men's genitalia with a gourd or grass skirt, and women's garments were comprised of grass skirts and beaded necklaces. The absence of livestock from which hides or wool could be produced, as well as few traditional trading opportunities with groups that had cloth, meant that Papuans had relatively less covering than other Indonesian communities. This lack of clothing is often conflated with backwardness in Indonesia and is similar to how the poverty and backwardness of American Indians was once referred to as being a 'blanket-ass Indian' (Orr, 2017, p. 105). Additionally, men carry bows and arrows and machetes in rural regions of New Guinea. This is also associated with primitiveness by Indonesians outside of Papua. For instance, while the lead author accompanied tribal leaders from Papua to Jakarta, they were routinely asked during their stay if they wore clothing while at home or carried bows and arrows. Indonesians were also surprised that Papuans spoke the Indonesian national language. Often Javanese who asked such questions confided in the lead author that they thought Papua was still backward (*terbelakang*).

Aspects of comportment were also ways in which Papuans identified with American Indians as Indigenous and marginalised communities. While in Papua, the lead author worked with school programs in which students learned about the outside world. Elementary and secondary school students, upon finding out that the lead author was an American Indian, would talk about the *panah* (bows and arrows) and feathered headdresses that were common in depictions of Papuan people. Papuan students could even reproduce what is stereotypically thought of as the 'war cry' of American Indians by moving their hands over their mouths while vocalising. These were highly salient connections they had between their own culture, which is known for such comportment, and elements of American Indians. Dances, war cries and feathered displays are also how Papuans are depicted culturally in Indonesia. This is a cultural form that they embrace as a contribution of their society to larger cultural forms in the region. Some also identify their production of large carvings out of a single tree as 'totem poles' and recognise that they are also produced among American Indians. While many Papuans described characteristics of American Indian cultures, distinctions between tribes—which are significant—were less salient to them. They recognised that American Indians, like Indigenous Papuans, were members of different tribes that varied in characteristics, but they focused on broader cultural assemblages.

Despite Papua's reputation as being remote and isolated within broader Indonesian society, a number of Papuans the lead author knew had visited the United States and Canada. They typically did so through church groups that funded and organised their visit. Because of the nature of these organisations, much of their trip involved religious activities, including community service and outreach. Several of these visits had components in which recognition of underserved and marginalised communities among

American Indians in rural regions of the Northwest took place. Papuans who returned from these trips described both cultural similarities (art, dance, bows and arrows) and sympathy for the marginalisation American Indians also experienced.

Conclusion

American Indian communities have proven socially and politically meaningful to those who directly or indirectly encounter them since some of their earliest contact with communities outside of the Americas (Elliott, 1970). The depth of their impact on the intellectual, cultural and political development of European society remains the subject of contemporary interest (Kupperman, 1995). They maintain a cultural reference point for broader discussions of society, power and politics (Chiappelli, 1976), and such relevance extends to other Indigenous peoples, to form an imagined transnational Indigenous community.

In this article, we have presented how in seemingly isolated areas in Southeast Asia (Ricklefs, 1969), an imagined community has emerged based on a number of characteristics. Depending on the context of Southeast Asian communities' interactions with outside entities, such as the state or other hegemonic actors, elements of American Indian experiences became more salient for how continuity in this imagined community was constructed. Whether or not the source of their identification with American Indians was found in the material culture, race or resistance to colonialism, Southeast Asians focused on the marginality of American Indian communities, which they constructed as similar to their own.

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¹ The Age of Exploration is generally defined as the exploration of Africa, Asia and North and South America by Europeans from the beginning of the 15th century to the end of the 18th century (Boorstin, 1985)

² As of 2017, *Peasants into Frenchmen* has been cited 4,919 times and *Imagined Communities* has been cited in 85,384 works.

³ One such example can be found within the Philippine Independence Movement in which José Rizal referred to himself and one his colleagues as *Indios Bravos* after reading of the brave Indians in the Wild West show that travelled through the United States and Europe at the end of the 19th century (Delmendo, 2004).

⁴ Shively's account (1992) of why cowboy material culture is prominent among American Indians might offer an explanation as to the double identification with both cowboys and Indians in Southeast Asia. After showing Anglo Americans and American Indians the same 'western' or 'cowboy' film that both groups generally enjoyed, Shively (1992) found that American Indians identified with the themes of autonomy, freedom and relationships to the land in the film, whereas Anglo Americans enjoyed their identification with the imposition of values onto new territory. This suggests the possibility that symbols that appear to represent contradictory or antagonistic groups may be disaggregated to allow for coherent appeal. A cowboy hat, boots or belt might represent a sense of independence that is congruent with values of autonomy associated with indigeneity.

⁵ Because of their relatively darker skin tone and feeling of being discriminated against, Papuans also deeply identify with African American communities and culture. Papuan men often dress in clothing similar to Rastafarians in Jamaica. They show great interest in African Americans in cinema and broader culture. The most elated the lead author saw a Papuan village was during the visit of an African American man. This is in contrast to how many Africans and African Americans are treated on the island of Java. See the account of Barack Obama's childhood in Indonesia in 'The Real Story of Obama's Mom' in *The Atlantic*, April 20, 2011.