

**SYMPOSIUM ON THE HISTORICAL MEMORY OF INDIGENOUS PARTICIPATION
IN THE UNITED NATIONS:
FROM THE EXPERIENCE OF THE ELDERS TO THE EMPOWERMENT OF
FUTURE GENERATIONS**

CONCEPT NOTE

The Indian Nations of the Americas, as survivors of permanent colonization by the European colonial powers and the American republics, and seeking to assure their survival through recognition from the international system (first with the Society of Nations and later at the United Nations), invested great efforts to gain visibility and to have their rights addressed in the sphere of international law.¹ In fact, colonization, a European phenomenon with global reach, had social and political consequences in countries where the identity of native peoples was subordinated to the national identities emerging from the colonial experience; because of this, the struggles of American Indians were also experienced by the peoples of the Pacific, Asia, Africa and Europe itself. Thus, a process of transnational partnerships began that was later formalized through the establishment of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues; these partnerships are today represented in the seven main regions of the world.²

During the 1960s, throughout the American continent a number of indigenous peoples, who, under the cloak of indigenism and ILO Convention 107, were undergoing systematic processes of assimilation, began to seek recognition of their identity and rights. The academic and intellectual output that denounced the racism oppressing indigenous peoples was very important. For Bolivia, and for Latin America in general, the publication of works by Fausto Reinaga has been fundamental: *Indian Thesis* and *Indian Revolution*. The 1968 publication, *De eso que llaman la antropología mexicana* ["That's what they call Mexican anthropology"], criticizes anthropology that was committed to the formation of a national identity that had as its goal the disappearance of the Indian; this marked the end of indigenism. At the 1968 Stuttgart Congress of Americanists, Robert Jaulin's denunciations of the massacres of Indians in various Latin American countries put in evidence the ethnocidal character of assimilation; in 1970 he published the book, *White Peace: Introduction to Ethnocide*. Meetings held in Barbados in 1971 and in July 1977, which included the participation of indigenous leaders, many of whom were important players in the formation of the international indigenous movement, played an important role in increasing the visibility of the Indian. In the United States activists of the American Indian Movement (AIM) occupied Wounded Knee, site of the last massacre of American Indians by the American army in 1890; this occupation marked a decisive moment in this history. Faced with threats from the same American army, the Indians from the various nations forming AIM appealed to international opinion to avoid a catastrophe. The Conference of 1977 also came about as a result of this indigenous resistance.

The most important action taken by indigenous peoples was holding the 1977 International NGO Conference on Discrimination Against Indigenous Populations in the Americas, which was organized by the Sub-Committee on Racism, Racial Discrimination, Apartheid and Colonialism. This Conference "contributed to forging a transnational indigenous identity that subsequently expanded to embrace

¹"... over the last several years, in conjunction with domestic efforts in the countries where they live, indigenous peoples have appealed to the international community and have looked to international law as a means to advance their cause." James Anaya, "Indigenous Peoples in International Law", Editorial Trotta, Universidad Internacional de Andalucía, 2005, pg. 26.

² Africa; the Arctic; Asia; Eastern Europe, Russia, Central Asia and the Transcaucasus; Central America, South America and the Caribbean; North America; and the Pacific.

indigenous peoples from other parts of the world"³ and contributed to building organic foundations and interrelationships among indigenous peoples and organizations. The Conference led to the publication of the Declaration of Principles for the Defense of the Indigenous Nations and Peoples of the Western Hemisphere, a pioneer document for the drafting of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, adopted by the General Assembly in 2007. The 1977 Conference constitutes a milestone of great importance for the struggles of indigenous peoples and the treatment of their issues by the international system, which has resulted in the creation and establishment of specialized bodies and instruments of international law which recognize their most fundamental rights.

The history of Indian struggles, including individual as well as collective efforts to gain visibility before the international system and to have the latter make decisions in defense of the territories and life of indigenous peoples, is very long, going back to the sorrowful events that occurred during what is known as the period of "discovery". However, the Symposium on the Historical Memory of Indigenous Participation in the United Nations will cover a relatively short period of time, beginning with the history of Deskahe, who, as a spokesperson for the Council of the Iroquois Confederacy, became a pioneer of indigenous diplomacy through his actions before the League of Nations in 1924.

The Symposium will bring together the elders, both male and female, who participated in the historic Conference of 1977, and will make use of the methodology of oral history. Documentation will be achieved through audio and video recordings, which will then be organized and made available for later use as primary sources.

The Symposium, which will include the participation of indigenous youth, will establish bridges of intergenerational communication that will result in a series of histories compiled by these young people with a view to their continuing on the path that was forged in 1977.

³ Anaya, op. cit., pg. 93.