

# **What Remains of the Cultural Identity of Indigenous Africans?**

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## **What Remains of the Cultural Identity of Indigenous Africans?**

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**May our ancestors be honoured by our will to perpetuate African cultures! Our respect returns to the older previous generations which have fought for the survival of the indigenous people of the world. In their name, in that of my colleagues and members of the Permanent Forum, I salute the initiative of the CPSU/IPACC for the research into and valorisation of African Indigenous Peoples. To Dr Helena Whall and Ms Mala Mareachealee, I thank you for inviting me to this meeting while knowing that I do not master the language of the Commonwealth.**

To all of you present at this meeting, I greet you especially in the name of the indigenous Kinshasa of Congo, that each might find in the experience of our elders, courage and objectivity in thoughts about the rights and duties of the indigenous of today.

Our warm compliments to the South African State for its efforts towards the promotion of African languages and of ancestral heritage. May all the African States and their leaders live in the influence of the ancestors in discussion day and night in these difficult times. Dear African colleagues, be messengers for transmitting to your States, who trusted me to represent them at the Permanent Forum at the United Nations, all my thanks. With their help, and with yours, my friends, I will succeed in realising the mandate entrusted to me.

### **All that there was?**

In the past we were owners of vast territories where we had children who learned knowledge and skills, and ways to work collectively. Young people knew their rights and duties by heart; they practiced our customs, they respected their environment and managed their ecosystems according to certain rules. The education system was specific and the transmission of knowledge and other professional learning was done in local languages that were known by all.

Sickness was considered to be the result of idleness and consequently had no place in society as every member of the community produced something. We were happy and united and our earth was a place where it was good to live. We loved ourselves, loved others, and obeyed the laws of nature, which we had mastered thanks to the ancestral knowledge transmitted by our elders.

### **The systematic sweeping away of our culture and values**

The contemporary system has used all possible means to conquer the African continent. Indigenous people in Africa, who in the past were active, are today in a marginalised state. Deprived of everything, they are passive witnesses to the degradation of their ecosystems and are distanced from their own children by changes which have been imposed from the exterior, to the detriment of their own indigenous cultures. Yes the sweepers have come!

## **The systematic sweeping away of culture and values within Africa**

Economic reasons have led to a transformation of the communal property system into one of private property. This change has intensified in the postcolonial era and indigenous people are the victims of it as they depend on political decision-making by the privileged educated minorities who are more easily controlled by the Western system. With a few rare exceptions the African States have opted for the individualistic system not mastered by African peoples.

Indigenous peoples have been dispossessed of their land. Outside interests have been able, with or without State support, to appropriate the land of indigenous communities. The exclusive occupation of land leads to the award of the "titre aborigène".

"When this title is recognised, indigenous peoples at least hold a right that they can assert within the framework of the legal system" (Special Rapporteur May 2002). It is not easy however for indigenous people to gain access to the legal system, or the laws are not applied. It is said that a decision that is not applied is worthless. One of the big human rights problems which indigenous people come up against is that their rights and needs are often ignored.

The whole social organisation, the languages, the beliefs, and the history have been broken up and swept away by the new system. Indigenous people find themselves divided on the one hand into villagers, homogeneous under the authority of the charismatic chief, guardian and guarantor of customs and traditions, and on the other hand into more heterogeneous city dwellers. These non-traditional centres are managed by a western system which only preserves the folkloric aspect of cultural identity; its form, rather than content.

## **An instrument of assimilation and acculturation**

The school as created by the colonial system is an instrument of assimilation and acculturation where children learn in the languages of others. These languages are declared "national languages" in first position, to the detriment of their own languages.

It is our honour at this point to mention the exceptional case of Rwanda, followed by Tanzania, where citizens from the countryside to the town master African languages and where they are used in the administration. This is south of the Sahara. In the north, the promotion of African languages is making its way, notably concerning the Tamachek language.

Here in the South-African Republic, there are three officially recognised languages: Xhosa, Zulu and Sotho, while in DRC there are four: Kikongo, Kiswahili, Chiluba and Lingala. Little by little, we are witnessing Africans becoming aware and opting for schools which advocate a command of vernacular languages and *lingua franca*. Of course, language constitutes one of the essential cultural characteristics of any people, in the sense that they are tools for communication and an element for structuring thought and for giving meaning to the natural and social environment. To lose language is also surely to lose culture and thereby to lose our African identity.

## **The current situation**

*Idleness means unemployment and sickness*

Whereas the ancestral system was based on the acquisition of knowing and having, and learning was within reach of everyone vertically from adults to the younger, today we know nothing. We do not know our rights and duties, there is no more communication between generations, we are not trained to be useful to our communities, specialists of the individualist school we tolerate healthy people living in the community without doing anything. These people also need to satisfy their basic daily needs, they are called the unemployed!

*We have lost our personality*

We only think of poverty in terms of begging and, in Africa we even import foodstuffs.

## **Becoming aware**

At the present time we realise that the values and customs of one country cannot manage another. (Some people also try to get by, by all possible and probable means.) To do this, we first tried to find out if there is anything left to save; this is what leads us to ask this specific question:

## **What remains of our cultural identity?**

To know what remains of these good old times, we put this question to the indigenous people with whom I frequently rub shoulders, and to the research colleagues, collaborators, whose reactions I give you now.

A. Indigenous people said that up to now they still recognise and identify with their clans, their tribes, their ethnic groups, their chiefs and their territory. In the village everyone works and is productive. They respect the elders and are close to ancestral wisdom and to divinities. Villagers visit city dwellers out of solidarity and hence maintain the bare essentials with them. The colonial hurricane has met with different resistance from one group to another, so that today one is still able to speak of Suku, Shi, Nbilikimo, Zulu, Fang, Agonie, Ashanti, Bamileke, Tuareg, Namwezi, Bemba, Masai, Yoruba etc. all over the African continent. We are currently obliged to opt for multiculturalism, and rural cultural space has given way to that of the town.

Indigenous people do think that something essential persists which can be preserved for future generations, notably:

- acquisition at birth of authentic clan names.
- traditional marriage remains a prerequisite for all other celebrations be they official or religious. It is validated by dowry.
- the basis of mourning follows the pattern of the ancestors in villages and towns.
- traditional cultural, tribal and ethnic organisations exist in the untraditional agglomerations.
- use of ancestral medicines is very common.
- magical and mystical beliefs.
- wearing amulets for protection against evil spirits is in fashion.

the religious wandering into everyday language: marabou, mlozi, ndoki, douva, kichaa.

B. The indigenous still think clan organisation remains which translates into vertical stratification, that is to say the rights of elders etc.

- attachment to the land where our sacred sites are, confiscated lands where we had our Mahero, Zembu etc.

C. The situation in Africa for indigenous peoples is ambiguous. We have seen that the indigenous who yesterday were land owners, have become beggars on their own continent:

- because of the economic difficulties many African countries are experiencing, “the persistent state of misery of indigenous people is an insult to our common humanity” (A Global Quest for Justice 1987/ Special Report – 2002).

- because of armed political conflicts.

- because of the negligence of African States who do not respect their duties towards citizens, who then return to their respective clans, where they feel better protected, for example, people displaced by war and victims of prolonged economic embargos think only of returning to their homes if these are intact, as their ancestral language is spoken there. They want to return to their respective ancestral values.

### **Difficulties**

Recuperation is very slow because of the intellectual laziness of African linguists. They lack the courage to confront languages without alphabets, to take the initiative of creating alphabets and obtaining writing for certain vernacular languages.

- There is a requirement for special training and pedagogical skills for teachers.

- There is a lack of production of schoolbooks and educational materials in the indigenous languages of Africa.

- There is a questioning of traditional ideas about culture and identity, and the world should be reminded that the cultures of indigenous people contribute to a universal culture. For this reason the future has positive aspects.

### **Cultural heritage for future generations**

The emphasis is on conceptual redefinition. Researchers have proposed promoting local languages, these being cultural signifiers. It goes without saying that linguistic rights are human rights.

- Imposing languages on the indigenous is cultural genocide. All assimilative policies are policies of cultural genocide.

- There should be teaching in the mother tongue, the best way to correct the current situation. There is the human right, that is to say leaving to our children what we know, having faith in our system. For example, in these times where indigenous people do not have access to modern health care, and are condemned by the system of western hospitals, healers save lives or prolong them for up to ten years.

## **Recommendations**

- that African States carry out a radical transformation of the school system for an education useful to Africans;
- for a plan of action in favour of indigenous people, their point of view must be known, therefore it is imperative:
- to carry out a systematic census of the indigenous of the African continent and of the Commonwealth in particular;
- that the Earth of our ancestors be returned to the indigenous and above all that they be involved in any development projects via prior free and informed consent;
- that the cultural and linguistic rights of indigenous people be recognised.

This is my contribution about the little that remains to us of cultural identity in Africa; let us preserve it in order to survive as indigenous people.

Bibi Njuma

## **Sources**

- Experience of stays in the field with indigenous people
- Oral consultations with indigenous people living in towns
- United Nations documents:
  - UNESCO: cultural heritage
  - WHO: contribution/programme for the international decade of indigenous peoples
  - ILO: convention 169 – 1989
  - Permanent Forum: report on the 1<sup>st</sup> Session –2002
  - OHCHR: world conference against racism – 2001
  - Working group/ UN: plans for a declaration on indigenous peoples.

## Appendix

### Main texts devoted to indigenous people by the United Nations:

#### 1. Convention 169/ILO – 1989

Ratified by 14 countries of which none are African.

This Convention remains the only international legal instrument in force, open to ratification, specifically aimed at the rights of indigenous and tribal people.

#### 2. Agenda 21 - 1992

Indigenous people should be integrated into the programme on the environment, and even into the exercise of control of their lands and into more autonomous management of their resources.

#### 3. Convention on Biological Diversity – 1992

Signed by 141 States.

Special attention to article 8(j): The innovative and practical knowledge of indigenous communities, their contribution to conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity.

#### 4. Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

Wish: this Declaration should be adopted before the end of this decade.

#### 5. Inter-American declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples

-1940: 1<sup>st</sup> inter-American congress: “indigenous issue”, hence “indigenous problems”

-1990: the elaboration of a project for a declaration currently under examination.

#### 6. Vienna Declaration and plan of action – Vienna 1993

Part I, paragraph 20:

This document put the emphasis on indigenous peoples’ unique participation in and contribution to development and the diversity of societies, and recommended:

“States should, *inter alia*, guarantee for them the respect of all human rights of principles of equality and of non-discrimination, recognise the value and diversity of their identities, of their cultures and of their social organisation”.

#### 7. Durban Declaration and plan of action – Durban 2001

Here, it is acknowledged that indigenous peoples are victims of multiple discrimination above all because of their origins and their identity (paragraph 39) and, that in order for them to express their own identity, their freedoms and fundamental rights should be respected (paragraph 42).

There was however much disappointment at Durban compared to expectations.

#### 8. Declarations/directives of the UN

Notably:

*UNESCO 1990: Declaration on cultural diversity*

Underlines the ethnic imperative which is a prerequisite to the protection of human rights.

*United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Working Group.*

Part II: Article 6 in summary says that collectively indigenous people have the right to live in freedom, in peace and in safety. They must have guarantees against genocide, against displacement of indigenous children, families and communities.

Article 7 involves the right to protection from ethnocide.

Article 10 provides for the right not to be displaced from their territories, and if it has happened, the right to return or to compensation.

Article 14: the right to public manifestations of their culture.

Article 17 even provides for the right to establish media in their languages.

Part V:

Article 26: the right to manage their lands.

Article 28: the right to the protection of their environment.

Article 29: the right to protect their ancestral knowledge.

*Permanent Forum:*

A consultative body of the UN. It is composed of 16 members including 2 African: Mr. Ayitegu Kuevi (Togo), in the name of indigenous people, and Mrs. Njuma Ekundanayo (DRC), in the name of African States.

The only body within which the UN representatives of the indigenous peoples and of States sit simultaneously, independently and as equals. They are called experts.

The mission of the Permanent Forum:

Responsible for examining indigenous questions from ECOSOC about economic and social development, culture and education, the environment, health and human rights.

- Mr. Ayitegu Kuevi is concerned with human rights and Mrs. Njuma Ekundanayo with culture and education.

Its creation:

After a long process, the Permanent Forum saw the light of day in New York on 13<sup>th</sup> May 2002.

For all else, consult the report of the 1<sup>st</sup> Session, written by Njuma Ekundanayo in June 2002.