Scales, Translations, and Siding Effects: Uses of indígena and religión in Talamanca and Beyond

Bjørn Ola Tafjord

The words indígena in Spanish and ‘indigenous’ in English may mean many things. There is, for example, an evident (although not always noted) tension between uses of indígena or ‘indigenous’ that point at things that are special to a particular people and a particular place, and uses of indígena or ‘indigenous’ that point at things that relate to a kind of peoples who are found in most corners of the world; between indígena or ‘indigenous’ in a most culturally contingent and local sense and indígena or ‘indigenous’ in a transcultural and almost global sense. Besides, between the most local and the almost global senses of these words, there are wide spectra of uses which serve to claim belonging or origins on intermediary levels, for example with reference to a region, to a nation, or to a continent. To understand the work that the words indígena and ‘indigenous’ do, it is necessary to pay close attention to scales.

Uses of indígena and ‘indigenous’ do not necessarily correspond. Indígena has a trajectory of more than five hundred years in the Spanish speaking world, where this word has been used in various ways to point out the kinds of people who are thought to have their origins in, and thus to belong to, the lands into which Spanish has expanded historically.1 In comparison, until quite recently, the English word ‘indigenous’ was used mostly about plants and animals, and occasionally about particular people in particular places.2 It was only in the latter half of the twentieth century that it started to gain currency as a common category for a special kind of peoples, as it became part of partly new political discourses which have emanated from meetings between activists and politicians from oppressed ethnic groups from different parts of the world (see, for example, Clifford 2013; Niezen 2003; 2009). In most, if not all, of the encounters which have prompted or prompt uses of indígena or ‘indigenous,’ there are also other languages at play, other words, other worlds of references, and complex processes of translation.

---

1 Consult, for example, http://www.corpusdelespanol.org/, accessed April 10, 2015.
To further complicate the matter, the same words may be used by different actors for different purposes. *Indígena* or ‘indigenous’ are words which necessarily draw borders, words which distinguish and allocate, but each use is relative to its context and politically charged in its own particular ways. Yet, in an ever more interconnected world, no use is isolated from all others. Globalisation has brought about unprecedented conditions for reflexivity. New communication technologies make alternative uses of categories increasingly accessible for more and more people. This goes for academics’ analytical uses of categories, too. Actors with different agendas may easily adopt the words of scholars and use them in their own ways, for their own purposes, in their own contexts. In so doing, they may also tap into the authority of scholarship, intentionally or accidentally. When borders and categorisations are disputed, significant ‘siding effects’ may arise from academic work as some actors, at the cost of others, align their arguments with academic language and approaches – or as academics, willingly or not, align their descriptions with wordings which are used by particular interested parties.

For students of religions, it is of special interest to investigate how uses of *indígena* or ‘indigenous’ are combined with or related to uses of *religión* or ‘religion.’ This is what this chapter attempts to do, by focusing on articulations that have emerged in or about a specific space. My ethnographical and historiographical studies of events and processes in Talamanca, in eastern Costa Rica, provide the material for a contextual discussion. The aim is to shed light on how scales, translations, and siding effects arise from particular uses of *indígena* and *religión* or ‘indigenous’ and ‘religion.’ This survey of the Talamancan case will then allow me to ask a few critical questions about practices in the study of religions. One of these questions is better kept in mind from the start: How may the entanglements of scholarship in multifaceted reflexive processes make it a major contributor to constructions of ‘indigenous religions’ also in the communities and the contexts that we study?

My point of departure and the main thread through this enquiry is a focus on how the Spanish words *indígena* and *religión* have been used to define particular peoples and particular practices in Talamanca. Those whom I have spent most time with during my fieldwork, and who therefore guide my study, self-identify as Bribri. Most of them are bilingual and speak both Bribri and Spanish on a more or less daily basis. Translations or exchanges between Bribri and Spanish are thus a recurrent concern, although my limited literacy in Bribri prohibits me from probing deeply into details. Talamancan people and practices are also translated into English, sometimes by Bribris but more often by others, in contexts like tourism and education, or in texts and discourses.

---