

**Report on the UN Working Group on Indigenous Peoples  
of the Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights  
Geneva, 21st annual session, 21 to 25 July 2003**  
*by Wilbert Verheyen*

**Introduction**

Thanks to my two Subud colleagues, Katherine Carré and Floriane Syfrig, I was informed of the above mentioned Working Group that had as principal theme “ Indigenous Peoples and Globalization”. Floriane arranged even my very comfortable lodging, some very wholesome meals and above all the latihan near the hostel where I was staying. I feel grateful for all the time and money they spent on me during this visit. My thanks also to SDI who supported me with the finances for travelling and lodging during these unforgettable days.

I didn't go there without some prejudices about the way U.N. bodies usually are working but that changed from the first morning onwards of this efficient week. It was a gathering of a thousand people from all over the world who were eager to be heard: representatives of the Pygmies of Africa, the Gypsies of Romania, the Inuit or Eskimos of Canada, the Touareg and other Berbers of the Sahara, the Massai of East Africa, the numerous tribes of South, Central and North American Indians, Laplanders or, better, “call us Sami” of North Scandinavia, the Maoris of New Zealand, the Aborigines from Australia, the Pacific Islanders, including my Papuans and the Dayaks of North Borneo, the Hawaiians, the indigenous peoples of Japan and the Philippines etc. But also the governmental representatives of their countries were there who were not always pleased with the accusations of their “human law-less” residents who didn't like to march to the music of the mainstream population in their countries.

The Cuban Chair and the Secretariat of the Working Group gave all of us a chance to write out, print out and speak out our grievances and ideas without fear. The other four Experts of the Working Group made their introductions before the various agenda points came up. After the election of the officers, the adoption of the agenda and the organization of the work of the session, items 4, 5, 6 and 7 came up:

4. Review of developments regarding the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms of indigenous peoples:

(a) General Debate,

(b) Principal Theme: “Indigenous peoples and globalization”.

5. Standard-setting.

6. Other matters

Cooperation with other U.N. bodies in the sphere of indigenous issues;

Follow-up to the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and related Intolerance;

Review of activities undertaken under the International Decade of the World's Indigenous People;

State of the voluntary funds.

7. Presentation of the conclusions and recommendations of the Working Group at its twenty-first session.

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The reason for my going to the meeting was triggered off by my interest in the situation the Papuans of New Guinea (now called West Papua) and the Dayaks of Kalimantan. During my thirteen years in New Guinea I had seen how the coastal Papuans gradually were pushed into the interior by new-comers and their legal advisors, notaries, who did “clever” deals with local people who never had heard about buying or selling land to transmigrants and transnational corporations. Not only their land was gone but also their family structure, their

customary law and language, in short they had lost their identity. The elderly couldn't do much about it because the young men had adopted strange ways now, not working in the gardens anymore but had become engaged in the businesses of foreigners, paid for by food in tins; the girls had gone working in the households of the strangers and the more daring ones had gone farther away next to the mining projects where they were selling their bodies.

When I visited Kalimantan in the beginning of the nineteen eighties, I asked the Rector of the University of Palangka Raya if it wasn't the time to start a law faculty to train his Dayak students to become notaries so that they could inform their people of the complicated western way of buying and selling land; this law faculty was only recently established after twenty years of waiting.

However, other positive requests came from the five faculties of this campus. Generally speaking the questions were about their identity: the history of the Dayak population, about their language, about their customary law and their land rights in particular; many answers are hidden in archives of the Dutch and other national libraries and museums, and their conservators are more than pleased to answer their questions, even to send relevant documents in the form of CD ROMS to them.

The bitter experiences I had gained in New Guinea acted as a stimulus to become actively interested and involved in, and hopefully committed to, the finding and safeguarding of the real values of the Dayak population, values that are on the brink of being lost for good.

Generally speaking I see the work of Subud members in Kalimantan as a pilot project for our approaches in Africa and, even wider, in the globalizing world of today.

This was the reason why I was interested in participating in this Working Group.

#### **Item 4a: The General Debate**

Even before the real meeting started there were opportunities to become acquainted with other participants: in the bus from the airport to the bus terminal, I met an Indonesian young man who had a seven month fellowship from the High Commissioner for Human Rights and he helped me later on to find my way in the labyrinth of the office buildings.

When I was queuing up to get my badge I came in contact with a huge American Indian, a friend of Leonard George, the son of Dan George, the Old Indian in the Walt Disney Movies. Ilaine Pevac had befriended me with Leonard and so we had something to talk about.

While waiting for the first meeting, I met the team from the Philippines who were very concerned about the mining companies in their country; I could tell them that "Mining-in-the-other way" was done by Mansur Geiger and his companions in Kalimantan and that UNCTAD could give them information as their office was in the same building as ours.

It was interesting to see the Ecuadorian Indians in full traditional attire manipulating their high tech equipment: several laptops and the newest digital camcorder.

There were almost a thousand members of eighty indigenous populations together at this twenty-first session of the Working Group, opened by the Acting High Commissioner of Human Rights who stressed the fact that the national human rights protection systems had to be used too so that the poorest of the poor indigenous peoples could receive help. He was asking the representatives of NGOs to help the indigenous

peoples to tell their stories and speak to their governments in the spirit of dialogue.

Then they started to tell their stories and were asking for all the human rights for all the members of their communities, political, economic, social and cultural, sometimes raising their voices so high that the translators had difficulties to bring their message down to us.

Just before lunch time on the first day, Floriane and Katherine came in to guide me to one of the restaurants of the complex; here Katherine was telling me that many of the participants were regular yearly visitors of this indigenous event and gradually I got the feeling that all these numerous people were in the process of clustering together, knowing each others problems and solving them together in a worldwide movement.

This agenda point was for me as a picture of Brueghel, who had painted all disablements and ailments of his small world, but now stated by more than hundred people in front of the real United Nations, people telling each other their concerns. The continuous bad behaviour of governments, the military, the trans-national corporations and the threatening loss of social and cultural values were the order of the day in the reports of the new-comers. Sometimes more positive aspects had to be exposed as the frequently-visiting elderly had to tell the W.G. that the money for their free tickets and lodgings had been well spent during the last year.

#### **Item 4b: Indigenous Peoples and Globalization**

After the General Debate, an Expert of the Working Group, Dr. Guisse of Senegal, introduced this theme with a very negative speech about the aftermath of colonial egoism: the autonomy of African states which was immediately followed-up by the global and trans-national companies who didn't care at all about the indigenous peoples they had driven out. On the other hand, he felt that Africa could give the values the western materialistic world was hankering after, namely human and cultural values. Another Expert of the W.G., Mrs. Hampson of the U.K., explained the impact globalization has on the languages of the indigenous peoples and on their cultural rights.

On the second day of this gathering 34 voices were heard, some of them were harsh and asking for revenge on governments, the military and trans-national globalizing companies. Other people were asking quietly for help in a subdued way as if they were apologizing that they were indigenous people.

In the meantime Mrs. Hampson, "the human lawyer" was already preparing agenda item No. 5 about Standard-setting: how far can we use the law to get our human rights against the trans-national corporations; national systems can't be used because these corporations are not under the control of states anymore. So we can't use the law; she talked about hard law and soft law or customary law. But another law specialist Mrs. Motoc from Rumania thought that customary law or adat-law couldn't be used as it was not recognized as law, so we have to try to work in an indirect way by using other human rights.

During the afternoon the problem of Indigenous Peoples and Globalization came up as the principal theme. Several times the Chairperson had to stop the speakers as they were seduced into talking continuously about the situation in their countries whereas he needed more information about globalization in general. Also here we heard a lot of negative approaches as if globalization was per se destructive and not neutral.

The negative approaches were mainly about the behaviour of giant corporations in the field of oil exploration, mining, agriculture and production of medicines and food; the behaviour of state and provincial governments by the selling of the indigenous peoples' land to foreigners, by using the military force to get the

indigenous people into the mainstream of national social behaviour, national language, national educational systems and laws and state religion, without any form of self-determination, none at all in cases where the state decided to sell the natural resources and the indigenous culture to non-indigenous people. One of the participants felt that they were sold by international companies as souvenir objects for foreigners. A young Indonesian lawyer talked about the identity crisis of her people in Sulawesi: "They don't know any more who they are". At the end of the day Mrs. Hampson stressed the conservation of local languages that could be promoted again via regional radio programmes.

The following day, 23/7, the globalization item had to go till the bitter end, till all the speakers were heard although the time for the individual speakers was limited to 4 minutes.

The Berbers of Morocco expressed their feelings and asked permission to live in their own cultural environment and to speak their own language. The Tahitian people of the Pitcairn Islands in Polynesia more than 3000 miles away N.E. from New Zealand, until now a British colony with as governor the British High Commissioner in New Zealand, were asking politely to be allowed to speak their own language under the overwhelming occupation of British troops being there as a defence base on their small island. Mrs. Rina David is teaching the South American women home economics in their own language and Mr. David added: "Neglecting the mother tongue is killing the culture".

Representatives of the National Council of the Pacific were stating: "Being globalized is being dominated. So we need new ideas e.g. going back to our own food, our own way of life". From the lips of Lupaka, one of the speakers for the indigenous people of Peru, came the wise words: "Let us, men and women, go back to our indigenous knowledge" and her compatriot, Mrs. Pineda, was asking that their indigenous art should be respected, because "globalization is jeopardizing our own culture". Several times we heard the warning that commercial tourism is doing the same: "Even our local celebrations have been distorted; feasts from 2000 years ago are now becoming changed without any original content."

The indigenous people of Burma asked for help to get their cultural heritage back, afraid for the fragmentation of their identity. Grappa Hawa of Cameroon said: "Globalization is for the North, not for Central Africa" and the man of Niger said: "First the West has split up our people in their arbitrary way and now globalization is the last means of the West to destroy my people. Even our places of worship are being destroyed. Please help us".

As one of the speakers I got the floor to make this statement:

*Mr. Chairman, Brothers and Sisters,*

Numerous fundamental freedoms are taken away from indigenous peoples by tough governments and by tougher international corporations; we heard about it during these last days.

Now we focus on "indigenous peoples and globalisation". You, Mr. Chairman, invited non-governmental organisations such as Susila Dharma International to provide information in a forward-looking exchange of views and information between indigenous peoples, States, UN-bodies and NGOs.

The view of Susila Dharma International is the following: Globalisation has not only an impact on political and economical but also on socio-cultural processes, resulting in the loss of cultural identity.

But on the other hand, the confrontation with globalisation can also foster a re-orientation towards one's own cultural origins and towards cultural revival, even towards the emergence of new cultural identities, assisted by the Internet that promotes indigenous peoples' languages, cultures, history and arts.

Much of the heritage of the indigenous peoples is hidden in archives of former colonizing countries: in libraries, museums and universities worldwide.

We would like to ask this working group to pay attention to this problem so that these hidden treasures at least in the form of CD ROMS are sent back to the places of origin. Their history, their original way of life and their language can so be used not only for the education of their own offspring, but also for the cultural enrichment of the world at large. UNESCO also will be pleased to help them, at least I hope so.

*Thank you.*

Item 5, the Setting of Standards is already mentioned before.

Item 6, Other Matters

The cooperation with other United Nations bodies in the sphere of indigenous issues.

- a) The communication technology and globalised commercial interests and indigenous peoples
- b) Follow-up to the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance.
- c) Review of activities undertaken under the International Decade of the World's Indigenous Peoples; This session gave participants the opportunity to express their general appreciation of the International Decade of the World's Indigenous Peoples. It was the occasion for them to give their evaluation about the work that has been achieved throughout the decade, and the work that is still to be done.
- d) State of the Voluntary Funds.

It was very clear that even this Working Group had suffered under the general economic depression in the world and the Chair apologized that the budget had not provided anymore the traditional drinks after the meetings. There were even rumours that the U.N. people higher up had suggested that this Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights be transferred to New York.

e) Rising Oceans: The Life of Indigenous Peoples at Stake.

On the day the Working Group opened its 21st Session, the participants agreed that a new issue demanded immediate action. Entitled "Human rights situation of indigenous people in states and territories threatened with extinction for environmental reasons", this new issue was added on the agenda.

Item 7, Presentation of the conclusions and recommendations of the working Group at its twenty-first session.

The Final Declaration and the Recommendations related to the 21st Session Working Group on Indigenous Populations will be presented during the second week of the Sub-Commission on Human Rights, by the Chairman of the Working Group on Indigenous Populations.

I should like to close this report now, but I intend to write some more about the active involvement of SDI and SD Nationals in the work of the U.N. bodies in the future so that we can face the problems of the world and their solutions with a "Hati Maknawi" as Bapak suggested, that is with a heart that is as wide as the ocean.