

The Indigenous Peoples Rights Question in Africa

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Madam Chairperson, fellow representatives and friends in the struggles of indigenous peoples rights, first, I convey from Africa the message of unity and resolute determination to consolidate the strive for our common course. I have learnt that this is the first time that representatives of any community in Africa have been able to attend this very important forum. This is a historic moment for us. We are only two in attendance, both from Tanzania, of the Hadza and Maasai communities. I take this opportunity to express our very profound appreciation of the generosity of the UN Voluntary Fund and the NGO Human Rights Fund for Indigenous Peoples which have helped to sponsor our trip to Geneva. We look forward to the future when more delegates from Africa will be able to make use of this valuable forum. Also would you please accept my wish for your attention and time to introduce our plight and to provide you with some basic information about the situation in Africa which has not been aired in this forum before.

The environment for human rights in Africa is severely polluted by the ramifications of colonialism and neo-colonial social and economic relationships in which we are compelled to pursue our development and sovereignty in a global system replete with injustices and exploitation. Let us keep in mind the fact that the overwhelming majority of African countries attained political independence only in the decade of the 1960s. That is, most have existed as sovereign political entities for a period of less than three decades. And indeed the process of decolonialisation is still in progress in Africa. The struggle of the peoples of South Africa against direct and indirect bondage of apartheid allied with the might of Western economic hegemony provides ample testimony of the agonies of Africa in its

determination to overcome the inhumanities of colonialism and neo-colonialism.

In that ahistorical context, African countries are at present going through a necessary phase of consolidating the fabric of national identity and unity of all their peoples, free from the destructive afflictions of tribalism which have already created massive losses of life in several countries. These historical factors are crucial in seeking to place into perspective the question of the human rights of indigenous and distinctive cultural communities in Africa.

However, in common with other regions of the world, Africa is not composed of a monolithic human cultural population. This holds equally true in the case of the different countries of our continent. Most African countries have peoples of diverse cultural roots. What is more, almost a century of colonialism has left a legacy of very unequal access to education which has in turn created wide disparities in participation in the apparatus of the state and the national economy. Yet there is hardly any African state that has a charter of rights that gives recognition to the existing cultural diversity.

Preoccupation with the promotion of the rights of the majority and the vital need to consolidate national identity and unity are beyond doubt necessary undertakings. But these concerns should never be pursued to the exclusion of the protection of the legitimate rights of vulnerable minorities. To do that undermines the very objective of national unity and places a primary component of human rights to cultural diversity outside the agenda of national ethics, integrity and freedom to development options.

In Africa, uniformity of approach and state monopoly of interpretation of national identities and also the conception of what development actually means have thrown wide open the floor for prejudices against the fundamental rights and social values of those peoples with cultures that are distinctly different from those of the mainstream of national population. Such prejudices have crystalized in many African countries into blatant cultural intolerance, domination and persistent violations of the fundamental rights of minorities.

In East Africa there are two main categories of vulnerable minority peoples who have been in consequence subjected to flagrant violations of community and individual rights. These are hunters and gatherers, namely the Hadza, Dorobo and Sandawe together with many ethnic groups who are pastoralists. The Maasai of Tanzania and Kenya are the largest and most widely known of the many pastoral peoples of East Africa.

These minorities suffer from the common problems which characterise the plight of indigenous peoples throughout the world. The most fundamental rights to maintain our specific cultural identity and the land that constitutes the foundation of our existence as a people are not respected by the state and fellow citizens who belong to the mainstream population. In our societies the land and natural resources are the means of livelihood, the media of cultural and spiritual integrity for the entire community as opposed to individual appropriation. The process of alienation of our land and its resources was launched by European colonial authorities at the beginning of this century and has been carried on, to date, after the attainment of national independence. Our cultures and ways of life are viewed as outmoded, inimical to national pride and a hindrance to progress. What is more, access to education and other basic services are minimal relative to the mainstream of the population of the countries to which we

are citizens in common with other peoples.

Let it be understood, we do not advocate separatism but assert the fundamental human right to maintain our cultural identity within the framework of united nations of Africa. We do not expect overnight change. We trust that our modest plea in this most appropriate forum of the United Nations has been understood. We speak with the total conviction that respect for our differences strengthens unity and national identity in our countries and the world at large.

With the greatest respect to mother earth, the cradle of all life, I salute you all. Thank you very much for your time and attention.