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Contributory Paper

Indigenous People, Land Rights, and the Maintenance of Culture

The problem ...

Indigenous cultures are endangered worldwide. It is the contact with modern civilization which is triggering processes threatening their survival. With every traditional group that vanishes, valuable knowledge is being lost. The few indigenous cultures left on this globe are far too precious to be exposed to disintegration.

Loss ...

Cultural variety is decreasing, and the number of cultures is shrinking. This is also reflected in the death of dialects and languages. Instability becomes problematic as the discarding of cultural knowledge is just as irreversible as the loss of species and their genetic information. In a changing world where even the climate is destabilized, strategies for coping with future situations are being erased at the same time - a serious loss for mankind.

Urgency ...

Though cultural loss, due to globalization, is now occurring world-wide, it is especially present in the sociocide of indigenous ethnic societies. Human rights violations, frequently going along with cultural destruction, stress the urgency of planning interventive strategies.

Fatal changes ...

Societies confronted with a dominant system are attached to it as subsystems before being disintegrated. The dominated try to bridge the gap between themselves and the culture of dominance, yet deleting traditional elements of their own. Radical changes of identity are caused by the social pressure leading to the use of clothes. Women and the loss of female attributes play a catalyst role in the process of cultural change.

Land rights plus ...

The mere acknowledgement of land rights would not change anything of the situation's fatality. Only responsibilities would be shifted, but the processed would go on: deletion of cultural knowledge, loss of languages, destruction of the eco-system, decay of families and entire societies, humiliation of men, women, and children. In order to stabilize culture, to preserve tradition, to maintain identity, to prevent the social system from destruction, the borders of autonomous land must also be cultural boundaries, within which respecting the local culture is compulsory; the people concerned must have the right to control and prevent the influx of destructive elements.¹

Destructive elements ...

What is destructive to a traditional culture? Elements of the dominant civilization might cause irreversible damage. Primarily, the design of the body is concerned as this is the locus of defining identity. Indigenous cultures have lived for thousands of years in a stable relation to their environment without, e.g., wearing a shirt. Yet, for the first one out of such a group doing so, this is a communicative act of appreciating the dominant industrial culture and of devaluating the own traditional culture. Even if a visitor, like a "role model", is wearing a watch, this might create needs which, sooner or later, are a factor of cultural deterioration. If a visitor wears glasses, he or she should try to replace them by contact lenses during the visit. The positive effect of such an integrative behaviour has been proved in various field studies.²

¹ This refers especially to clothing because every individual makes a cultural definition through the signs of the body.

² Cf. Groh (1997)

Integration ...

It is taken for granted that people from other cultures integrate when coming to the industrial culture. An integrative identity is created by signs worn on the body: jeans, shirts, jackets, even if the climate does not require to do so. In turn, people from the industrial culture, when visiting traditional cultures, do not show those signs of respect at all. For them, *not* to integrate is taken for granted. It is not a relation of equal partners; A respects B, but B does not respect A. The dominant say, "you are to be developed, you have to live our ways". Integration, however, would not only be a sign of respect for indigenous cultures, but it would be a contribution to prevent destabilization.

Indigenous territory ...

Beyond cultural boundaries - how to integrate? - Visitors from outside should be asked to make sure to only cover those parts of the body which are traditionally covered, i.e. to restrict themselves to covering the loin.³ Because of some central psychological mechanisms, women are urgently asked not to cover their breast during the visit as the import of the breast taboo is a crucial factor in the destabilization of indigenous cultures.⁴ With regard to gifts, visitors should avoid everything that could lead to dependencies. The more they integrate, the less they are "alien objects". Even if external influences have already reached the indigenous culture, visitors should not use this as an excuse, but rather take the chance for "rescue work" by practically showing respect for the indigenous traditions.

Obstacles ...

It is evident that, in order to reach stabilization through counter-measures, intervention is to be projected in respect to the original cultural storage, as far as it still exists or as it can be reconstructed. Problems of carrying-through mostly originate from taboos within the dominant culture. Unfortunately, most visitors from a dominant cultural context rather risk to damage an indigenous culture than adapt to it. This can only be overcome by decree. - It has to be taken into consideration that infrastructural linking-up bears perils as long as effects of dominance are not eliminated. Some fields of practical work are especially problematic, like tourism and policies towards and within so-called developing countries.⁵ Here, it has to be pointed out that carrying on the destructive way leads to irreversibly damaging effects. Culture, social processes, environment, and even climate all depend on each other. So, any contribution to the protection of cultures is a most important service to the entire mankind.

³ Of course, there is not always a loincloth at hand to replace the shorts when encountering an indigenous culture. But what matters here in the first place is *which* parts of the body are covered or uncovered, because this is a communicative act yielding psychological effects.

⁴ When everybody obeys these traditional rules, shame becomes redundant.

⁵ The concept of "development" is an ideological one. If left alone, indigenous cultures have proved to be stable, without destroying their environment or themselves. Cultural change (as originating from Europe) is the result of (destabilizing) cultural synthesis.

And now, some scientific aspects ...

1. What is culture?

During the recent years, remarkable progress has been made in seizing intercultural mechanisms and describing transcultural processes. Namely, it was the discipline of semiotics that managed to overcome the long-lasting struggle of conceptualising "culture". For decades, if not for centuries, even the definition of this term seemed to be a hurdle impossible to overcome.

Theoretical approaches to the mechanisms of intercultural processes and cultural change help to evaluate and to prognosticate the socio-cultural impact of intercultural encounters. The semiotic approach is open to the integration of different theories on culture in order to make mutual cultural impact and its consequences intellegible. Semiotics, a scientific discipline focussing on sign processes, is most useful for dealing with intercultural problems. One central assumption of the semiotic approach is that cultural behaviour occurs on the basis of significant sign processes concerning sign users, specific sign combinations, and codes. Within a situational context, communicational actions consist of paralinguistic, non- and extraverbal behavioural patterns constituting cultural specificity.

Thus, sign processes go along with any kind of cultural interaction. They are relatively easy to describe, as they are directly observable. The formulation of functional models representing general mechanisms gives way to an understanding of specific situations and to an improvement of intercultural policies. Although situations differ from each other, they are based on characteristic structures of cultural communication. As the semiotic approach is open to all kind of cultural theories, other approaches can be comprised, if necessary, in the explication of intercultural mechanisms.

An example for a basic model in semiotic terms is the general situation of cultural encounter: culture A meets culture B. The encounter results in an overlapping scope, where processes of sign transfer and cultural synthesis take place. These processes are not subject to coincidence; rather, they can be traced back to psychological, sociological, and other laws. E.g., cultural boundaries have the property of *semipermeability*: Determined by the gradient of dominance, there is a main direction of the flow of cultural information.

2. Diversity at stake

The need to focus on the factors which determine the cultural specificity in transcultural communication becomes very evident when we look at the increasing interdependence of cultures and the resulting increase of intercultural contacts. Stabilizing the world as an intercultural system requires insight into culture and its mechanisms. Information policies on the diversity of culture could contribute to sustaining indigenous cultures. Local authorities and NGOs are to be supported in their efforts to maintain cultural identity and to enhance local characteristics.

Cultural identity is one of the key issues of the future worldwide. Its presence, linked with the acceptance of each other, is essential for peace, welfare, and partnership. Refusal of acceptance, on the other hand, has a destabilizing effect. Within cultural interactions, processes of comparison and conceptualisation take place. For those who take part in these

communications (i.e. meeting of cultures), it is necessary to realise themselves as partners in communicative processes and to reflect on the occurring mechanisms. Relationship between social groups of different cultural backgrounds can be measured on a scale ranging from acceptance to rejection. These attitudes towards each other can be named as the crucial factors of social and political stability vs. instability.

Intervention can be successful if the mechanisms underlying the loss of culture are known. Tools for the analysis of these phenomena are present in semiotics with regard to culture and in cognitive psychology with regard to the individual: Growth of dominance can be explained within the framework of a functional model, showing that the increase of a culture's effectiveness is the result of preceding cultural syntheses by which momentary successful strategies have been accumulated.

3. Need for a change

Practical application of the theoretical knowledge in the field of intercultural affairs is long overdue. Trapped in the books, cultural theories are of little or no use for those outside the "ivory tower". Nevertheless, these theories are highly relevant for the development of effective strategies. Application of cultural theories, their translation into action and the benefit that can be derived from these applications, could lead to valuable advances in the protection of cultures. There should be a focus on the question, how can cultural theory be conveyed to where it is needed, in order to support the preservation of cultural heritage; how can the knowledge we have about cultural processes be used to achieve positive effects.

As sustainability is a trait present-day policies are aiming at, specific needs will have to be formulated concerning cultural issues. Cultural theories that give answers to those problems are to be transformed into easy-to-understand information for those who need it. Direct beneficial effects would be gained in stabilizing the intercultural togetherness and thus preventing social and political problems.

Culture is a very complex system of information; mechanisms of culture can be semiotically "translated". A transforming of theoretical knowledge, making it commonly intelligible, would be of great help to the maintenance of indigenous cultures, and it would yield guidelines to overcome cultural interferences. Moreover, semiotic-psychological transfer analysis explains the relations of human actions and the behaviour of others. This also helps to realise the expectations of others. Respecting interests of identity and plurality means to antagonise cultural dominance. Mediating these perspectives is highly relevant to the world's future reality of social and multicultural competition: Mobility is increasing which, in turn, leads to an increase in multicultural contacts. The arising intercultural problems are to be met the most effective way.

4. Cultural respect

Impacts take place wherever encounters take place. As long as one culture is only being absorbed by another, dominant one, this leads to some long-term disadvantages to the dominated. Indigenous cultural identity needs to be strengthened - guidelines for adaptive and accepting behaviour, delivered along with culture-specific informations, given to those

inducing contact would help to prevent cultural destruction and thus to maintain cultural diversity. This is especially necessary in areas of indigenous culture.

Tourism, as a paradigm, is a fast growing industry and culture is one of its major resources. On one hand, travellers want to consume culture; on the other hand, tourism is being increasingly criticised for being destructive towards culture. Travellers want to have information on cultural characteristics of the destination. But more than this, directions on how to behave in a culture-sustaining way are necessary. At the locations, local authorities and NGOs need information on how to implement cultural identity in settings of intercultural contact. With the help of semiotic applications, the system of intercultural exchange could be shaped in a beneficial way, thereby including the persons who actively take part in intercultural encounters.

5. Inside and outside

By naming cultural elements which define membership, the question of isolation vs. cultural adoption can be avoided. The restriction to relevant signs leaves intellectual exchanges untouched, be it in conceptual, scientific, or religious terms. This is in concord with international conventions concerning the *Freedom of Information*⁶, enabling the individual to choose freely and to decide consciously.

Differentiating “inward“ and “outward“ culture is not only the precondition for representing the mechanisms in functional models, but also for the definition of interventive strategies. “Inwardness“ is principally bare of signs; its mediation by signs is restricted just by customs; “inwardness“ is only being represented by “outwardness“, by signs. Cognitive content is not identical with defining, perceivable symbols. Differentiating “inwardness“ from “outwardness“ points out the importance of identity-relevant signs in cultural interactions, especially with regard to the gradient of dominance; at the same time, the freedom of the mind is to be respected.

6. No time to waste

These considerations can be translated into action by relatively simple, local measures. Anybody entering indigenous territory is to be instructed - verbally, by leaflets, or by other means - as how to avoid semiotic destabilization i.e. to avoid carrying in elements which would be destructive in the sense that they delete corresponding traditional elements, or lead to identification with the industrial culture. The use of signs is very important as it concerns the definition of cultural membership. A deletion or replacements of traditional elements means that the members of the corresponding cultural group by the use of the new elements (instead of the traditional ones) then cease from defining themselves as members of this traditional culture; instead, through the communicative act of using the imported signs, the individuals then tend towards defining themselves as part of the industrial culture. Leaving the incompatible cultural elements outside the indigenous territory can be managed concretely by placing guarded lockers at the entrance. Needless to say that nobody is forced to come to such an area. But those who do should comply with the semiotics of traditional local culture - and not counteract and corrupt it.

⁶ Cf. *United Nations Conference on Freedom of Information (1948)*.

Covering, veiling, hiding the human body is characteristic for modern or dominant societies. When intervening, one should be cautious not to be part of the destructive system. Minimal invasive encounters of culture, applied semiotics, would yield the preservation of culture. Of course, strategies are to be improved step by step, especially with regard to compliance of the (dominant) visitors.

The costs of such interventions are relatively small compared to the results that can be achieved. The diversity of traditional cultures would profit, gaining an increase of identity by means of those measures. The few traditional societies that are left on this planet are far too precious to be deleted.

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