

that the authorities are creating by bribing us with money and powerful positions. So the people who still believe that we can live in a different way, in communities, need to get stronger. We have a big challenge ahead and we need to face it with imagination. We also need to show courage because the state institutions have been developing strategies to destroy communities, and they have dealt us heavy blows. We must create more collective bodies and be less trusting. We must also show more secrecy in developing our strategies, so that they are less vulnerable, and strengthen our collective processes until they become irreversible.


In the beginning, you said that the legal system doesn't recognise the rights of the people, especially their collective rights. What is the difference between collective rights and individual rights?

Individual rights can be rights that everyone has, such as human rights. Collective rights are those that a group of people has to decide how it wants to live, how it wants people to relate to each other. For example, a person can have the right to a piece of land on which to work and to live, but only a collective body, a community or a people, has the right to own that land and to decide what kind of life or civilisation should be practised on it.

Individual rights have no meaning if they don't have a collective expression. For example, the right to education doesn't make sense unless a people decides what kind of education it wants.

The right to territory isn't a property right, but the only way of getting legal recognition for territory is

by turning it into property. For many indigenous communities, the relationship they have with their territory goes far beyond legal recognition. This becomes obvious when you look at areas that are sacred for indigenous people but lie outside their legally recognised territory. If the Indians' ownership over these lands isn't recognised, these areas create permanent conflict: they are areas over which the indigenous people have no formal decision-making power, even though they hold them sacred. For capitalism, the only kind of relationship that is possible is through property rights. It is capitalism that converts people's rights and their relationship with territory into property rights, even though indigenous people have a far broader relationship with their territory.

For communities, territory can only be seen as a whole – what you do with respect to one aspect of it is going to have repercussions for the other aspects. Everything is related – the people, the plants, the forests, everything. Territory is the place where you can still decide how to live, what to do. And there you can't separate the forest from the water, the land from the rainfall, and none of this from the customs of the communities. For example, a Huichol Indian cannot spend more than two months away from his home because he has to practise certain ceremonies in sacred places and, if he is not at home, he can't do this and so he can't carry on with his life. It is clear that rights are linked to obligations. For the Wixaritari Indians the very purpose of their life is to care for the world, this is their obligation. And only after this will come rights and benefits, but always linked to more obligations. 



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If rights are badly defined, this will have serious consequences for mankind's relationship with fellow human beings and the environment, and, indeed, for everything that makes up society. Duties and responsibilities are intimately linked, but very often people from all sectors of society give undue emphasis to the "rights" side of the equation. This is particularly true with jurists, governments and regional intergovernmental organisations and

international organisations, such as the African Intellectual Property Organisation and the World Intellectual Property Organisation.

Moreover, all over the world, including Africa, the concept of rights has been assimilated within the concept of private property. This is serious, for African culture says that collective rights should take precedence over private and individual rights. Unfortunately, the political authorities do



not always take collective rights into account. In my opinion, this is because, in the decades since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was imposed on the whole world, rights have been standardised, despite very diverse social, cultural and political realities.

Rights by themselves do not encapsulate all relations desired by humanity. Indeed, rights, which is a general concept, now covers both values that are useful to progress and the development of humanity and those that are harmful. Indeed, if we want to continue to fight for our rights, we must make a distinction between legitimate and illegitimate rights by assessing the contribution they make towards progress and the development of humanity.

To protect collective rights against exploitation by multinationals, people must be informed about their rights and duties, their obligations and those

of the multinationals, within the framework of a win-win social partnership. Each member of society should be taught about this so that social relations can be established on a healthy basis.

Where I live, traditional standards are imposed by private rules. The individual belongs to a family, which is part of a social group, which is, in its turn, an integral part of the community governed by a very precise system of values and standards.

Individuals develop by stages and, at each stage, they have rights, obligations and duties to other members of the community. It is a pre-established system that is accepted by all members of society. But these days modernity and its corollary, “development”, have introduced other ideas and concepts that make it difficult to apply the traditional system of regulating society in Benin and Africa.



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Some professions, such as sculpture and basket-making, which are exercised only within a family or group, or a certain community, may use particular species of plants. They have a monopoly of production and never reveal their secrets. People hand down this jealously guarded right to their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

In our various traditional and even modern societies, the preservation of rights is dependent on the exercise of discretion, which means that you do not copy what another person does unless they give you the “right” to do so. A sale of rights, accompanied by a blessing, then takes place. In the herbal medicine we practise in Benin, everything is negotiated at a price (with payment in alcohol, money, cloth or other goods) and the beneficiary has an obligation to pay. That is why, in order to protect their place in society, almost all inventors do not divulge their secrets, because they don’t want everything stolen or available to everyone. If you feel exploited or dispossessed of your goods or knowledge, and believe that someone else is profiting without any consideration for you, then you feel a sense of indignation. This degrades the relationship with regard to rights.

Singer-composers with a gift or a talent have often been exploited. People with financial resources pay them next to nothing or give them objects of little importance (T-shirt, alcohol or whatever) for their work and then sell on their work at a high price. It is easy to spot the pirates and the traders who take advantage of the singer-composers and exploit their work on the commercial market.

The right to exchange seeds

As for the peasants and farmers here in Avrankou and in the district as a whole, the question of the right to seeds is not an issue. No particular place and no single ethnic group has the right to the exclusive ownership of seeds. Different seeds are grown in different regions, and these must be allowed to be exchanged freely or given as a gift. The crops grown here are maize, manioc, groundnuts, sweet potato and beans.

Each socio-professional group (peasants, fishers, hunters, livestock raisers, traditional healers and so on) should meet to think through the problem of property rights in their particular sector. Then all producers should come together and work out their position collectively.



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