

OUR OWN VOICES

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“It is the heart broken that I must affirm that since several months I am against the most cruel indifference . . . My appeal to the Society of Nations has not been heard, and nothing in the attitude of Government [leaves] me any hope.

It is in this dreadful agony that I take the advantage to cry out that injustice, by the means of your free review, to my Brothers from all races and all religions. Too long we have suffered from the tyranny of our neighbors who tread under feet our Right, and laugh at the Pact which binds them . . . Our appeal is for all those which are animated by the spirit of justice and we ask them their benevolent help.”

**The Cayuga Chief Deskaheh, November 1924,
in a letter to the editor of a Swiss journal**

“I ask you a question or two. Do not hurry with your answers. Do you believe – really believe – that all peoples are entitled to equal protection of international law now that you are so strong? Do you believe – really believe – that treaty pledges should be kept? Think these questions over and answer them to yourselves.”

**On the evening of March 10, 1925, Deskaheh in his last speech,
before a radio microphone in Rochester, NY.**

Introduction

As the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues meets for the first time in New York City, May 13th – 24th, 2002 we can remind ourselves of our strengths and the strengths of our ancestors.

We, the Indigenous Peoples and Nations from around the world, are over 300 million strong. We represent thousands of still existing Nations, cultures, and languages, as well as our millions of relatives in the natural world. We speak for and represent our ancestors and our children yet unborn, unto the seventh generation. Above all we speak for our Mother, the Sacred Mother Earth.

Despite five centuries of unspeakable encroachment on our lands and territories, deplorable acts of violence against our peoples, and attempts to force alien values and beliefs on our way of life, we are still here. And we are speaking out to the world. In our efforts to bring world attention to the shared experiences of Indigenous Peoples worldwide, we have worked for over 75 years to have a voice in the international arena.

The first trip to the League of Nations in Geneva, Switzerland was by the Cayuga Chief Deskaheh in 1923.* In 1977, a delegation of 165 Native people from North, Central, and South America (including a 21 person delegation from the Haudenosaunee Confederacy) traveled to the International NGO Conference on “Discrimination Against the Indigenous Populations of the Americas.” This history is powerfully documented in the book **Basic Call to Consciousness**. The 1992 gathering of Indigenous Peoples and Nations from around the world in New York City to address the General Assembly of the United Nations (at the opening ceremonies of the International Year of the World’s Indigenous Peoples) is well documented in the book **Voice of Indigenous Peoples**.

Excerpts from these books are shared here as a reminder of the work that has gone before us to bring us to this historic moment. We are also including a statement from the Saami Council, and a small paper that asks why we do this work. What has happened has not gone unnoticed, unrecorded, or unchallenged by Indigenous Peoples worldwide, some of whom who have entered the Spirit World. It is now our responsibility to continue to notice, to continue to record, to continue to challenge - to send out our voices to the ones who are able to listen in this world.

* followed by a delegation of Maori from New Zealand in 1924.

Excerpts from

Basic Call To Consciousness

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PO Box 180, Summertown, TN, 38483, 1978. (phone 1 800 695 2241, \$9.95)

Native delegates, on entering the United Nations Headquarters in Geneva in 1977,

“We may seem small yet – but we represent the aspirations of millions and millions of people – small nations which will be recognized.”

“And it must be said, one and another time. Say it, say it, say it – let the words go out.”

“If enough of us say it – often enough – we let it loose. It will carry itself.”

“Colonialism is the process by which we are systematically confused.

“Colonialism – from the word colony: to be controlled from afar.

“Confusion – an agent of control.

“The confusion takes many shapes and forms (gimmicks) that overlap creating layers, many, many layers.

“Western Civilization – the history of mankind since the beginning of its contradictory relationship with nature. The most basic contradiction. The history, also, thousands of years old, of the refinement of colonialist techniques. So successful that it no longer needs to regenerate the techniques, but rather, it perpetuates them.

“Natural World Peoples – Nations of human beings which developed governments, religions, cultures and economies that fit their activities to the cycles of Nature. Non-colonialist by definition.”

“Western technology and the people who have employed it have been the most amazingly destructive forces in all of human history. No natural disaster has ever destroyed as much. Not even the Ice Ages counted as many victims.”

“Today the species of Man is facing a question of the very survival of the species. The way of life known as Western Civilization is on a death path to which their own culture has no viable answers. When faced with the reality of their own destructiveness, they can only go forward into areas of more efficient destruction.”

“The air is foul, the waters poisoned, the trees dying, the animals are disappearing. We think even the systems of weather are changing. Our ancient teaching warned us that if Man interfered with the Natural laws, these things would come to be. When the last of the Natural Way of Life is gone, all hope for human survival will be gone with it. And our Way of Life is fast disappearing, a victim of the destructive processes.”

“Our essential message to the world is a basic call to consciousness. The destruction of the Native cultures and people is the same process which has destroyed and is destroying life on this planet. The technologies and social systems which have destroyed the animal and the plant life are also destroying the Native people. And that process is Western Civilization.”

“The majority of the world does not find its roots in Western culture or traditions. The majority of the world finds its roots in the Natural World, and it is the Natural World, and the traditions of the Natural World, which must prevail if we are to develop truly free and egalitarian societies.”

“It is the people of the West, ultimately, who are most oppressed and exploited. They are burdened by the weight of centuries of racism, sexism, and ignorance which has rendered their people insensitive to the true nature of their lives.

We must all consciously and continuously challenge every model, every program, and every process that the West tries to force upon us. Paulo Friere wrote, in his book, the PEDAGOGY OF THE OPPRESSED, that it is the nature of the oppressed to imitate the oppressor, and by such actions try to gain relief from the oppressive condition. We must learn to resist that response to oppression.

The people who are living on this planet need to break with the narrow concept of human liberation, and begin to see liberation as something which needs to be extended to the whole of the Natural World. What is needed is the liberation of all the things that support Life – the air, the waters, the trees – all the things which support the sacred web of Life.

We feel that the Native peoples of the Western Hemisphere can continue to contribute to the survival potential of the human species. The majority of our peoples still live in accordance with the traditions which find their roots in the

Mother Earth. **But the Native peoples have need of a forum in which our voice can be heard. And we need alliances with other peoples of the world to assist in our struggle to regain and maintain our ancestral lands and to protect the Way of Life we follow [emphasis ours].**”

Excerpts from

Voice of Indigenous Peoples
Native People Address the United Nations

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Published by Clear Light Publishers, Santa Fe, NM (phone 1 800 253 2747, \$12.95)
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From the Foreword by Boutros Boutros-Ghali, Secretary-General of the United Nations

“The really crucial role of the United Nations is to promote and protect the human rights of indigenous people. ... Human rights are universal, but the promotion and protection of the human rights of indigenous people require a special sensitivity to particular situations.”

“This meeting is addressed directly to the indigenous people, but it concerns all peoples of the world. For the situation of indigenous people prompts us to take a broader look at human rights today. Henceforth we realize that human rights cover not only individual rights but also collective rights, historical rights. We are discovering the “new human rights,” which include, first and foremost, cultural rights. The twentieth century has almost succeeded in reducing the world to the level of what some have called a planetary village – a village, perhaps, provided that cultural diversity is preserved in that village.”

“Diversity is another name for the world. What would the world be like if there were no differences? What would the world be like if there were only one language? It is true that, as Paul Valery said, civilizations are mortal. But just because civilizations are mortal does not mean that we have to kill them.

Allowing native languages, cultures, and different traditions to perish through “nonassistance to endangered cultures” must henceforth be considered a basic violation of human rights. An inadmissible violation. We might even say that there can be no human rights unless cultural authenticity is preserved.”

“We can no longer allow a single act of ethnocide to take place. Let us promise to be more vigilant in this respect than we have been until now. Let us organize the watch and let us sound the alarm as soon as a civilization, a language, or culture is in danger.”

“It is time, for technology possesses in itself a tremendous power to level out differences. If we are not careful, it will gradually reduce men and women to mere

interchangeable unity. The world will thereby be reduced to a single culture, a single language. That is to say, it will be reduced to the lowest common denominator of our dead cultures: and, although we will speak with one voice, we will have nothing to say.”

From the INTRODUCTION, an Indigenous Worldview

“Over the past two hundred years the majority of people on this planet has shifted from an agrarian to an industrial society, losing their contact with the earth. They have become either so engrossed in advancing their own well-being that for them the earth is simply a tool by which to enrich themselves, or they are so poor that they have been left with no choice but to exploit resources for survival and destroy the very lands that sustain them.”

“Long proud of our tradition as “caretakers of the earth,” indigenous people are combining energies to raise awareness of the need for everyone to become active defenders of the remaining wildlife and wilderness – a part of the world that has now become totally dependent on human generosity and sensitivity for its continued survival.”

“We ourselves, however, are an endangered species and may soon, like the rain forests, disappear. Along with the assault on our peoples, our governments are colonized, our lands occupied and stolen, our religious freedoms denied, and our treaties broken. Our multitude of cultures is shrinking. Each time an elder dies in North America it is like a rare book that is lost forever. When whole cultures are lost, so are different ways of thinking, distinct perspectives and philosophies that allow humans and nature to live in harmony. At the same time as the world is rapidly being deprived of its biological diversity and its ability to sustain itself, it is also being robbed of the tools of thought that may counter this self-destruction.”

Oren R. Lyons, Faithkeeper, Onondaga Nation, Haudenosaunee (North America)

“I stand before you as a manifestation of the spirit of our people and our will to survive. The wolf, our spiritual brother, stands beside us, and we are alike in the Western mind: hated, admired, and still a mystery to you. And still undefeated.

So, then, what is the message I bring to you today? Is it our common future? It seems that we are living in a time of prophecies, a time of definitions and decisions. We are the generation with the responsibility and option to choose the path of life with a future for our children – or the path that defies the laws of regeneration. Even though you and I are in different boats – you in your boat and

we in our canoe – we share the same river of life. What befalls me, befalls you. And downstream, downstream in this river of life, our children will pay for our selfishness, for our greed, and for our lack of vision.”

Marcial Arias Garcia, Continental Coordinating Committee of Indigenous Organizations & Nations (Central and South America)

“We do believe that the problems of our people should be accorded the same prominence as other problems being considered by this world body. Likewise, in regard to items of concern to indigenous peoples, the discussions should be facilitated by the indigenous peoples themselves. It seems we will never stop being “indoctrinated, colonized, and manipulated.” What we want is to be the leaders in the solutions of our problems.”

Venerable Bernal Bhikkhu, Chakma of Bangladesh (Asia)

“We are different but not enemies. Brothers, we have common enemies to fight together: ignorance, fear, hatred, and violence. We can be mutually enriched by our differences. The path of reconciliation between our people must involve respect for justice. There is no way for peace; peace is the way.”

Lars Johansen, Premier, Greenland Home Rule Government (Arctic)

“We know from experience that there is great creative energy gathered in self-determination, both for us and for our mother states. Today, more than ever before, we know that no acknowledgment can replace the desire of a people to maintain their independent identity – the desire of a people to be the masters of their own destiny.”

Poka Laenui, President of the Pacific Asia Council of Indigenous Peoples (Pacific Islands)

“The domination theme, which has ruled the present evolutionary period of human development, has witnessed the institutions of slavery, imperialism, colonization, and economic conglomerations which have demoted the quest for spiritual development to the lowest rung of consideration. In the quest to dominate we have seen man’s rampant destruction of his immediate environment and his insatiable hunger for further destruction in lands far from his own shores. None of those activities have raised the measure of happiness for human society one iota.”

William Means, President, International Indian Treaty Council (North America)

“The longest war in world history has been the war against indigenous peoples. Until this moment, we have had our place in civilization determined by the so-called ‘modern’ industrial nations, and were ranked according to their values – which have placed indigenous people at the very bottom of the human family. Today the United Nations begins the process of knowing us, not through the distorted history of the colonizer, but by hearing our own voices, looking into our hearts, and understanding our humanity – to really begin learning about the important past of indigenous people and our potential contributions to the world. Today, we begin the process of seeing indigenous peoples of the world, not as primitive and backward, but rather as human beings with our own dreams and aspirations, our own value systems, and our own yearning for international recognition of our human rights, including the right to self-determination.

Just as the international community has recognized the right of self-determination for peoples in former colonies, the right of self-determination for indigenous peoples should now be recognized by the same international community.”

“Despite intense efforts at acculturation and assimilation by the great multinational forces and empires, the indigenous peoples of the world still cling to their own cultures, origins, and their indigenous roots. ... The issue for indigenous peoples is the land. Indigenous people are one with the land.”

“One of our great Indian leaders* once said: ‘Our land is more valuable than your money. It will last forever. Your money will perish by the flames of fire. As long as the sun shines and the water flows, this land will be here to give life to men and animals. We cannot sell the lives of men and animals, therefore we cannot sell our land. It was put here for us by the Great Spirit, and we cannot sell it because it does not belong to us. You can count your money and burn it. But only the Great Spirit, the Creator, can count the grains of sand and the blades of grass of these plains. As a present to you, we will give you anything we have that you can take with you. But the land, never’.”

*** Attributed to a Blackfoot chief in 1855.**

Ovide Mercredi, Grand Chief of the Assembly of First Nations (North America)

“I believe that it is very important to end colonization as it affects all of humanity, because decolonization is a right for all human beings, including the indigenous people around the world. We have experienced great pain, great turmoil, and we have lost land, resources, and lives in the experience that we all share in common as colonized peoples.”

“We call upon the governments of the world to begin to meet with us as equals, to respect our people as human beings, and to embrace our collective rights; to end this history of dominance and to replace it with what needs to be done to create a new era, a new world, where all people can live in harmony.”

Lois O’Donoghue, Chairperson, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (Pacific Islands)

“In 1788, Australia became a British penal colony, a dumping ground for the problems of the British Empire. The British declared Australia *terra nullius*, ‘no one’s land.’ The indigenous peoples were deemed to have no legal rights to the land on which they had lived and for which they had cared for so long. There were no negotiations, there were no agreements, there were no treaties. There was no recognition that we were a people with distinctive cultures. There was no recognition that Australia’s indigenous peoples, with more than five hundred different languages, shared one thing in common – their relationship with the land. That relationship remains central to our very being.”

“After 204 years Australian law has finally recognized that indigenous people did own their land at the time of European settlement in 1788. This recognition is greatly welcome. Indeed, it is more than two centuries overdue. But it remains to be seen what its practical effects will be.”

Moringe L. Parkipuny, KIPOC (Africa)

“In Africa there is no generalized practice of genocide against minority peoples. For instance in East Africa, minority peoples of Asian, Arabic, and European descent are free to maintain their lifestyles, languages, religion, and economic ways of life without any intervention by the state. It is specifically indigenous African cultures – which are well known to have languages, lifestyles, and grassroots community-oriented environmental and economic systems that are all profoundly different from those of the mainstream population – which have been actively targeted for total alienation.”

Noelí Pocaterra Uliani, Movimiento Indio por la Identidad Nacional and National Indian Council of Venezuela (South America)

“In our vision of the world, it is not possible to speak of a family without restoring the role of our elders as the spiritual guide, as the standard for our conduct. We must restore the role of a woman, as a fighter, as a wife, as the reproducer of life,

and the key to preserving the identity of our peoples. The young, as our future generations and children, are the continuity of our peoples, and it is they who are our own life. It is not possible in the name of Western science and technology that we should ignore the place of the family and the family of communities of the planet. We cannot ignore Mother Earth and the cosmos, who are the sources of life and have been throughout the history of all peoples.”

Mary Simon, Inuit Circumpolar Conference (Arctic)

“Agreements and treaties between indigenous peoples and states must be fully respected under international law. Such treaties include modern land claims agreements. Indigenous treaties were not signed only as domestic instruments; they must not be turned into domestic instruments after the fact.

Respect of our right to self-determination is paramount. Our right to subsistence, our rights to benefit from our own resources, our rights to self-government – many of our fundamental rights are contingent upon respect for our right to self-determination.”

Anderson Muutang Urud, Sarawak Indigenous Peoples Alliance (Southeast Asia)

“For defending our way of life, we have been called ‘greenies, pirates, terrorists, and traitors.’ I have been put in prison and into solitary confinement. ... It is for this reason that I call upon the United Nations, the government of governments, to do its utmost to assist all indigenous peoples who are threatened by their own government. ... Even though we are desperate, our people have avoided violence. We have used only peaceful methods of protest. Why does this organization which is dedicated to peace not listen to the pleas of peaceful people?”

Davi Yanomami, Yanomami (Brazil)

“Stop the destruction, stop taking minerals from under the ground, and stop building roads through forests. Our word is to protect nature, the wind, the mountains, the forest, the animals, and this is what we want to teach you.”

Thomas Banyacya, Hopi elder (North America)

“Nature herself does not speak with a voice that we can easily understand. Neither can the animals and birds we are threatening with extinction talk to us. Who is this

world can speak for nature and the spiritual energy that creates and flows through all life? In every continent are human beings who are like you but who have not separated themselves from the land and from nature. It is through their voice that nature can speak to us. You have heard the voices and many messages from the four corners of the world today.”

THE SAAMI COUNCIL

Excerpts from Indigenous peoples: land environment and sustainable development

“In order to survive, Indigenous Peoples and their communities need to be able to own, use, conserve and organize their land and resources.”

“Indigenous Peoples around the world evidence their concept of law and land rights, based on their own customs and traditions, to support their claims that their traditional lands, including its resources, belongs to them and not to the national State. Indigenous claims have generally been negated by applying various versions of the principle of *terra nullius*

Even if the legal strength of the principle of *terra nullius* is rather weak today, it is still de facto very much in force when it comes to indigenous land rights. The reason why indigenous rights to land, water and resources still remain unsolved is due to the adaptability of legal arguments and concepts which correspond with the principle of *terra nullius*. This occurs in many forms, and by the use of various sophisticated arguments as to why past injustices towards Indigenous Peoples should continue. The time which has passed since the State took possession of the land is often used as an argument, on the premise that new rights have been established during that time regardless of the fact that the original takeover was unlawful. It seems to be a common thing that States try to justify continued injustice towards Indigenous Peoples by saying that even if our past takeover of the land was unlawful, it must be considered as lawful today because for such a long time we have been possessing and acting as owners of this land.

The present legal situation is a result of this grim unlawful past. It is hard to see how to find a lasting settlement without resolving the core of the problem. This fact cannot be ignored in any serious and constructive attempt to solve this problem, even if it causes some pain in the backbones of the State concerned.”

Why International Work?

Questions arise from local communities, trying to understand why the **American Indian Law Alliance** works with Indigenous Peoples, other indigenous organizations, communities, and Nations worldwide in New York and Geneva, Switzerland. What can be accomplished internationally that's so important? Wouldn't it be better to concentrate our efforts here at home? Why are we doing this?

To begin answering these questions, we need to first place our work in the continuum of work begun in the early 1900s. Over 75 years ago, a Cayuga Chief named Deskaheh traveled to Geneva to speak to the League of Nations about Haudenosaunee treaties and their unilateral abrogation by the United States and Canadian governments. Although he was not allowed to speak to the world family of nations, Deskahe's vision set the stage for the work of Indigenous Peoples worldwide.

Over 50 years passed before a delegation of Native people from the western hemisphere (Haudenosaunee, Cheyenne, Mapuche, Cree, Lakota, Maya, Ojibway and others) traveled to Geneva, at great expense to themselves and their communities, to speak to the United Nations. They came to present our issues of survival, and left a powerful legacy for all of us who work for our communities and Nations – *access to international forums from which legal challenges can be launched against unjust law and policy.*

In 1997 the late Chief Garfield Grass Rope, at that time Vice Chairman of the Teton Sioux Nation Treaty Council, delivered the opening remarks at a gathering at Lower Brule, South Dakota. His words are alive in our work today.

For many years we lived in defeat, waiting for some miracle to come and make things change for the better. But this is a fantasy and it will never happen. We were living through oppression, but we wouldn't give up our hopes. Still we felt the pain and heartbreak of this silent cry within us. We kept each other joking, laughing on the outside. Some of us cannot stand the pain and drink to cover it. I know this thing, because this is how I once lived too. But there is no miracle solution and drinking does not help.

The problem lies within the political system. The political system of the United States, that I have described, plays games with our lives. They have installed colonial governors, dictators, on our territory through the Indian Reorganization Act . . . The abuses pile up on us and we have no alternative but to listen to the wisdom of our treaty elders.

On October 29th, 1983, in Lower Brule, the Teton Sioux Nation Treaty Council held its regular meeting with five reservations present. At that meeting we voted unanimously to declare our independence and to exclude ourselves from the federal system. We claimed our aboriginal human rights and our treaty rights as a part of our heritage. This was a big step towards our work at the United Nations and the World Court of Justice and a big step in our work for the future generations. Our purpose is nothing less than the restoration of our nation. Removed from the federal system, we believe there is hope for our international appeal.

But these goals are unachievable say pragmatists. We are too small, too few, too poor, too divided, to pursue such a vision. We ask them, isn't it our responsibility, as we have been taught, to pursue *just* such a vision?

Native author Vine Deloria, Jr. wrote in his 1974 book, Behind the Trail of Broken Treaties,

Can one view the re-creation of the state of Israel after two thousand years of exile and seriously maintain that the Oglala Sioux will never again ride their beloved plains as rulers of everything they see? Or that the might of the Iroquois will not once again dominate the eastern forests?

The world has seen more sweeping and unpredictable changes; the end of apartheid in South Africa, the fall of the Berlin wall, the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Deloria then reminds us that many founding member nations of the United Nations, such as Belgium, Denmark and the Netherlands, are smaller than the Navajo Reservation,

yet they have each enjoyed sovereign independence for over a hundred years ... even though the largest of them is only 179 square miles in size and all are completely surrounded by other countries. Barbados ... became independent in 1966 and joined the United Nations, yet it is smaller than fifty American Indian reservations and has a population of only 240,000. An examination of the population statistics for the world's small countries ...

reveals some startling facts. Seven sovereign states have fewer than 100,000 population, 20 have fewer than 500,000 and 30 have less than 1,000,000.

To return to the words of Chief Grass Rope,

From here on, we are actively encouraging our young people to get involved and to participate in the treaty issues and our international efforts. We want you to have the opportunity to learn how to stand up for your human rights and the treaty rights of our people. We know that you will faithfully continue this work into the future and become our leaders in the next century. We know that the federal government of the United States is waiting, like buzzards, for the elders to pass on so they can say that our treaties have passed on with the elders. Working with our young people, our nation and our way of life will survive.

Our Nations define their own existence. Our way of life will survive. This is the important point. This is our vision and the purpose of our work. “*Human rights and the treaty rights of our people*” are nothing more and nothing less than our rights to self-determination, to determining for ourselves what our lives will actually be.

We *young people* at the American Indian Law Alliance are responding to our elders and reaching out to *younger people* to carry on the work that may not be achieved in our lifetimes.

Native peoples have an opportunity to provide leadership in breaking down the monopoly of the controlling nations and to push the United Nations towards truly becoming a forum for all peoples of the world, a forum with an identity transcending the boundaries set by lines drawn on maps.

Ingrid Washinawatok

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We agree. We believe that by taking our work to the international level, self-determination and sovereignty can become a reality for Native people. No matter how long it takes.