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0521793394 - Culture and Rights: Anthropological Perspectives

Edited by Jane K. Cowan, Marie-Benedicte Dembour and Richard A. Wilson

Frontmatter

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Culture and Rights
Anthropological Perspectives

Do people everywhere have the same, or even compatible, ideas about multiculturalism, indigenous rights or women's rights? The authors of this book move beyond the traditional terms of the universalism versus cultural relativism debate. Through detailed case studies from around the world (Hawai'i, France, Thailand, Botswana, Greece, Nepal and Canada) they explore the concrete effects of rights talk and rights institutions on people's lives.

JANE K. COWAN is a senior lecturer in social anthropology in the School of Cultural and Community Studies at the University of Sussex. Her publications include *Dance and the Body Politic in Northern Greece* (1990, Winner of the Chicago Folklore Award 1991), an edited volume, *Macedonia: The Politics of Identity and Difference* (2000) and numerous articles on gender relations, ritual, popular music, the politics of 'tradition' and the formation of complex identities in contemporary Greece.

MARIE-BENEDICTE DEMBOUR is a lecturer in law in the School of Legal Studies at the University of Sussex. Her recent publications include *Recalling the Belgian Congo: Conversations and Introspection* (2000) and a number of articles that reflect her interests in human rights, identity and migration in Europe. She is now working on a project entitled 'Problematizing Human Rights: the European Convention in Question'.

RICHARD A. WILSON is a reader in social anthropology at the University of Sussex. His books include a monograph on an ethnic revivalist movement in Guatemala, *Maya Resurgence in Guatemala* (1995), an edited collection, *Human Rights, Culture and Context: Anthropological Perspectives* (1997) and *The Politics of Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa* (2000, Cambridge University Press).

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Frontmatter

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Contents

<i>List of contributors</i>	<i>page</i> ix
<i>Preface</i>	xiii
1 Introduction	1
Part I: Setting universal rights	27
2 Changing rights, changing culture SALLY ENGLE MERRY	31
3 Following the movement of a pendulum: between universalism and relativism MARIE-BENEDICTE DEMBOUR	56
4 Imposing rights? A case study of child prostitution in Thailand HEATHER MONTGOMERY	80
5 Gendering culture: towards a plural perspective on Kwena women's rights ANNE GRIFFITHS	102
6 Between universalism and relativism: a critique of the UNESCO concept of culture THOMAS HYLLAND ERIKSEN	127
Part II: Claiming cultural rights	149
7 Ambiguities of an emancipatory discourse: the making of a Macedonian minority in Greece JANE K. COWAN	152
8 From group rights to individual rights and back: Nepalese struggles over culture and equality DAVID N. GELLNER	177
	vii

Cambridge University Press

0521793394 - Culture and Rights: Anthropological Perspectives

Edited by Jane K. Cowan, Marie-Benedicte Dembour and Richard A. Wilson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

viii	<i>Contents</i>	
9	Advancing indigenous claims through the law: reflections on the Guatemalan peace process RACHEL SIEDER AND JESSICA WITCHELL	201
10	Rights as the reward for simulated cultural sameness: the Innu in the Canadian colonial context COLIN SAMSON	226
	<i>Index</i>	249

Cambridge University Press

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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MARIE-BENEDICTE DEMBOUR is a lecturer in law in the School of Legal Studies at the University of Sussex. She also holds a doctorate in social anthropology. Her publications include *Recalling the Belgian Congo: Conversations and Introspection* (2000) and a number of articles that reflect her interests in human rights, identity and migration in Europe. She is now working on a project entitled 'Problematizing Human Rights: the European Convention in Question'.

THOMAS HYLLAND ERIKSEN is a professor of social anthropology at the University of Oslo and has carried out field research in Mauritius and Trinidad. His publications in English and Norwegian include textbooks, monographs and essays, often with a focus on identity politics and globalisation. His most recent books are *Charles Darwin* (1997), *Common Denominators* (1998), *Ambivalens og Fundamentalisme*, with Oscar Hemer (1999), and *Egoisme*, co-edited with Dag O. Hessen (1999).

DAVID N. GELLNER is a reader in social anthropology in the Department of Human Sciences at Brunel University, London. His publications include *Monk, Householder, and Tantric Priest: Newar Buddhism*

Cambridge University Press

0521793394 - Culture and Rights: Anthropological Perspectives

Edited by Jane K. Cowan, Marie-Benedicte Dembour and Richard A. Wilson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)x *Contributors*

and *Its Hierarchy of Ritual*, edited with Declan Quigley (1992), *Contested Hierarchies: A Collaborative Ethnography of Caste among the Newars of the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal* (1995) and *Nationalism and Ethnicity in a Hindu Kingdom: The Politics of Culture in Contemporary Nepal* (1997), which he edited with J. Pfaff-Czarnecka and J. Whelpton. A collection of his essays, entitled *The Anthropology of Buddhism and Hinduism: Weberian Themes*, is in press.

ANNE GRIFFITHS is a reader in law at Edinburgh University. Her specialist interests include comparative family law (Scotland, Botswana and the USA), anthropology of law, and gender and law. She has carried out fieldwork in Botswana over an eight-year period, the results of which are detailed in her book *In the Shadow of Marriage: Gender and Justice in an African Community* (1997). She is also co-author of a book on family law in Scotland. She has recently worked as a consultant on the Women and Law in Southern Africa Research Project for its research phase on 'Delivering Justice'. Her current research involves a comparative study of 'The Child's Choice in Care Proceedings', in Glasgow and a county in New York state, funded by the Annenberg Foundation in the USA.

SALLY ENGLE MERRY is a professor of anthropology at Wellesley College. Her speciality is the anthropology of law, specifically law and colonialism, conflict resolution, and gender, violence and human rights. She is the author of *Urban Danger: Life in a Neighborhood of Strangers* (1981), *Getting Justice and Getting Even: Legal Consciousness among Working Class Americans* (1990), *The Possibility of Popular Justice: A Case Study in American Community Mediation*, co-edited with Neal Milner (1993), and *Colonizing Hawai'i: The Cultural Power of Law* (in press). She is President of the Association for Political Legal Anthropology and past-president of the Law and Society Association.

HEATHER MONTGOMERY currently holds a British Academy post-doctoral fellowship at the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology at St Hugh's College, Oxford. She is the author of several articles on children's rights and child sexual abuse, including contributions in *Nobody's Children: Anthropological and Historical Perspectives on Child Abandonment and the Lives of Children without Families*, edited by Catherine Panter-Brick (1999), and *Global Sex Workers: Rights, Resistance and Redefinition*, edited by Kemala Kempadoo (1998). She is currently working on a book about child prostitution in Thailand.

Cambridge University Press

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Contributors

xi

COLIN SAMSON is a lecturer in sociology at the University of Essex, where he is a Director of the MA in Native American Studies. He has been working in the Innu communities of Sheshatshiu and Utshimasits, Labrador, since 1994. He is co-author of *Canada's Tibet: the Killing of the Innu*, a human rights report commissioned by Survival International, and has written several scholarly articles on dispossession and land claims. In the spring of 1999 he worked for the Sheshatshiu Innu Band Council and produced a report on the impact of Euro-Canadian schooling. He also maintains interests in, and has published works on, Native American literature, cultural studies and medical sociology.

RACHEL SIEDER is a senior lecturer in politics at the Institute of Latin American Studies, University of London, where she teaches courses in comparative politics and in human rights. She is also an associate fellow at FLASCO Guatemala, where she is involved in research on indigenous customary law and legal reform. Her books include *Central America: Fragile Transition* (1995), *Derecho consuetudinario y transición democrática en Guatemala* (1996), and *Guatemala After the Peace Accords* (1998). She is currently working on a historical analysis of law and citizenship in Guatemala.

RICHARD A. WILSON is a reader in social anthropology at the University of Sussex. He has studied human rights and informal justice in countries such as South Africa and Guatemala which have moved from authoritarian and repressive regimes towards more democratic political dispensations. His books include a monograph on an ethnic revivalist movement in Guatemala, *Maya Resurgence in Guatemala* (1995), and an edited collection, *Human Rights, Culture and Context: Anthropological Perspectives* (1997). His recent ESRC-funded research investigated reconciliation in South Africa, leading to the monograph *The Politics of Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa* (2000). He is the editor of the journal *Anthropological Theory*.

JESSICA WITCHELL works as a development education worker at Reading International Solidarity centre, using participatory learning and action (PLA) methodology to facilitate an understanding of global issues in a local context. She has also led a participatory research project in Nepal exploring local health practices, which culminated in the publication of a poster and booklet for use in Nepali adult education classes.

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

The political rhetoric of ‘culture’ confronts us each time we open a newspaper, or turn on the television or radio. For example, in autumn 1999 international media carried the story of a treaty successfully negotiated between the Canadian Parliament and the Nisga’a people, granting the latter land, access to natural resources and self-government. In that same period, a British Airways inflight magazine carried a colour spread on the Sorbs, ‘the forgotten people’, ‘one of the smallest races in Europe’ and survivors of ‘1300 years of oppression’. The Sorbs were reported to have brought a case before the European Commission of Human Rights concerning the actions of a mining company which threatened to displace them and irreversibly alter their distinctive way of life. These are just two random illustrations of a rhetoric which is specific to our times and in which culture is presented as an object of rights.

In the hope of grappling with the motives and consequences of claims to culture in the language of rights, in July 1997 we organised the Sussex Workshop on Culture and Rights, in Brighton. The workshop brought together an international and interdisciplinary group of scholars (from anthropology, sociology, law, social and political theory, and feminist studies) with the aim of developing a rich and conceptually useful understanding of contemporary rights struggles. We are grateful to the participants of the workshop for their sharp but generous critical engagement and for their help in formulating meaningful questions (as much as answers) about this still underexamined conjunction. The stimulating discussions held at the workshop helped to define the agenda for the present book. Apart from the five participants whose work is included in this book, we acknowledge the participation and contributions of Peter Fitzpatrick, Vivien Hart, Jane Hindley, Neil Stammers, Ann Whitehead and Nira Yuval-Davis.

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xiv *Preface*

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JANE K. COWAN, MARIE-BENEDICTE DEMBOUR
AND RICHARD A. WILSON
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