

# BEING INDIGENOUS IN TODAY'S WORLD

**Key note speech by Johnson Malih Ole Kaunga at IWGIA's 40th anniversary celebration**

When I was asked to give a key-note address on this auspicious moment of IWGIA's 40th anniversary, I found it a challenge for a number of reasons. First, I had only known IWGIA for about 10 years. Second, I am five years younger than IWGIA and, looking round the audience, I may well be the one with the least experience of the key issues in front of us for discussion. Nevertheless, I find this a grand opportunity and a great honour for me to express my thoughts and share my experiences of the last 12 years on the frontline of the Kenyan pastoralists' struggle for recognition, rights, representation and territorial and cultural/heritage resources. I don't claim to have universal suffrage to represent the pastoralist indigenous groups in Kenya; however, I understand the critical issues that are affecting and undermining their efforts and rights to have secure livelihoods like other Kenyans. What's more, I am a pastoralist myself and I have these issues passionately in my heart.

I am not a scholar and I do think that, even if I was, I would change my position on the issues. In my view, being indigenous to me means:

1. Being indigenous means being a victim of:

- displacement from ancestral land in the name of development, national security/militarization, wildlife conservation and environmental protection;
- dispossession of territorial resources, heritage and cultural resources and indigenous technical knowledge;
- domination by mainstream thinking, formal education and administrative systems, at the expense of indigenous learning and mechanisms for collective decision-making. The media promotes a certain mindset as being superior to indigenous peoples' lifestyles;
- oppression and subjugation – by the mainstream communities;



- social exclusion, which is institutionalized in decision-making processes. Our traditional means of livelihood and occupations are treated as inferior and primitive, our culture is criminalized.
2. Being indigenous means fighting endless battles with rigid state governments, multinationals and, at times, development thinking and processes that tend to further marginalize our voices and rights. These battles include:
    - fighting battles for our representation at all levels of decision-making;
    - fighting for recognition as peoples with rights and responsibilities, to ensure a just society for all;
    - fighting for legal and human rights as enshrined in national legislations and international human rights instruments;
    - fighting for control of our resources and the opportunities they create or present within the national boundaries and beyond.
  3. Being indigenous in today's world also means being in complex conflicts on different levels, such as:
    - with state governments over the above mentioned issues;
    - with the private sector and multinationals over our natural resources, our heritage, our lands;
    - with national and international legislation, which treats us as minors as compared to the dominant and mainstream communities;
    - due to changing land ownership structures that have ended up diminishing our natural resources and ancestral lands, we are in constant conflict with our neighbouring indigenous sisters and brothers. In Kenya, for instance, there are serious natural resource-based conflicts between different indigenous communities, such as between the Pokot and the Samburu/Laikipia Maasai, the Murule and Garre clans in Mandera, Borana and Samburu. The traditional lands have diminished due to dispossession caused by militarization and conservation;
    - there are also serious conflicts between modern ideas and practices of wildlife conservation and pastoral livelihoods.
  4. Being indigenous in today's world means being tolerant, innovative and creative so as to address

the above issues and also accept being a "student" forever on the ever emerging new laws and new processes, such as

- being creative in applying both modern and indigenous skills as the different situations demand;
  - modern and formal administrative decision-making systems, and also keeping the traditional institutions of decision-making;
  - due to rational livelihoods being threatened, we have to learn and adapt to new skills and ways of survival.
5. Being indigenous in today's world, in the eyes of local and international companies, means being a "trademark". A couple of examples come to mind:
    - Land Rover Freelander – Maasai: using the Maasai resilience to the savannah to market the Freelander Land Rover;
    - Maasai Barefoot technology (Maasai shoe company), using Maasai long distance walking on the rangelands to market shoe brands;
    - Volkswagen Touareg – using the Touareg survival and resilience to market the Volkswagen;
  6. Being indigenous in today's world also means:
    - being a hero or heroine engaging in powerful processes at different levels so as to reclaim our lost heritage, lost land and, much more, fighting for a our space in a dominant world;
    - being patient lobbyists and activists, prepared to go a long way to ensure that indigenous peoples' voices and concerns come to the public domain and also to raise the profile of the issues I have noted above to a level that actors can no longer ignore them;
    - learning to network at the local and international level so as to ensure that our cumulative voices and gains are translated into success stories that we can all celebrate.

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