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**On decolonising and indigenising Scottish Gàidhlig Studies:
a rejoinder to Armstrong et al.**

Iain MacKinnon

Abstract

In their response to my *Scottish Affairs* article ‘Recovering and Reconstituting *Gàidheal* Ethnicity’, Armstrong et al present misleading and misinformed beliefs about my views on identity and indigeneity. In doing so they distort and divert from my article’s focus.

Armstrong et al’s own views on identity and indigeneity not only contain problematic claims relating to ancestry and race, but also disclose superficial essentialist thinking. Indigeneity is not decided by abstract theorising or legal fiat, as Armstrong et al propose. Instead, the contemporary emergence of indigeneity in the *Gàidhealtachd* is happening in community settings among many self-identifying and community recognised or affirmed *Gàidheil*, and with support from those working in allyship. It is developing, and apparently intensifying, in relation to real-world experiences, concerns and aspirations.

Keywords: *Gàidheal*; culture; identity; indigeneity; essentialism; extractivism

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For Martyn Bennett, spirit guide on this journey.

In ‘Gaelic and Identity: a response to Iain MacKinnon’, Timothy Armstrong, Wilson McLeod, Rob Dunbar, Stuart Dunmore, Bernadette O’Rourke and Michelle Macleod critique my article ‘Recovering and Reconstituting *Gàidheal* Ethnicity’ in *Scottish Affairs*, 30.2 (MacKinnon, 2021) [henceforth RRGE]. Armstrong et al make a series of claims about my views as expressed in RRGE and elsewhere, some of which merit rejoinder. In the space available here, I will address the following aspects of my interlocutors’ argument:

- misleading and misinformed beliefs about my views on identity and indigeneity;
- essentialism evident in their own views on those issues;
- problematic claims relating to ancestry and race;
- problematic representation of the international Indigenous Peoples movement;
- distortion and diversion of the focus of RRGE’s arguments on ethnicity and indigeneity.

Surprisingly, my interlocutors persistently present inaccurate claims about my argument in RRGE without providing evidence or citations for them. This functions to obscure the processes of reasoning through which they arrived at mistaken conclusions. In addressing these issues I will therefore provide relevant page numbers from Armstrong et al and RRGE as reference points for my own claims.

Despite the limitations in Armstrong et al’s conceptualising of indigeneity, my interlocutors are nevertheless contributing to an important discussion on *Gàidheal* identity, and also indigeneity. Their response has helped bring to light a tension which has become clear to me through subsequent discussions with Indigenous scholars. That tension is between the relational and integral importance of lived cultural experience to indigeneity versus that of ancestry as identity, and I am grateful both to my interlocutors and also to *Scottish Affairs* for the opportunity to deepen awareness around it by contributing this rejoinder.

At the outset it should be noted that although Timothy Armstrong and Wilson McLeod were Armstrong et al’s lead authors, their article-length response was almost completely silent on the specific criticisms that RRGE makes of their work, particularly of their resituating *Gàidhlig* and *Gàidheal* identity as a linguistic identity.

In relation to the specific issue of ancestry, there is nothing in RRGE, or my previous work, to justify my interlocutors' interpretation and belief that I have defined *Gàidheal* identity simply by way of ancestry, nor is there anything to justify their mistaken conclusion that I hold an exclusivist and racially problematic conception of 'Gaelic identity and community' (Armstrong et al, 2021: 9, 18). As elsewhere, these claims were simply presented as fact but without substantiation.¹ In contradiction of their claims on ancestry, not only is there no evidence for them in the article to which they were responding, wherein the definition of ethnicity emphasised the importance of 'culture' as well as 'descent' (MacKinnon, 2021: 219), but also, at one point, Armstrong et al do acknowledge my emphasis on the role of both 'culture' and 'place' to identity (2021: 9). Thus, in addition to being based on a false premise, their argument appears to me to be internally inconsistent.

Moreover, previously published work of mine on this topic has argued that indigeneity be understood and treated as an 'inclusive' category, both in terms of self-identification and, importantly, in relation to cultural practice (MacKinnon, 2008; MacKinnon in Gordon, 2021). Given that Armstrong et al repeatedly cited (2021: 12, 14, 15) the 2008 report on indigeneity that I wrote for the Scottish Crofting Foundation (SCF) which arose out of my Masters thesis, it is particularly to be regretted that my interlocutors should have missed the passage in it which argues that indigeneity should be considered 'an inclusive concept, and is primarily to be regarded culturally, rather than racially or genetically' (2008: 2). This statement directly refutes their main claim that I define identity by ancestry. This is a claim which underpins Armstrong et al's argument throughout and thus renders much of that argument a fanciful strawman of assertions.

While I have repeatedly emphasised the importance of inclusivity and of lived experience in place to the shaping of identity, it is also true that since writing the SCF report in 2008 I have become more attentive to the situated importance of ancestry in defining indigeneity among Indigenous Peoples. Descent through ancestry is written into the definitional matter of the International Labour Organisation's Convention 169 on Indigenous Peoples (Article 1), and Indigenous colleagues with whom I have worked internationally have further emphasised the positive significance of ancestral descent as integral to fundamental group rights. Such recognition also provides protection from 'pretendians' who, in particular contexts, claim indigenous identity on spurious grounds for personal gain (For examples in the context of First Nations in Turtle Island/North America, see CBC, 2021; Nagle, 2019).

Importantly, while both the global movement of Indigenous Peoples and also the development of Indigenous rights within international human rights law situate indigeneity in terms of genealogical ancestry, language, culture, and customary practice, there is no recognition of pan-indigenous identity. Each context of indigeneity is locally situated and configured historically in relation to the expansion of nations and empires. There is much to reflect further on with this active question in the *Gàidhealtachd*. However, the pernicious position in which my interlocutors sought to place me, based on the misplaced assertion that I have defined identity ancestrally, requires more immediate rejoinder. Their insinuation (Armstrong et al, 2021: 9) that defining identity in ancestral terms marks a person as potentially racist is itself undoubtedly problematic as it speciously conflates ancestry with race – see Armstrong (2019) for explicit avowal of this position by their own lead author. Logically, this appears to be a form of category mistake. Ongoing debate on the contours of *Gàidheal* indigeneity, which may include consideration of the development of formal recognition based on historical antecedents, should proceed without spurious references to race.

Armstrong et al's claim that RRGE did not consider half a century of writing on 'Gaelic identity' (2021: 3) overlooks the fact that RRGE was not examining a linguistically focussed 'Gaelic' identity. Although Armstrong et al repeatedly assert that the issue at stake is 'language revitalisation' (2021: 1, 2, 3 & passim), that is not a focus of RRGE's argument, and such assertions misrepresent the case. Neither my article, nor the 'Scotland's *Gàidhealtachd* Futures' special issue as a whole, sought 'any single disciplinary focus' such as language studies. Instead, as the editorial introduction makes clear, it is 'ontologically oriented' and 'informed by cultural context, contemporary society and lived experience' (Oliver and MacKinnon, 2021: 147).

The great majority of the 'missing' literature cited by Armstrong et al is rooted in the specific language revitalisation project that has developed for *Gàidhlig* over the past 20 years. RRGE highlights this project (MacKinnon, 2021: 214) which, it is now apparent, is approaching a 'dead end' as a societal project. Much of this literature is, therefore, of limited relevance to the actual issues at stake in RRGE. Nevertheless, almost all the so-called 'missing' authors they allude to are to be found cited across the special issue.

In relation to the literature, Armstrong et al repeatedly emphasize Stuart Dunmore's findings on identity (2021: 6, 7), in particular that some young people in the Hebrides do not think of themselves as *Gàidheil*, as if this finding contradicted the argument in RRGE. However, the finding comes as no surprise to those of us who actually grew up as *Gàidheil* in the islands over the last forty years with the compounding intergenerational traumas of cultural dispossessions – I did not voluntarily self-identify as *Gàidheil* until I was in my thirties.

Dunmore appears to exemplify here the priorities, assumptions and methods of a research approach that has been thoroughly critiqued in Indigenous contexts because of the ways in which it 'may conspire to replicate colonization by placing Indigenous knowledge under the control of (predominantly non-Indigenous) researchers and institutions...transfer[ring] language knowledge [and authority] from communities to archives and academe' (Gaby and Woods, 2020: e269, e270). Incidentally, these views were part of a larger discussion on race held by the Linguistic Society of America (LSA, 2020) which reiterated the long-standing situation of academics performing extractive work in Indigenous communities while lacking significant wider interest in or commitment to the societal realities, including the cultural and spiritual, of the communities they take from, carrying out their research on the basis of a series of 'flying visits' to the area, and producing research publications which, despite high-flown aims, in fact, bring little or nothing by way of benefit to the communities whose knowledge has been extracted, although such publications often support the career development of the researcher towards other work elsewhere.

Gàidhlig sociolinguistics has become institutionally dominated by a 'new speaker' hierarchy group (discussed in MacKinnon, 2021: 214, 224, 225), a group which includes almost all the Armstrong et al authorship – some of whom, as RRGE has shown, spuriously problematize the very idea that *Gàidheil* exist in a culturally meaningful (or indeed non-utilitarian) way in Scotland today. In this regard Alice Gaby and Lesley Woods' concern is relevant, that culturally insensitive or desensitized language researchers may 'aggravate or compound colonial trauma' (2020: 269). The information such researchers extract from a range of Gaelic speakers, can then be framed to further overt or implicit majority culture ideological positions, rather than as a platform for critical intervention or dialogue in allyship with members of the minority culture group to support their marginalized societal existence. For examples of this approach, see Armstrong (2013: 349); Dunmore (2017: passim). For a thorough exposure of majority culture bias in Dunmore, 2017, see Ó Giollagáin et al, (2020:

133, 134). One set of alternatives to an approach which reduces research subjects to instruments of authorial voice and ideology can be found in participatory and indigenous methodologies (Chilisa, 2019; Bradbury (ed.), 2015). Such methodologies are also important for creating spaces for diversity within minoritized groups to exercise their own authorial voices and arguments – this was an approach James Oliver and I were influenced by as co-editors of ‘Scotland’s *Gàidhealtachd* Futures’.

Indigenous linguistic scholar Wesley Leonard observes that linguistic research can reinforce identity based ‘hierarchies and injustices by rendering languages as objects framed around dominant society’s interests and ways of knowing’. He proposes that majority group researchers may be unaware of these patterns of extraction, control and domination, ‘many of which are so embedded in the field that they become invisible except to those who directly experience them or make the effort to understand them’ (2020: e282). This analysis has parallels to Ó Giollagáin’s discussion of the ideological work of some members of the majority culture ‘new speaker’ *Gàidhlig* institutional elite (MacKinnon, 2021: 214, 224, 225).

Beyond misinterpreting my article and creating a strawman, Armstrong et al’s response consisted mainly of a series of demands for definitional exactitude around the concepts of ‘indigeneity’ and ‘ethnicity’ based on their prioritising of the use of these terms in legal instruments. The response thus operated on the presumption that legal and technical language determines precision on who these terms refer to, rather than social and cultural situations and relationships, and that this must be attained before political activity based on them can begin. It then argued that if the demanded level of definitional precision cannot be attained, then these ideas should be considered a ‘dead end’ and any action based on them cease (Armstrong et al, 2021: 9-17).

However, the limits of this legalistic approach are disclosed by Armstrong et al’s analysis of the relationship between International Labour Organisation (ILO) Convention 107 of 1957 and ILO Convention 169 of 1989, the two legally binding international instruments relating to indigenous peoples. Armstrong et al’s analysis focused solely on the instruments’ legal content, stating merely (2021: 12) that 169 was ‘meant to replace’ 107. No reasons were given as to why replacement was considered necessary. I will expand here for the benefit of the response authors and readers.

Luis Rodríguez-Piñero's definitive history of the ILO's legal regime relating to Indigenous Peoples discusses how Convention 107 was formed without involving those it affected and was 'based on a degrading conception of indigenous cultures as without value in themselves ... destined to be changed in the name of higher goals' (Rodríguez-Piñero, 2006: 211). Interestingly this is reminiscent of Armstrong's inferiorisation of what he calls 'the old core Gael identity' for the higher goal of language revitalization (see discussion in MacKinnon, 2021: 222).² International law professor, S. James Anaya, a former United Nations special rapporteur on indigenous issues, argues that the terms of Convention 107 reflected a wider mid-twentieth century value system that 'promoted the assimilation of members of the culturally distinctive indigenous groups into the dominant political and social orders that engulfed them ... breaking down competing cultural or ethnic bonds' (Anaya, 2004: 53). According to Indigenous scholar Makere Stewart-Harawira, this mid-twentieth century assimilationist agenda was an extension of the older colonial doctrine of trusteeship 'embedded in liberal racist ideologies' and 'premised on notions of indigenous peoples as "primitive", lacking "civilisation"' and destined 'to be subsumed within a universal family of nations' (Stewart-Harawira, 2013: 74-77).

By contrast, the preamble of ILO Convention 169 in 1989 recognized:

... the aspirations of [Indigenous] peoples to exercise control of their own institutions, ways of life and economic development and maintain and develop their identities, languages and religions, within the framework of the States in which they live.

Rodríguez-Piñero (2006: 258) argues this transformation 'is only comprehensible in the light of global normative and political development that ... resulted in a new approach to issues involving cultural diversity and, more particularly, indigenous peoples.' Therefore, co-ordinated, international political organizing and action by Indigenous Peoples was the crucial factor in the attitudinal development of international law towards them, transforming legal norms in ways which are still developing. (Anaya 2004: 56-58; Lightfoot 2016: 1-29, 33-71; Stewart-Harawira 2013: 131-139)

My interlocutors do not address this central causal factor of Indigenous activism in securing the normative attitudinal changes which shifted their pre-existing imposed and 'degrading'

position in international law to one which began to reflect their own views and aspirations. Effectively, Armstrong et al's argument superficially essentialises indigeneity in abstract, technical legal terminology, eliding the generative and motive force of political action which makes law happen – for a helpful distinction between shallow, or superficial, essentialism and deep essentialism, see Kockel (2014). Serious analysis of real-world decision-making cannot afford to ignore the political foundations of law which demonstrate that any prevailing legal provisions are normative, not final, and always contestable, as outmoded political and ethical values and norms are challenged. Were this not so, we would now be discussing *Gàidheal* indigeneity under the terms of the 1957 legislation, or, as referred to above, even the colonial doctrine of trusteeship – interestingly, the applicability of James Hunter's description ofcrofting governance as 'highly bureaucratic and paternalist' to the governance of the *Gàidhlig* language suggests that the attitude and doctrine of trusteeship may be the *de facto* position currently applied to the *Gàidhealtachd* (Hunter, 2010. See also MacKinnon, 2020).

My interlocutors' legalistic essentialism may also account for their unusual interpretation of indigeneity in Northern Europe. They claim the literature demonstrates that indigeneity there is 'exceedingly problematic' (Armstrong et al, 2021: 12). However, the collection of academic papers they think they are using to justify their claim does not actually take this point of view, as can easily be inferred from its title, *Knowing from the Indigenous North: Sami approaches to history, politics and belonging*. Furthermore, five of its eleven authors identify as Sámi, and, more plainly, the work's introduction states:

Its principal aim is to create a social science based on perspectives from the Indigenous North, by which we mean a particular epistemic position, a sensibility, a certain way of knowing and being in the world ... In this regard, our book is part of, and engages with, the Indigenous research paradigm which deliberately brings Indigenous perspectives, epistemologies and worldviews to the centre of academic knowledge production. (Valkonen, Valkonen and Ingold, 2019: 4, 6)

This is hardly a presentation of indigeneity as 'exceedingly problematic'. However, what is exceedingly problematic is the decision by six scholars based in Scotland, and themselves not identified in the article as indigenous, to characterize in wholly deficit, legalistic, reductionist and state-based terms a differentiated and global movement, including in Europe (Armstrong

et al, 2021: 12). In doing so these scholars give the appearance of ignoring the substantial practical cultural and community ontological benefits that have been achieved by Indigenous movements, including for languages, especially in the context of widespread structural racism. That the main reference they cite to support their use of these deficit terms does not actually justify that position makes their ideological determinism on indigeneity even more troubling. It risks evoking strategies of extinguishment more commonly typical of settler colonialism (Tully, 2008).³

Knowing from the Indigenous North also addresses the complexity and diversity of indigeneity, and particularly the problem for Sámi in Finland of administering a specific criteria-based approach. The collection highlights this problem for Sámi and the Finnish Parliament and its criterion of ‘historical tax records’ (N.B., Finland is only one administrative context for Sámi, who are situated in relation to four nation-states). *Knowing from the Indigenous North*’s introduction further observes that the institutional structures of autonomy gained by Northern Indigenous Peoples ‘are usually modeled on the powers of the state rather than on traditional forms of self-governance’ (Valkonen, Valkonen and Ingold, 2019: 5,6). It is clear, then, that there are specific political reasons that the Finnish Sami case is complex. Furthermore, as Sanna Valkonen articulates in the collection:

This debate that has been going on almost 30 years has demonstrated the complexity of implementing Indigenous rights recognised by international law in local circumstances which have been characterized by flexibility and relationality in understanding and crossing ethnic boundaries. (Valkonen, 2019: 156)

Contrary to a burgeoning global and transdisciplinary field of Decolonial and Indigenous studies and research, a range of which is resourced in the special issue’s editorial (Oliver and MacKinnon, 2021), my interlocutors reduce the plurality and spectrum of indigeneity to an essentialized binary of deliberately oversimplified stereotypes of everyday *Gàidheal* belonging (‘peat-cutting and crofting’ (Armstrong et al, 2021: 9,17)) versus a techno-legal bounding, ignoring the relational and situational in-between of ‘real people in a real place’ (Crichton Smith, 1986). It seems that the response authors seek to prioritize the limitations of a narrow, criteria-based approach, which no-one (as far as I am aware), other than my interlocutors, has proposed to apply in the *Gàidhealtachd* context.

The contemporary emergence of indigeneity in the *Gàidhealtachd* is being discussed, deliberated, advocated, contested and acted upon by many self-identifying and community recognised or affirmed *Gàidheil*, and with support from those working in allyship. This process is occurring primarily in community settings and local organisations and in relation to indigeneity's relevance to values, interests and aspirations as these are affected by interconnected real-world issues, such as access to land and all that land brings into cultural relation and political framing: including housing and employment, ecological degradation, renewable energy benefits, climate change responses, cultural devastation and its origins, health implications that may include alcoholism and other socially mediated epidemiological observations. Indeed, societally relevant conversations around inextricable issues of colonisation (internal and external), indigeneity and the decolonial, appear to be intensifying as part of what may indeed be a process of cultural awakening and conscientisation with clear historical echoes in the politics of land, language and people (McIntosh 2002; MacKinnon, 2008; Oban Times, 2011; Hunter, 2014; Misneachd, 2018: 10, 27-35; Merritt, 2020; Black, 2021; BBC, 2021; Roddick et al, 2021; Gordon, 2021; A. MacKinnon, 2021; Oliver and Bayjoo, 2021; Oliver 2021; McFadyen 2021).

In conclusion, the twenty-sixth United Nations' Commission of Parties (CoP26) on climate change was meeting in Glasgow as I wrote this rejoinder. CoP26 has brought more sharply into consciousness and imagination the impending collapse of ecological systems globally, with apocalyptic consequences for human societies within those systems. Arguably, these processes are already happening. As Hebridean human ecologist Alastair McIntosh has observed, those western islands of Scotland where *Gàidhlig* still survives to some degree as a language of community, have already lived through centuries of ecological degradation, and social and cultural devastation (McIntosh 2020: 165-192). This is the common experience of colonised peoples. However, despite such destruction, indigenous peoples are engaged in actions of survivance (Vizenor 1999), rebuilding locally and, in doing so, contributing globally. These hopeful and inspirational signs are present in the *Gàidhealtachd*, often aligned with community land ownership, and include the locally cultivated and futures-facing dialogues and actions on pressing social and environmental issues. In alignment with growing sensitivity to, and in solidarity with, the situations and struggles of other marginalised groups and ethnicities, such work offers the best hope for the resurgence of *Gàidheil* as a historically, culturally and place-grounded people, including societally based language revitalisation.

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¹ Other instances of Armstrong et al's unsubstantiated misrepresentation of my views include on the inter-related issues of territory (2021: 4) and my conception of assembly (2021: 16, 17).

² In his position as lead author, Timothy Armstrong (Armstrong et al, 2021: 10,11,13) acknowledges self-identification and group recognition as international good practice in determining group membership. However, his writing elsewhere (2019) discloses implementation of a pedagogical 'thought experiment' which contradicts international good practice on self-identification. In doing so it replicates the problematic non-involvement of affected groups in the construction of ILO's Convention 107 in 1957.

³ Professor Dunbar's previous work on indigenous language policy makes his decision to endorse this characterisation all the more extraordinary.