

The Word “Indigenous”

A Studio Wā Living Memo

What it carries, where it gets confused, and what precision protects.

Why the word matters

The word Indigenous carries real weight, and it is often used without a full grasp of its meaning, or of the difference between the word lowercase and the word capitalized. The gap is understandable. The term does a great deal of work, and most people meet it through usage rather than definition. The most common reading is racial: Indigenous as a synonym for non-white, or for brown peoples with traditional cultures. That reading runs in both directions. People using the word loosely may not carry its legal and political content, and people hearing it may assume a content the speaker never intended. The looseness is not harmless. It is the first thing every bad-faith argument against Indigenous claims reaches for, because the loose version is the one that is easy to attack.

What follows is what the word means in international law and practice, where the common confusions come from, and what the studio is actually reaching for when it says Indigenous values.

What the United Nations actually says

The UN has deliberately never adopted an official definition of Indigenous peoples, and the refusal is itself meaningful. Indigenous representatives have argued consistently that the power to define from outside is the colonial move the whole framework exists to end. The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, adopted in 2007, contains no definition.¹

What exists instead is the Martínez Cobo working definition, from the UN's foundational study of 1981 to 1983, which the system still works from.² It identifies Indigenous communities, peoples, and nations by four linked criteria:

1. **Historical continuity** with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories;
2. **Self-identification** as distinct from the societies now prevailing on those territories;
3. **Non-dominance**: they form, at present, non-dominant sectors of society;
4. **Determination to preserve and transmit** their ancestral territories and identity to future generations, as the basis of their continued existence as peoples.

ILO Convention 169, the only binding treaty on the subject, adds that self-identification is the fundamental criterion.³ The UN Permanent Forum describes the whole approach in three words: identify, not define.⁴

Notice what the criteria say and what they do not. The standard is non-dominance, not minority status. Indigenous peoples make up a near-majority or a majority of the population in Bolivia and Guatemala, depending on how the census is taken, and they remain structurally non-dominant in each.⁵ And nothing anywhere in the framework is about race. The word names a political relationship between a people and a state that formed around and over them. Not a phenotype, not a continent, not a stage of development.

indigenous and Indigenous

English carries two words in one spelling. Lowercase **indigenous** means originating in a place. It is true of everyone somewhere, and of plants, animals, and microbes; a botanical fact. Capital-I **Indigenous** is the political-legal category above: a people with historical continuity prior to a colonizing or enclosing state, presently non-dominant within it, self-identifying as distinct, and determined to continue. Nearly every confusion in public discourse is a slide between these two. The capital letter is doing legal work.

“Everyone is indigenous to somewhere”

The sentence is true, and the studio does not dispute it. Everyone’s ancestors are indigenous to some place; that is the lowercase, and it is real. The bad-faith move is to take that truth and use it to deny living peoples their standing, to argue that because everyone is indigenous to somewhere, no one should be singled out for Indigenous rights. That move was answered formally twenty years ago. When “we are all indigenous in Africa” was used to deny the San, the Maasai, and the Batwa standing, the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights ruled, in its 2005 report, that the term does not award priority of occupancy.⁶ Capital-I Indigenous names structural marginalization and dispossession within the present state, conditions that hold for some peoples on a territory and not others, regardless of how long anyone’s ancestors have been there.

The argument’s emotional engine is the assumption that Indigenous is a racial honor being handed out, that the claim is brown people matter more than white people. It is not. The claim is that specific political structures are extinguishing specific peoples and cultures right now, and that those peoples hold rights against that extinguishment. Two cases dissolve the racial reading entirely. The Sámi are white Europeans, and they are unambiguously Indigenous: pre-existing peoples of Sápmi, enclosed by four states (Norway, Sweden, Finland, Russia), structurally non-dominant in each, with their own parliaments, their language struggles, and their land claims. The Ainu were colonized not by a Western power but by Japan, a non-Western industrialized state that annexed Hokkaidō, banned the language,

and recognized the Ainu as Indigenous only in 2019.⁷ Colonialism is not a white monopoly, and Indigenous is not the opposite of Western. Together the two cases break both equations: Indigenous is not a word for non-white, and it is not a word for non-Western.

Two distinctions that get collapsed

The deepest confusion, the one that catches even Indigenous people, is the collapse of two different distinctions into a single word. The first is political: the relationship between a people and the state that encloses them. This is what Indigenous actually denotes, a matter of structure, power, and law. The second is ontological: how a lifeway relates to the living world, relational and reciprocal and intergenerational at one end, extractive and accumulative and present-tense at the other. This is a matter of values and practice.

The two correlate historically, because the states doing the enclosing were built on the extractive ontology and the peoples being enclosed largely carried relational ones. But they are not the same thing, and treating them as one produces predictable errors. Indigenous versus Western fails in both directions: the Sámi are Indigenous Westerners, and Japan is a non-Western colonizer. Industrialized versus non-industrialized freezes Indigenous peoples in pre-modernity, when Sámi herders manage reindeer with GPS and drones and Kānaka 'Ōiwi build apps; a people does not stop being Indigenous when it industrializes, and a state does not become Indigenous by staying poor. That framing is the romantic version of the same colonial move the racial version makes. It assigns Indigenous peoples a fixed cultural content in place of a political relationship, then revokes the status when the content changes. BIPOC, an American coalition term for the shared experience of racialization inside the United States, is useful for what it does, but it re-racializes the word Indigenous and exports a specifically American frame to places it does not describe. The Sámi are not BIPOC. Race is the wrong distinction.

What “Indigenous values” actually points at

When people say they want to lead with Indigenous values, what they almost always mean is the ontological distinction: reciprocity, intergenerational learning and accountability, seven-generations time horizons, kinship with the non-human, sustainability as a relation rather than a metric. Those values are real, and they are carried, kept, and developed by Indigenous lifeways. Two precisions keep the phrase honest.

They are lifeway-derived, not racially owned. These values emerged wherever people lived long enough in sustained relation with a place for the place to teach them, which is why they recur across unrelated Indigenous cultures, and why fragments of them survive inside Western traditions too. Saying Indigenous values when we mean relational values does two kinds of damage at once. It flattens the specificity of actual Indigenous knowledge systems, where Kānaka 'Ōiwi values are not

Lakota values are not Sámi values, and it lets settlers claim the aesthetic without the politics, the move Tuck and Yang named settler moves to innocence.⁸

They are also not a claim of natural virtue. The studio's position refuses the romantic claim as firmly as the colonial one. Indigenous peoples are not closer to nature by essence. They are peoples whose knowledge systems encode long relation with specific places, and who hold political rights as peoples. The values argument stands on the knowledge, not on an essential nature, and it survives industrialization, urbanization, and app-building intact, because knowledge travels with the people who carry it.

So the honest formulation is something like this: led by the relational values that Indigenous knowledge systems have kept alive and continue to develop, and accountable to the political reality the word Indigenous names. Both halves. The values without the politics is appropriation. The politics without the values is just another state project.

Why the studio offers a working definition

Setting out a definition can look like the very move the UN section refuses, the studio claiming for itself the power to fix what a people are. It is the opposite. The studio is not defining Indigenous from outside; it is declaring the register it works in, so that anyone reading the studio's work, commenting on it, or building alongside it knows which sense of the word is on the table. To define is to settle a people's meaning for them. To declare a register is to say plainly, here is what we mean when we use this word, so you can agree, disagree, or correct us without our talking past one another. The definition is not offered as the only one the studio will ever use. It is offered so that the context is affirmed each time the word is picked up.

When someone comments on the studio's work, or the studio comments on someone else's, the first question is whether both parties are holding the same word. If a foundation officer hears Indigenous as a racial category, a state agency reads it as a box to be counted in a census, and the studio means a political relationship between a people and the state that formed around them, then one sentence about Indigenous data, or Indigenous values, or Indigenous land reaches three different objects. Praise lands on one, objection on another, and neither touches what was actually said. That is not disagreement, which is useful. It is equivocation, which cannot be resolved, because no one is holding the same thing. A shared register is the precondition for a disagreement worth having.

Whether a data center's draw on a watershed needs the consent of the people who live there, whether a model trained on a language owes anything to the people who speak it, whether cultural knowledge can be taken for training at all: each of these turns on who counts as Indigenous and what the status carries. These are the questions the studio's other memos take up, and the instruments that govern them, free, prior, and informed consent, the right to control cultural heritage, the principles of Indigenous data governance, are built on the political definition and dissolve into nothing on the racial

or romantic one. Argue them from a flattened word and the argument never joins; the parties are not even contradicting each other. The studio's memos on AI and on water stand on this one for that reason, because the case each makes is only legible to a reader holding the political sense of the term.

So the definition is offered, not imposed, and offered first, ahead of the work that leans on it. It is the register the rest of the series is written in, and every Studio Wā memo that turns on Indigeneity points back here, so a reader knows which sense is in play before the argument starts. The studio will keep using the word. This is its account of what it means by it: open to revision, as the form requires, and firm enough in the meantime to build on.

Where Studio Wā stands

The studio cares about holding the word precisely because its own subject runs straight through it: whether many peoples' ways of keeping time are honored rather than overwritten, and whether a people holds real authority over its own time, both rest on the political sense of the word and dissolve on the loose one.

Studio Wā speaks for itself and no one else. Nothing here is offered on behalf of any Indigenous community, or of Kānaka 'Ōiwi broadly; it is one studio's position, held by the people who run it and open to correction by the people it concerns.

About Studio Wā living memos. A living memo is the studio's account of a topic as of the date it carries. Living means it will be revised as our learning grows, from written sources and from conversation, which the ground here requires.

Why this is Studio Wā work. Studio Wā is a Hawaiian-rooted studio concerned with how culture shapes our relationship to time: the ritual, art, and language through which a people build a temporal world and decide what their hours are for. Time here is not a quantity to be measured and spent but a relationship to be kept, and the question is whether that relationship stays reciprocal and rooted in culture or flattens into productivity and monetary value. That relationship is the studio's subject. Indigenous is the standpoint it works from, and the two meet in this word. To call a people Indigenous names a relationship between them and the state that formed around them, and that relationship is fought first over time: whose calendar governs, whose history counts as history, whose future is permitted to arrive. Hawaiian timekeeping is among the most sophisticated and fully elaborated temporal systems still in living practice, and an important part of the global inventory of temporal knowledge; it endures because the people who carry it refused the overwrite. This memo is where the studio sets the term the rest of its work on Indigenous matters stands on. Holding the word precise, lowercase from capital, values from politics, is itself part of that work, because the power to define a people from outside is the colonial move the word resists. That is not a digression from that work. It is the ground the work stands on.

References and further reading

Verified June 2026. Legal and demographic sources are listed first, followed by the scholarly reading the studio's stance draws on. All links are live in the Word and PDF exports.

- *Martínez Cobo Study: Study of the Problem of Discrimination Against Indigenous Populations*. United Nations, 1981–1983. The working definition's source. un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples
- *Who Are Indigenous Peoples?* UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, Fact Sheet. The “identify, not define” position; confirms UNDRIP carries no definition. un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii
- *Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989 (No. 169)*, Article 1. Self-identification as fundamental criterion. ohchr.org
- *Report of the African Commission's Working Group of Experts on Indigenous Populations/Communities*. ACHPR and IWGIA, 2005. The formal answer to “we are all indigenous.” iwgia.org
- *Japan: New Ainu Law Becomes Effective*. Library of Congress, 2019. Ainu recognized as Indigenous for the first time. loc.gov
- Tuck, E. and Yang, K. W. *Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor*. Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society, 2012. The source of “settler moves to innocence.” jps.library.utoronto.ca

To go further:

- Moreton-Robinson, A. *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty*. University of Minnesota Press, 2015. Goenpul (Quandamooka) scholar; the closest match to this memo's stance. Argues that the settler nation is constructed as a “white possession” that renders Indigenous sovereignty invisible by routing everything through race. The scholarly engine behind the claim that nothing in the framework is about race.
- TallBear, K. *Native American DNA: Tribal Belonging and the False Promise of Genetic Science*. University of Minnesota Press, 2013. Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate. The sharpest text on why defining Indigeneity by blood or race is itself a settler move, “biological colonialism”; the direct rebuttal to the “everyone is a little bit Native” version.
- Tuhiwai Smith, L. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. Zed Books, 1999; 2nd ed. 2012. Ngāti Awa and Ngāti Porou (Māori). The most foundational and accessible single entry on Indigeneity as a contested category; opens with a treatment of the term itself.
- Coulthard, G. *Red Skin, White Masks*. University of Minnesota Press, 2014, and Simpson, L. B. *As We Have Always Done*. University of Minnesota Press, 2017. The political-distinction grounding.

1. *Who Are Indigenous Peoples?*, UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues Fact Sheet: no UN body has adopted an official definition, and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples is premised on self-identification rather than a definition. un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii↵

2. *Martínez Cobo Study: Study of the Problem of Discrimination Against Indigenous Populations*, United Nations, 1981–1983. un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples↵
3. *Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989 (No. 169)*, Article 1(2): self-identification is regarded as a fundamental criterion. ohchr.org↵
4. *Who Are Indigenous Peoples?*, UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues Fact Sheet: no UN body has adopted an official definition, and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples is premised on self-identification rather than a definition. un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii↵
5. Estimates vary with method and census year. Guatemala's 2018 census records about 44 percent Indigenous; Bolivia's recent censuses range from roughly 39 percent to a majority depending on how identity is counted. Both populations are structurally non-dominant. *Indigenous Peoples in Guatemala* and *Indigenous Peoples in Bolivia*, IWGIA. iwgia.org/en/guatemala↵
6. *Report of the African Commission's Working Group of Experts on Indigenous Populations/Communities*, ACHPR and IWGIA, 2005: the term does not turn on priority of occupancy. iwgia.org↵
7. The Ainu Policy Promotion Act, effective May 2019, recognized the Ainu as an Indigenous people of Japan for the first time. *Japan: New Ainu Law Becomes Effective*, Library of Congress. loc.gov↵
8. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, *Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor*, *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 2012. jps.library.utoronto.ca↵