



WINDOWS TO THE WORLD: PROTECTING INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES

September 2024

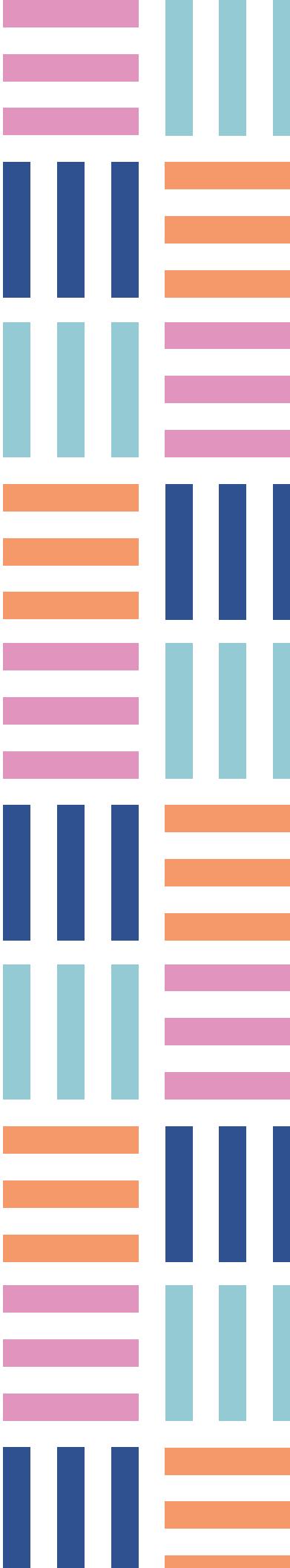


TABLE OF CONTENTS

BIOS OF PARTICIPANTS	1
PROGRAM INVITATIONS	3
HIGHLIGHTS FROM PROGRAM	4
SPEECHES	6
<i>DR. MAUREEN EKE</i>	
<i>DR. HABIB ULLAH</i>	
<i>DR. JOE MAGNET</i>	
<i>AHMED MOHAMED</i>	
<i>Y BHIM NIE</i>	
<i>AWRING SHAWAYS</i>	
<i>SOMAYA SELIM</i>	

Participants

Co-hosted by The Congress of Nations and States and Can-Go Afar

Warren Creates (moderator)

Warren Creates is an immigration lawyer in the Ottawa area and head of the Immigration Law Group at Perley-Robertson, Hill & McDougall, representing individuals, families and corporations in all aspects of immigration. His services include complete representation and arrangement of all documentation for work permits and permanent resident status, including skilled workers, business immigration programs, provincial nominee programs, and representation for individuals in all matters pertaining to citizenship applications and refugee claims. Warren is the Co-Founder, Director, and President of Can-Go Afar.

Y Bhim Nie

Y Bhim Nie, is from the Rhade tribe in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. He lived for more than fifteen years under the communist Vietnam regime. He trained as a medical doctor and fled to the USA, where he lives today. During his lifetime, he has survived bombing, fighting, betrayal, torture, and incarceration. He is a member of the Congress of Nations and States Convening Council. He recently published, Coffee as Blood: Persecution of the Rhade People in The Resolution Journal (2023).

Ahmed Youssouf Mohamed

Mr. Ahmed Youssouf Mohamed, is a Canadian of Afar origin, indigenous rights advocate, and a staunch defender of Afar human rights. Over the years, he has raised the bar for the voiceless Afar and raised awareness for respect for Afar Human and political rights in Eritrea with a number of Governments, Non-governmental organizations, the United Nations, and other rights groups including Canadian First Nations organizations. Ahmed was also instrumental in setting up various political groups and a co-founder of a joint Afar- Canadian NGO, called the Can Go Afar Foundation, a humanitarian organization that aims to empower the ancient nomadic Afar people in the Horn of Africa, by boosting awareness and advocacy for the voiceless. He is the current president of the Eritrean Afar National Congress (EANC), a senior Afar political organization dedicated to the rights of the indigenous Afar nation's internal self-determination and self-government in the traditional Afar territory of Dankalia, in Eritrea.

Somaya Selim

Somaya Selim is a dedicated human rights activist with a strong focus on amplifying the voices of minorities and indigenous peoples. With a dual background in law and engineering, she has worked tirelessly to bring attention to the injustices faced by marginalized communities in the MENA region and beyond. Her activism centers on documenting human rights violations, advocating for justice reform, and empowering communities through strategic research and coalition building. Somaya has been involved in several impactful projects, including her work with Justice House, where she led initiatives to monitor and report on human rights abuses against indigenous populations. She has also contributed to the Congress of Nations and States as a member of the Justice Commission, where she actively contributed to advancing the rights of minorities and preserving the cultural heritage of indigenous peoples. She is the new Deputy Secretary General of the Congress of Nations and States.

Dr. Habib Ullah

Dr. Mohammad Habib Ullah was born in a well-known ethnic Rohingya family in 1980. He has earned PhD in Electrical, Electronics and System Engineering from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) in 2014. He has authored and co-authored more than 60 International peer-reviewed journal articles and presented research work in 9 international conferences in Australia, Mauritius, Japan, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Bangladesh and published 8 book chapters. Currently, he serves as Convening Council Member of Congress of Nations and States (CNS), general secretary of Arakan Rohingya National Organisation (ARNO) and Executive committee member of Arakan Rohingya National Alliance (ARNA).

Awring Shaways

She is the founder of KG Lobby Center, Shaways has been instrumental in raising awareness about the plight of the Kurdish people and advocating for their rights. Throughout her career, she has worked extensively with women organizations, specifically Kurdish women and refugees, showcasing her commitment to promoting gender equality and empowering women. Through her efforts, she helped amplify the voices of marginalized women and worked towards creating a more inclusive society.

Joe Magnet

Joseph Eliot Magnet, F.R.S.C. B.A., LL.B., LL.M., Ph.D. is one of Canada's most respected constitutional lawyers. He clerked for Chief Justice Brian Dickson at the Supreme Court of Canada, served as Crown Counsel in Ottawa, Distinguished Visiting Professor, Boalt Hall Law School, University of California, Berkeley, Visiting Professor, Faculty of Law, University of Haifa, Israel, Visiting Professor, Central European University, Budapest, Distinguished Visiting Professor, Buchmann Faculty of Law, Tel Aviv University (2003 and 2008), and Visiting Professor Université de Paris, France. He has acted as counsel in more than two hundred constitutional cases in the Supreme Court of Canada, the Federal Court of Canada, and the trial and appellate courts of Ontario, Quebec, B.C. and Manitoba. He has advised the Canadian Federal, Provincial and Territorial Governments on constitutional matters. He is counsel for national Indigenous organizations, First Nations, language communities, Members of the House of Commons and its Committees, Senators and Senate Committees, minority groups, corporations and others. Professor Magnet is the author of eighteen books and more than one-hundred articles on legal subjects, particularly constitutional and Indigenous law. He has lectured widely in Canada and around the world, and is in frequent demand as a radio, television and op-ed commentator in Canada's major media. He was elected to the Royal Society of Canada in 1998.

Maureen Eke

Dr. Maureen N. Eke, is a Professor of Comparative and World Literatures in the Department of English, Central Michigan University where she teaches courses in African Literature, African American literature, Post-colonial Literature and theory, World Literature, Women's Writing, Film and adaptation as well as Human Rights through literature and film. She has also taught courses on Trauma and Genocide. Her current research is on genocide, specifically, the Biafran genocide in Nigeria (1966-1970). She is also the founder of AHERO, a non-profit organization focusing on humanitarian and educational projects that empower women and youth, especially the girl child, in small communities in Africa.

PROTECTING INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES



Windows to the World: Protecting Indigenous Languages
Co-Hosted by Congress of Nations and States and The Can-Go Afar

Foundation September 26, 2024
1:00-2:30 PM (livestream available)

Side Event: UNGA 79 UN General Assembly Resolution A/RES/74/135 established the International Decade of Indigenous Languages from 2022 to 2032, to raise awareness on the need to preserve, revitalize, and promote indigenous languages. Since 2019, efforts at the international level have continued to put the focus on the importance of indigenous languages. In May 2024, UNESCO announced it was partnering with a company to place a nano-engraved nickel plate with approximately 275 languages and art work to be placed on the moon.

While preserving and recording languages are important steps, there are also external threats that create fissures and interruptions in the language transmission process and deprecate the capacity of indigenous children to acquire knowledge. These include policies to assimilate indigenous peoples, dispossess them of their lands and resources, environmental changes, censorship, discriminatory laws and human rights violations.

This event brings together a panel of speakers from different indigenous groups and experts to discuss the importance of their languages and external factors that must be addressed during the UN Indigenous Language Decade in order to preserve, revitalize, and promote indigenous languages.

Moderator:
Warren Creates, President, Can-Go Afar Foundation and Legal Expert

Speakers:
Ahmed Youssef Mohammed, Representative, Afar Nation
Dr. Habib Ullah, Secretary-General, Arakan Rohingya National Organisation
Dr. Maureen Eke, Professor Central Michigan University
Professor Joseph Magnet, University of Ottawa Faculty of Law, Constitutional Expert and Advisor
Y Bhim Nie, Convening Council Member, Congress of Nations and States

Registration Link:
https://us06web.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_bHw_uTyXR_Own2bZc53F9Q

Windows to the World: Protecting Indigenous Languages
Highlights
September 26, 2024
NYC

This event which was co-hosted by the Congress of Nations and States and Can Go Afar was held.

Discussion

Warren Creates the Co-Founder of Can Go Afar and moderator of the program began the session. Mr. Creates emphasized the mission and goals of the UN International Decade of Indigenous Languages.

Somaya Selim, the Deputy Director General of CNS, presented on the languages of people and underscored why indigenous languages should be maintained and protected as they are rich cultural sources. “The languages of indigenous and minorities are more than tools...”

Ahmed Mohammed from the Afar nation introduced the Afar people and where they are geographically located. He discussed the impact colonization has had on the Afar people and their rights. The impact of the continued militarization and degradation of rights has led to a loss of language which is key to the culture. Language is a part of society and other policies contribute to all of these issues.

Professor Joe Magnet, from the University of Ottawa, explained in his presentation that the Afar people are subject to extreme human rights violations which amount to crimes against humanity. Professor Magnet discussed that the Afar languages are constantly challenged in different setting which do not allow people to speak this language, such as in schools and hospitals where other languages are predominant. Professor Magnet suggests that economic development is a way forward in helping the Afar people.

Dr Habib Ullah a member of the Rohingya ethnic group and CNS Convening Council Member presented on the genocide faced by the Rohingya people. He explained that due to political marginalization, lack of formal education, declining usage among youth, and forced displacement and violence has caused the loss of language. Many efforts are being made to create a Rohingya language script.

Awring Shaways from the KG Lobby center discusses the Kurdish language and its importance of protecting the Kurdish languages to protect identity. “Losing a language is losing a part of ourselves....” Miss Shaways discusses how safeguarding languages plays an essential role in the “tapestry of human culture.” She discussed how the Kurdish language has been impacted and is currently endangered, with factors such as civil wars, militarization, and forced displacement. The Kurdish Regional Government has made strides to protect the language but there are challenges, namely infrastructure challenges.

Y Bhim Nie, a member of the Rhade community and CNS Convening Council member, presents on the challenges facing the Rhade people's language. Mr. Nie discusses the origins of the Rhade language. He discussed that the Vietnamese government considers the Rhade language as a "form of separatism." He emphasized that international law, if enforced, can help the Rhade people survive.

Warren Creates closes the session with a thought-provoking question as to whether or not the UN Indigenous Languages Decade is working and where should we go from here? Panelists have suggested that the United Nations put on pressure on states to follow through with protection measures. Warren Creates closed the session by emphasizing the need for justice and accountability of states who are not following through.

Language Extinction is Cultural Genocide: Igbo Dies, Biafra Dies

Maureen N. Eke, Central Michigan University

As an African child attending a European-run school, one of the first lessons one learned was that one must forget one's mother tongue or abhor it enough to deny it and forget it. Otherwise, remembering one's mother tongue or holding onto it meant constant punishment—beatings or fieldwork under an unbearable sun. We were not allowed to speak our indigenous languages, at least while in school, because those languages were “the vernacular” representing cultures that were defined by the West as “low” “uncivilized,” and therefore, without value or significance. The perception or definition of indigenous languages as inferior to European languages would persist from primary through secondary schools and university. It was not uncommon to find many of us competing to see who among us spoke the best and most sophisticated form of a European language. In the case of Nigeria, it was English. Also, speaking poor English became a marker of one's lower class as one's English language competence was often associated with one's family position and the school one attended. Boarding schools were privileged.

I went to a boarding school run by Irish nuns who made sure their students gained a mastery of English that was as good as, if not better than, that spoken by any student in an English boarding school in England or Britain! So, African indigenous languages and Pidgin, a form of hybridized English spoken in Nigeria, were banned in our school as in many colonial schools.

Colonial education effectively robbed us of our tongues and our heritage. That legacy would come to haunt us today as many African indigenous languages are threatened with extinction. Postcolonial African government maintained their inherited colonial legacies and policies that privileged European colonial languages and created a hierarchy of languages, thus continuing the marginalization of indigenous African languages. In Nigeria as in many African countries, colonial languages became the official national languages of the post-colonial independent states, contributing to the disappearance of the indigenous languages. In Nigeria, English remains the official lingua franca and language of international business.

The death of indigenous languages contributes to cultural genocide. In 2012, UNESCO predicted that Igbo would become extinct by 2025. It is now 2024 and Igbo is still spoken by over 20 million people across Nigeria, especially in the three Biafra states. Although Igbo is still spoken, UNESCO's predictions should be taken seriously.

According to Benzinger and Batibo,

In sub-Saharan Africa, not only languages but often the speakers themselves are threatened by external forces such as military, economic, religious, cultural, or educational pressures. Some of these external pressures develop into internal forces, such as a community's negative attitude towards its own language, or into a general decline of group identity. (21)

The Increasing destabilization and displacement of Igbo-Biafrans from their communities in Southeastern Nigeria by a combination of government-sponsored rampage and domestic terrorism by the so-called “unknown gunmen, and the Fulani cattle herdsman, agents of Boko Haram and/or Islamic State West Africa present a threat to the survival of Igbo language and culture. As communities are displaced by these destructive forces, many Igbo-speaking Biafrans have fled from their homes or refused to return from the non-Igbo speaking regions. This displacement also contributes to gradual disappearance of the language and its culture.

Infact, Benzinger and Batibo agree, adding that

Together, these forces [identified in their cited passage above] jeopardize the intergenerational transmission of linguistic and cultural traditions. Poverty and marginalization are often associated with ethnolinguistic minorities and their languages. For that reason, parents in these communities often decide to bring up their children in other languages than their own. By doing so, they hope to overcome discrimination, attain equality of opportunity and derive economic benefits for themselves and their children. (UNESCO’s Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger” 21-22)

Because Igbo-Biafrans are a threatened minority ethnic group in Nigeria, it is not uncommon to find many Igbo children whose primary language is English. One would say that English becomes for them a language of survival. Consequently, they are alienated from Igbo. They speak English or Pidgin at home, in school, and with other children and slowly become alienated from their cultural. If cultural rights are human rights, by extension, language rights are also human rights because it is through language that we communicate our cultures and our identities. As such, the preservation of language and the associated rights are central to any form of identity and self-preservation. It would be difficult to claim that any group has full human rights without its language, since a group’s culture and values are transmitted and preserved through the group’s narratives, images, and representations of itself through its language. Thus, the disappearance or extinction of indigenous languages represents an urgent threat to the survival of indigenous communities. For me, a threat to the survival of the Igbo language symbolizes the genocide that Biafrans, particularly, the Igbo speakers face for how can Biafra exist without its language or stories communicated through its own language, its own voice.

Works cited

Matthais Benzinger and Herman Batibo, “Sub-Saharan Africa,” *Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger*” ed. Christopher Moseley. UNESCO 2010.

The Rohingya Language: Safeguarding Identity in the Face of Adversity

Dr. Habib Ullah

The Rohingya language has deep roots in the historical and cultural fabric of the Rohingya people, who are predominantly from the Rakhine (Arakan) region of Myanmar. Linguistically, Rohingya is an Indo-Aryan language closely related to Chittagonian, spoken in southeastern Bangladesh. The Rohingya people developed their language centuries ago, blending influences from Arabic, Urdu, Bengali, and Persian, reflecting their interaction with various cultures through trade and Islamic history. Despite this rich heritage, the language faced marginalization under successive Burmese regimes, which saw it as a lesser dialect and suppressed its formal use in education and official communication.

As a minority group in Myanmar, the Rohingya have long struggled for recognition and protection of their identity, and their language is a key element in this struggle. Here are some of the key reasons why the language is important, such as: cultural identity and heritage, community cohesion, linguistic diversity, resistance to cultural erasure. Despite its significance, the Rohingya language faces several challenges that threaten its survival. Some of the main challenges are Lack of Formal Recognition, Displacement and Diaspora, Oral Tradition and Lack of Standardization, Limited Educational Resources, Pressure from Dominant Languages.

Given the critical challenges facing the Rohingya language, there are several steps that can be taken to help preserve it for future generations:

1. Development of a Standardized Writing System
2. Community-Led Initiatives
3. Advocacy for Official Recognition
4. Cultural and Artistic Promotion
5. Digital Preservation Efforts
6. Educational Programs

The Rohingya language has endured centuries of marginalization and cultural suppression. Today, it faces challenges due to the displacement of its speakers, but with strategic preservation efforts, its future remains hopeful.

International Decade of Indigenous Languages: Perspective of the Afar People

Joseph Eliot Magnet*

In 2019, the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed the period 2022-2032 as the "International Decade of Indigenous Languages". The reason for this action was "to draw attention to the critical loss of indigenous languages," to recognize "the urgent need to preserve, revitalize and promote Indigenous languages" and to stimulate action "at the national and international levels", to realize these goals.¹

This United Nations action was warmly approved by the Afar people of the Horn of Africa. I will explain their reasons for supporting the UN *Resolution*.

The Afar People

Since 400 BC, Afar people formed durable communities along the southern Red Sea coastline of what are now the States of Eritrea and Djibouti, and also migrated inland to what is now north-eastern Ethiopia. These ancient societies developed distinctive kinship networks, religions



(Islam), economies (agro and nomadic pastoral), laws (customary), culture and way of life that have endured intact until today. They also produced a unique Cushitic language, Afarigna, which is a seminal thread that binds together Afar communities.

¹ENDNOTES

*F.R.S.C., Professor, Faculty of Law, University of Ottawa

United Nations General Assembly Resolution A/RES/74/135, ¶24. Online:
<https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n19/426/26/pdf/n1942626.pdf>

Approximately 1.8 million Afar people reside in Ethiopia today, 0.5 million in present-day Eritrea, and 0.4 million in Djibouti. The Afarigna language predominates in these societies, spoken by 91% of the population.

Afar societies in Ethiopia and Djibouti are institutionally complete. In Ethiopia, for example, Afar people self-govern through an ethno-linguistically based regional state within a federal system. Afar also possess a university, hospitals, education system and more. Afar is the working language of these institutions, but with important practical and certain official exceptions, as I will shortly explain.

In Eritrea, Afar is historically self-governed by customary institutions using customary law. This historic situation was protected by the 1952 *Constitution* which joined Eritrea to Ethiopia as a Province.² All of this was stripped away by Ethiopia's annexation of Eritrea in 1962, Ethiopia's imposition of the Amharic language as the language of public institutions and education,³ and a subsequent liberation struggle that produced an independent, militarized Eritrea in 1993. The current situation was described curtly by United Nations Special Rapporteur Dr. Babiker. President Afwerki [of Eritrea], he wrote,

governs the country without the rule of law, a division of powers and any checks, balances or constraints on his power. Eritrea lacks a minimum institutional infrastructure for the administration of justice and the protection of human rights....For several decades, they [the Afar Indigenous people] have been subjected to discrimination, harassment, arbitrary arrests, disappearance, violence and widespread persecution....the Government of Eritrea...caused the displacement of Afar Indigenous communities from their traditional territory of Dankalia.⁴

² *Constitution of Eritrea*, 1952, reinforced in the *Constitution of Ethiopia*, 1955.

³ *Constitution of Ethiopia*, 1955, art. 125

⁴ *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea*["SR Report 2023"], paras. 42-3, 58-9, UN Doc. A/HRC/53/20 (9 May 2023). Online:

<https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G23/092/08/PDF/G2309208.pdf?OpenElement>.



Afar fleeing persecution in Eritrea

Indigenous Status

Sébastien Grammond, now a Justice of the Federal Court of Appeal in Canada, considered whether the Afar are Indigenous in the legal sense in an opinion submitted to the Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Grammond considered facts relating to Afar history, language, culture, economy and way of life in Eritrea before testing these against international law criteria for determining Indigenous status. He concluded:

The Afar people show all the characteristics usually associated with the concept of Indigenous people in international law. Hence, their assertion that they are Indigenous and that they are entitled to the rights and to the protection afforded to Indigenous peoples in international law should be respected.⁵

Grammond's conclusion is supported by the opinion of all United Nations Special Rapporteurs who have studied this question. Dr. Babiker stated clearly: "The Afar people are Indigenous to Eritrea."⁶

The Afar Economy

The vast majority of the Afar population in the Horn countries (90%) leads a pastoral life.

⁵ Sébastien Grammond, 'Status of the Afar People' (Legal opinion, 21 March 2011), p. 6. Online: <http://dankalia.org/old_site/downloads/afar_grammond.pdf>

⁶ SR Report 2023, para 58.

Pastoralism is more than an economic production system. It is a way of life that encompasses a system of social and political organization and a culture woven together since time immemorial. It is an accomplishment that guarantees the integrity, coherence and cohesiveness of pastoralist society and defines its identity...⁷

Afar are pastoralists who raise camels, cattle, goats, sheep and donkeys. Pastoralism is a major contributor to national economies in all the Horn countries. Pastoralism produces substantial economic surpluses. For example, in Ethiopia pastoralists raise 42% of the country's cattle, 7% of its goats, 25% of its sheep and 20% of its equines & camels. This activity contributes 12% of Ethiopia's gross domestic product.⁸

Pastoralism is profitable but inefficient because of governmental under-investment in the sector. For example, Horn governments fail to provide adequate veterinary and extension services, control of animal diseases, research and development of breeding, and inadequate marketing of livestock and livestock products.⁹ Horn governments also fail to harmonize access to markets, which means nomadic pastoralists encounter oppressive regulatory regimes within and between Horn countries concerning customs, animal health, use of range lands, taxation and much more. Under-investment and haphazard regulation depress pastoralists' incomes and the pastoral economy, which becomes in turn very inefficient from production to consumption.

Much governmental under-investment and poorly designed regulation stems from stereotypical attitudes towards the pastoralists as "backwards". The impact on development of Afar communities and the Afar language is severe.

Causes of Language Endangerment

Languages become endangered when the language's speakers perceive that their language does not have economic value, provide a path to securing a livelihood, or when negative attitudes towards a community and its language become internalized.¹⁰ UNESCO's *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger* stated:

Nettle and Romaine (2000) consider lack of access to economic resources to be the fundamental determinant of language shift and language death in modern times.¹¹

The attitudes and policies of Horn governments towards the Afar pastoralists just discussed present all these obstacles to the flourishing of Afar communities, the Afar way of life and the Afar language.

⁷ John Markakis, *The Afar*, p 95, in "John Markakis, Günther Schlee, and John Young: "The Nation State: A Wrong Model for the Horn of Africa". Online version at <https://www.mpri-series.mpg.de/studies/14/>

⁸ European Union and Intergovernmental Authority on Development, *Legal, Policy and Institutional Frameworks on Pastoral Areas and Cross-Border Transhumance in IGAD Region* (2020), p. 10. Online: <https://icpald.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Legal-Policy-and-Institutional-Frameworks-in-IGAD-Region.pdf>

⁹ Id., p.9.

¹⁰ UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages, *Language Vitality and Endangerment*, p. 2 (2003). Online: <https://ich.unesco.org/doc/src/00120-EN.pdf>

¹¹ UNESCO, (C. Moseley, ed.), *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger*, 3d ed, 2010, p. 25. Online: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000187026/PDF/187026eng.pdf.multi>

Other governmental policies, for example Ethiopia’s drive to settle the pastoralists (villagization) and sell their traditional lands to others,¹² and Eritrea’s confiscation of Afar traditional territory,¹³ strike at the heart of the Afar pastoral way of life. Ethiopia’s policy leads to “the rapid decline and ultimate disappearance of mobile pastoralism” and a consensus among regional officials “that pastoralism has reached a dead end when it comes to sustaining the economic livelihood of the communities”.¹⁴ Eritrea’s policy is much worse: it is “persecution,” a conclusion reached by all of the United Nations Special Rapporteurs who have examined Eritrea’s displacement of the Afar from their homelands.¹⁵ Persecution is a crime against humanity under international law.¹⁶

These policies threaten directly and existentially Afar communities and, in consequence, the Afar language. All of this is contrary to the thrust of the General Assembly’s 2019 *Resolution*.

Other Challenges

The main cause of endangerment to the 4000 Indigenous languages that exist in the world today, is the small size of most Indigenous communities and their speakers.¹⁷ Threats to the Afar language, as I have tried to show, are different. The Afar language is at risk because of government policies that compromise the security of Afar communities, economies and way of life.

There are additional practical challenges. For example, while Afar controls public institutions in Afar state in Ethiopia and Afar is the working language of these institutions, Amharic is the working language of the Ethiopian Federal Government.¹⁸ Any Afar politician or person with ambition will be motivated to learn and speak Amharic; it is the language of upward mobility, a practical necessity for economic advancement and political power. As a second example, the language of education at Samara University in Afar State is English. This means that children who proceed through the education system in the Afar language, must switch to English to advance to post secondary education. Moreover, the Federal Government selects where students receive post secondary education. Afar students likely will have to leave Afar state for another region of Ethiopia to attend university. In that other place, Afar students will be educated in English, surrounded by a community that does not speak Afar.

¹² Markakis, *supra*, note 7, p. 92-3; Mads Holm, *Villagization: A Case Study of Ethiopia’s Villagization Programme*, n.d. Online: https://projekter.aau.dk/projekter/files/237239193/Thesis_Villagization_Mads_Holm.pdf

¹³ Eritrea, PROCLAMATION NO. 58/1994, art. 3(1) (“land is owned by the State”)/ Online: <https://faolex.fao.org/docs/pdf/eri8227.pdf>

¹⁴ Markakis, *supra*, note 7, p. 95.

¹⁵ SR Report 2023, para 59. Online:

<https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G23/092/08/PDF/G2309208.pdf?OpenElement>. This was also the conclusion of Dr. Babiker’s predecessors as Special Rapporteur.

¹⁶ *Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court*, art. 7(1)(h) and 7(2)(g). See generally, F. Pocar, *Persecution as a Crime Under International Criminal Law*, [2008] 2 Journal of National Security Law and Policy 355.

¹⁷ Mary Jane Norris, *Canada’s Aboriginal Languages*, Statistics Canada – Catalogue No. 11-008, 1998, p. 10 (Among the factors that contribute to language endangerment, “first and foremost is the size of the population”). Online: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/pub/11-008-x/1998003/article/4003-eng.pdf?st=ehgscZ71>

¹⁸ *Constitution of Ethiopia*, 1994, art 5(2).



This is a real problem for survival of Afarigna because sociolinguistics has established that where languages are in contact, language shift – the switching from the language habitually used by a speaker to the language better understood by that speaker’s audience – occurs because of the need to communicate in a commonly understood language. Over time, language shift leads to assimilation of weaker languages by stronger languages in at most three generations.¹⁹ That the language of post secondary education in Ethiopia is English and the surrounding communities of Afar students in University do not speak Afar means that upward mobility through education is a siphon that drains off the talented and their progeny from the Afar community. This is a risk to the Afar language.

Necessary Protection Measures

As we have seen, the Afar language must have economic value to survive in Ethiopia and Djibouti. This will require a change in government policies in both countries. Economic development of the Afar people is critical to preserving the Afar language. It is the only way that Ethiopia and Djibouti can come into conformity with the strategies recommended in the General Assembly’s 2019 *Resolution*.

Governments should start with the largest industry – pastoralism. Government policy should strive to improve productivity of herders, sustainability of the land base, and streamline access to markets. This will require both revision of national policies and inter-governmental efforts to harmonize regulatory regimes. If these efforts are made, they are likely to have a dramatic impact on Afar communities and preservation of the Afar language. As pastoralism is a substantial contributor to the GDP of both countries, successful implementation of revised policies and

¹⁹ Joshua A. Fishman, *The Sociology of Language: An Interdisciplinary Social Science Approach to Language in Society* (Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House Publishers, 1972). Subsequent research has isolated the circumstances and factors that contribute to this.

inter-governmental harmonization of regulatory regimes are also likely to improve government revenues substantially and thus strengthen both countries.

Economic development efforts should not stop with pastoralism. Government should strive to promote other opportunities for Afar people in commerce, business, education, and services if they are to be consistent with the goals of the International Decade of Indigenous Languages.

In Eritrea, persecution of the Afar people must stop. If Eritrea normalizes by crafting and implementing a rule of law constitution, the Afar people will require a form of autonomy and self-government that is constitutionally guaranteed. The West has been supportive of efforts to assist the Afar people in Ethiopia. Hopefully, if Eritrea normalizes, similar partnerships for development of the Afar people can be formed. The path to vitality for the Afar language runs through development of Afar communities.

The Afar Nation under threat in Eritrea

Ahmed Y. Mohamed, Afar traditional elder, Politician, Indigenous rights advocate, Ottawa Canada

I. Introduction of Afar

The Afar people constitute an ancient and culturally homogeneous indigenous group residing within the "Afar Triangle," encompassing the contemporary territories of Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Djibouti. They possess a distinct language, customs, and traditions that set them apart from other ethnic communities in the region. Predominantly engaged in pastoralism and fishing, the Afar people rely on livestock and fishing as primary sources of sustenance. Despite their rich cultural heritage, the Afar encounter a myriad of challenges, including political oppression, socioeconomic marginalization, displacement, and limited access to education and healthcare. Presently, the estimated population of the Afar people ranges from 3 to 4 million, distributed across the aforementioned three countries.

During the late 19th century, the Afar nation and their traditional territories in the Horn of Africa fell victim to European colonization, a period known as the "Scramble for Africa." This colonization led to the political and cultural fragmentation of the Afar people as they were divided by the artificial borders imposed by European powers, particularly the French and Italian forces, without their consent.

Preceding the arrival of European colonialists, the Afar nation had long occupied their traditional territories, governed by five sultanates: Awsa, Tadjourah, Rahyta, Gobaqad, and Bidu. These sultanic entities autonomously governed Afar societies, culturally and politically, through the application of Indigenous customary laws and legal systems.

Dankalia, a traditional Afar homeland, was colonized by Italy and is situated within the state of Eritrea in the northeastern part of the Afar Triangle. Notably, this region features strategic coastal waters, including international shipping lanes and ports with significant capacity, which are coveted by global superpowers and regional governments.

II. Eritrea assimilating the Afar Nation

Since gaining independence in 1993, the Eritrean government has introduced series of proclamations and policies that threaten the survival of the indigenous Afar people and their cultural identity. Through militarized courts the state forced the imposition of a singular cultural vision, modeled under majority Tigrigna speaking culture, the state has sought to undermine the autonomy and traditional way of life of this indigenous minority groups such as the Afar.

The Afar language, customary law, and rights to land and resources have all been subordinated to the state's authoritarian agenda, leading to the erosion of Afar cultural heritage. This concerted

effort to erase minority identities in favor of a homogenized national culture (Tigrigna) amounts to a form of cultural genocide and repression that marginalizes the future of the Afar nation within Eritrea.

In Dankalia, a their traditional Afar territories in Eritrea, the Afar people do not have a single Radio, an Afar TV program or a newspaper to communicate within their communities. Eritrea is the only African country to have no privately-owned media.

The Afar people in the country face significant challenges in accessing basic government services within their own territory. They often need to translate their documents and even seek medical care or sell their fish in the market, all while having to learn the Tigrigna language. This language barrier severely impacts the Afar people's access to healthcare and their overall socioeconomic well-being.

III. Eritrea prevents Afar language preservation and transmission

The heavy military presence in the traditional Afar coastal villages has had a profound and detrimental impact on the educational experiences of children. The indefinite military service and forced conscription of Afar families have unjustly prevented school-aged children from attending school.

The lack of instruction in the Afar Af language within schools represents a clear and unjust barrier for the Afar community. Government policies compel the Afar people to assimilate into Tigrinya culture, erasing their linguistic heritage and suppressing their cultural identity. The consequences are far-reaching, hindering the Afar community's access to education and healthcare services. The absence of Afar language instruction in schools results in significant challenges, as students struggle to comprehend concepts and instructions.

Limited administrative services and language barriers make it challenging for healthcare providers to communicate with Afar-speaking patients, significantly impacting the overall health and well-being of the Afar community. The shortage of qualified medical interpreters further exacerbates this critical issue.

IV. Political Repression

The UN Commission on the Situation of Human Rights in Eritrea and the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Eritrea have unequivocally confirmed that the Eritrean authorities have systematically persecuted the Afar population since the country's formation in 1993. This persecution has involved forcibly removing the Afar from their ancestral lands near the Assab port through acts of violence, murder, and mass killings. The UN bodies have decisively determined that these actions by the Eritrean government amounted to crimes of persecution and crimes against humanity. They strongly recommended that the UN Security Council refer the crimes and the responsible parties to the International Criminal Court for further action.

The UN's findings provide clear evidence that Eritrean authorities have implemented policies of internal colonization against the Eritrean Afar population since 1991. This includes the killing of members of the Afar ethnic group, the existence of mass graves, and the subjection of the Afar people to extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances by the Eritrean government since the year 2000. These acts of atrocity have also resulted in the displacement of the Afar from their traditional lands within Eritrea, as well as across the borders into Ethiopia and Djibouti, significantly impeding their livelihoods as an indigenous ethnic group that is reliant on these lands for their sustenance.

V. Recognizing the Afar's inherent self-determination and autonomy within the Eritrea

The Afar people have a long-standing tradition of self-governance and autonomy, which predates the establishment of modern Eritrea. The Afar nation possesses a strong historical foundation to assert its right to special autonomy in the Dankalia region. The Afar have maintained control over their ancestral lands in the Afar Triangle well before the emergence of modern nation-states. The five Afar Sultanates - Rahayta, Biru, Tadjourah, Goba'ad, and Awsa - have a well-documented history of self-governance, which was acknowledged by external powers such as the Ottoman Turks, Italians, and French through peace treaties and mutual agreements.

Despite their long-standing history of self-governance and self-sufficiency in the region, the Afar people have faced systemic, widely documented, and unique marginalization. Approximately three-quarters of the estimated 500,000 Afar population have fled Eritrea due to persecution. UN human rights experts have extensively investigated and confirmed Eritrea's grave human rights violations against the indigenous Afar people.

The unprecedented human rights violations and marginalization of the Afar in Eritrea call for the recognition of their right to self-determination and self-government at the local level. The Afar's demand for internal autonomy is supported by the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which acknowledges the right to self-determination and the right to autonomy or self-government. Additionally, the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights calls for the recognition of the rights of indigenous Afar, including their unquestionable and inalienable right to self-determination and the right to freely determine their political status and pursue their economic and social development.

VI. Conclusion

The Eritrean oppressive military presence in Afar coastal villages has had a profound and adverse impact on the Afar nation and the transmission of their cultural values to the next generations of Afar children. Compulsory military service and conscription have directly prevented Afar traditional economic activities, such as fishing, nomadic pastoralism, and cross-border trades, from thriving, thereby hindering Afar children's access to education. The deliberate absence of Afar language instruction in schools is a deliberate barrier, as government policies enforce Afar assimilation and the erasure of their linguistic and cultural identity. This severely obstructs the Afar community's access to education and healthcare. Without Afar language instruction, students are left to grapple with significant challenges, and language barriers severely impair healthcare providers' ability to effectively communicate with Afar

patients, directly impacting the community's health and well-being. The dire shortage of medical care and interpreters only exacerbates these already critical issues.

The UN's designation of 2022-2032 as the Decade of Indigenous Languages in Resolution A/RES/74/135 warrants a focus on preserving these languages and the broader human rights issues facing Indigenous communities. This critical initiative demands a laser-focused approach to preserving indigenous languages and addressing the broader human rights issues facing indigenous communities. It is imperative to recognize that language is not just a means of communication, but a fundamental aspect of a nation's identity. Global Indigenous groups have unilaterally adopted charters, and there is an unwavering effort to exert pressure on African states to endorse the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. These actions are aimed at unequivocally recognizing the rights of autonomy for people like the Afar nation and shielding them from assimilation policies, as well as the unjust dispossession of their lands and resources.

UNDERSTANDING HOW LINGUISTIC GENOCIDE AFFECTS THE DEGA PEOPLE IN THE CENTRAL HIGHLANDS OF VIETNAM

Y Bhim Nie

INTRODUCTION

First and foremost, please allow me to thank all of you for organizing this session and for allowing me to address the atrocities the Rhade people are facing in the Central Highlands of Vietnam.

My name is Y Bhim Nie. I was born into the Rhade people in the Central Highlands in Vietnam. I am a United States Citizen, a member of the International Association of Genocide Scholars (IAGS), and a member of the Convening Council of Nations and States (CNS).

I have first-hand experience living before, during, and after the USA participated in the Vietnam War. I lived for more than fifteen years under the communist Vietnam regime. I trained as a medical doctor and fled to the USA, where I live in North Carolina.

I am a survivor and could be the last member who still holds the legacy of the Rhade people's identity, culture, literature, language, and poetry. A survivor possesses traditional skills from long ago, historical and current knowledge of what happened to us, and the Rhade people's philosophy of peaceful living in harmony with nature.

During my lifetime, I have survived bombing, fighting, betrayal, torture, attempting assassination, and incarceration. I have experienced the killing of family members and having my home village nowhere anymore, emptiness, desolation, devastation, and the continuing of everything is broken. It is completely wiped off the map by the invasion of Vietnamese colonizer settlers, thus destroying a way of life that took thousands of years to create and form. In addition to losing our traditional clan lands, the last tree has been cut down, the last fish has been caught, and the last river has dried up. They destroyed our history, culture, identity, and language. Our children no longer speak, read, and write in our Rhade language. They are zombified and know nothing about their people's history, engendering a sense of lost connection within the framework of human continuity.

Today, a few people still own a small piece of land, and the majority have become enslaved, forced into assimilation, abject poverty, and turned into exotic museum objects by the Vietnamese oppressors. Our people's rights to exist are denied.

WHO ARE THE RHADE (DEGA) PEOPLE?

We Rhade call ourselves Anak Dega, which means "the children of Dega." We are a separate race with a single origin; it evolved through the same processes and stages as other Malayo-Polynesian peoples, such as the Cham, Malay, Indonesian, and the Philippines. We are

ethnically distinct from the leading group of Vietnamese. We speak the language called Rhade, which is a member of the Chamic subgroup of this language family.

We comprise one of the largest tribes centered around the Buon Ma Thuot city of Dak Lak province and on all sides in the Central Highlands in Vietnam.

Less While in the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam) from 1955 to 1975. After the annexation of our country by its President Ngo Dinh Diem to become a part of South Vietnam, we are officially referred to as “người thượng” (highlanders). Less officially, we were formally referred to as đồng bào thượng (highland compatriots);

Since 1975, there has been no specific term to refer to the indigenous people of the Central Highlands. We are commonly referred to by the same label as Vietnam’s other minority groups in North Vietnam, such as “dân tộc thiểu số” or “ethnic minorities,” in distinction from what they now call themselves, “người kinh,” or ethnic Vietnamese majority. To move away from the common pejorative Vietnamese words for our people, such as “Mọi” or “Man,” which mean “barbarian” or “savage,” the French adopted the word “Montagnard,” which simply means “Mountain People.”

In America, we are called “Montagnard” in French terms. The communist government of Vietnam changes our name to minority E-de as a part of their manipulating our identity and their efforts to assimilate us into the Vietnamese race.

People have used and understood the Rhade language in daily intercourse for centuries or even thousands of years. It has been written in a Romanized script since the early 20th century.

It is unlike the language of Vietnamese, which was initially written with

Chinese characters have been used since then until Western scholars created their Romanized alphabet, “Quốc- Ngữ,” by two Catholic priests, Francisco de Pina, and Alexander de Rhodes.

The **Rhade** script was created by a person named Y-Ut Nie Buon Rit, a native of the present village of Buon Ko Tam in Dak Lak province in the Central Highlands in Vietnam.

He was a most talented person, and nearly all of us know the trail-blazing efforts of his hard work of using Latin to create the Rhade script. Communist Vietnamese guerrillas executed him in 1962 as part of their process of linguistic genocide and denied the existence of the Dega people.

Under the colonial French in Indochina and southern Vietnam, the ancient royal Nguyen regime (1558-1954) treated the Central Highlands as a separate, quasi-independent state with all the rights. The French language and Rade were officially language administration and teaching in the school. Including Vietnamese invaders from the north was strictly regulated and mostly prevented. It was not until 1890, in competition with Thailand, that the French incorporated the entire area of what was known as the French Indochina, which created national boundaries, the Central Highlands separately in what they called the “Pays Montagnard du Sud Indochinois” or PMSI.

So, why has the Rade language not survived and endlessly struggled to exist today? To fully understand, there are:

THREE STAGES LINGUISTIC GENOCIDE OF RHADE

_First Stage: The annexation of Central Highlands became part of South Vietnam.

The Republic of Vietnam was established in 1954 by the United States South Vietnam president, Ngo-Dinh-Diem. His government followed the old plan of the ancient Đại Việt in their “Nam Tiến” in English, “Southward” invading and occupying the lands of everyone to the South and illegally annexed the entire Central Highlands area into South Vietnam and began to occupy it with Vietnamese settlers. He was using the ancient “Dinh Điền” model of militarily protected settlement villages on the lands of the Dega people.

She dissolved the administrative society's legal and legitimate authority and jurisdiction, took over the schools, burned material documents, banned teaching for Rhade children, and published on social media. Rhade disappeared from teaching in the children's school in 1962.

This is the first stage of a long process of humiliation, deprivation, hatred toward us, dehumanization, marginalization, and turning our Rhade people into a minority on their ancestral land.

_Second Stage: Twenty years in the Vietnam War in which Americans participated

From around the world, people are familiar with the Vietnam War, but few people realize that the land between North and South Vietnam sits on the land of the Dega people.

The Central Highlands was the biggest target of bombing and spraying with the deadly chemical Agent Orange dioxin. It has brought unimaginable suffering to so many innocent people. Over 85% of the Dega villages, schools, and infrastructure society were destroyed, and many thousands of lives of innocent Rhade people were being threatened, killed, and ruined in another nightmarish way via horrific injuries, severe life-changing trauma of the loss of homes, and agricultural farming.

Neither side of the conflict paid attention to teaching the Rhade to children; instead, they used the Dega people as tools by recruiting them to fight on their battlefield. More than 200,000 people were killed, and the young Dega male population disappeared during the Vietnam War conflict.

American Christian missionaries did produce a bible in a Rhade version during the Vietnam War. However, it was solely for religious purposes, not for the grassroots to maintain or develop the Rhade language. Most generations of Dega children were not taught the language that they had already spoken during the Vietnam War and after the war.

_Third Stage: Forty-eight years under communist Vietnam rule till the Present.

North Vietnamese took over the Central Highlands in 1975. All the Rhade material documents being destroyed are once more intense under President Ngo Dinh Diem. All privileges and rights of our Rhade people were abolished, our leaders in 1950-1960 were eliminated, our traditional clan lands were seized, some more than 2 million North Vietnamese occupied them, the Vietnamese settlers took over our schools, and our language was not allowed. We have no freedom of assembly or organization.

The Communist Vietnamese government does not respect any linguistic human rights. It considers the maintenance of the Rhade language as a form of separatism. It fears that the Dega people might reproduce themselves and even demand political, cultural, and economic autonomy, ultimately threatening the disintegration of the state.

Hence, it pursues a vigorous policy of creating a diluted, wholly assimilated population without any sense of community, identity, language, or history.

The Rhade language was not only systematically stigmatized as being traditional, backward, narrow, and inferior, but our children were encouraged to abandon and leave their mother tongue behind through various modern methods. The Dega children have been marginalized and deprived of resources for their development and use of their mother language.

Social media platforms in Vietnam, including Facebook, YouTube, the Internet, and television, have become tools and play significant roles in destroying the remnant of Rhade. Manipulating, indoctrinating, intimidating, distracting, and molding attitudes of the young and children toward ancestral lands and Rhade language.

The threat goes beyond physical existence and losing our land and resources. It also extends to the loss of way of life, identity, language, culture, esteem, freedom, prestige, equality, and justice. Everything is being renamed: even streams, rivers, jungles, and mountains that used to be in Rhade names are not exempt from being converted to some strange Vietnamese name.

Goes back to the founding years of the United Nations, where the UN Convention on Prevention and Punishment of Crimes of Genocide, genocide means any of the following acts committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group:

- (a) Killing members of the group
- (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group
- (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part
- (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent birth within the group
- (e) Forcibly transferring children from one group to another group.

These five conditions constitute the destruction of group identity. Three of those relate to physical destruction. The remaining two conditions, 2 b and 2e, relate to linguistic destruction.

All of these five conditions are fulfilled with the history, facts, and experience of the Dega people; if not genocide, what else needs to be called?

Even though Vietnam's votes favor the UNDRIP and Universal Human Rights declaration, it does not ratify International Labor Convention number 169, which covers land rights, health, and education. It also does not recognize us as indigenous people.

So, do we go where we have no land, culture, language, or name?

CONCLUSION & SOLUTION

There are two paradigms for analyzing the Rhade in Central Highlands, Vietnam. Is the Rhade language dying, or is it being murdered?

Death is when a language disappears naturally. It is not the Rhade case because we would never commit suicide in our language. We have never left and never will leave our Rhade language voluntarily. Our case is that the will of anti-creation won our choice and destroyed it on the territory of our ancestral land, where our physical space is present. It takes thousands of years to create linguistics and culture.

Most of the time, those governments control the Rhade people's population and play a vital role in the linguistic genocide of the Rhade.

We suffer from unscrupulous deprivation of our linguistic and other human rights, including the right to self-determination.

Murder is Arson; the library is set on fire. Often, the Vietnamese government has intentionally promoted the death of the Rhade language because of its goal of racial purity, consciously creating a homogenous society and not wishing to have other languages in Vietnam.

The conditions in our home in the Central Highlands are so dire. We are on the brink of extinction. This harsh reality underscores the nature of our plights, which are significantly different in the struggle between death and inequality in life.

We are enduring and suffering with the most complex modern genocide of the 21st century, and its nature is an act of anti-creation that stops us from becoming. Unlike the Holocaust, the death camp oven and gas chamber as the tool to kill Jews, or the Cambodian genocide, the killing field was a tool by which two million Cambodians were killed. The Dega people are facing the intentional destruction of the whole part of the combination of physical killing, culture, identity destruction, and language eradication, ultimately, the entire dispossession of our ancestral land.

This insidious genocide happened gradually, slowly, subtly, and quietly but surely. It occurred over a long period and, bit by bit, aims at absolute annihilation. It does not alarm most Rhade people and the world community because its catastrophe is less horrific. Still, it is the worst genocide in human history, leading a group of Rhade people to disappear through the process of cultural destruction, assimilation, and land dispossession.

We recognize no magic answers or miraculous methods to overcome our condition. However, as a living species, humans have dignity, hope, obligation, and the aspirations of our children and grandchildren. Somehow, civilized people's empathy and compassion are willing to give us their hands to support us in continuing to exist.

I am pleading with the world community, particularly the UN and its mechanism on language, to ensure that everyone is included in achieving the sustainable development goal by 2030.

I am standing in front of you today as a witness. It is a call from deep in our soles to Devine when we might not have the precise words to cry for support to exist. To all elite politicians in Washington DC, to the United Nations, and Southeast Asia states

Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam are lost for us, but the whole community of nations, so it must not idly stand by. allow a fresh perspective of the complexity of modern genocide in the twenty-first century besides conventional Cambodian genocide. Acknowledge and recognize us as human beings—distinct people with cultural histories and languages. Returning our ancestral land allows us to live with dignity and exercise our right to culture and identity based on the right to self-determination. Intervention protection of International Humanitarian Law provides restitution, rehabilitation, and the maintenance of the remaining Dega people.

Thank you very much for listening and showing interest and concern.

Windows to the World: Protecting Indigenous Languages

Awring Shaways, Founder and Executive Director of KG Lobby Center

Ladies and gentlemen, esteemed guests, and advocates for cultural diversity, thank you for the opportunity to address a topic of critical importance today—the preservation of the Kurdish language. The Kurdish language is more than a means of communication; it represents a rich tapestry of culture, history, and identity for millions of Kurdish people across the globe. As we gather here, it is imperative to recognize that protecting indigenous languages like Kurdish is a fundamental aspect of safeguarding human rights and promoting cultural diversity.

I. Cultural Heritage and Identity

The Kurdish language is a vital part of the identity of the Kurdish people, who inhabit regions across Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. It consists of several dialects, with Kurmanji and Sorani being the most widely spoken.

Kurdish language serves as a cornerstone of Kurdish identity. It is a vessel for expressing the values, traditions, and beliefs that define the Kurdish people. Preserving the language is crucial for maintaining a sense of belonging, its own unique cultural significance, encapsulating the folklore, traditions, and wisdom of generations making its preservation essential for maintaining the identity of the Kurdish people especially in a world increasingly dominated by global cultures.

Every language is intertwined with identity; it is how we express our thoughts, emotions, and beliefs. Losing a language means losing a part of ourselves. For the Kurdish people, the language is a source of pride, our identity and a means of connecting with their ancestors. By preserving the Kurdish language, we honor our collective history and empower future generations to embrace their cultural heritage.

II. Political Empowerment and Advocacy

The Kurdish language is not merely a cultural asset; it also serves as a powerful tool for political expression and advocacy. In regions where Kurdish identity has faced systematic oppression, the language becomes an instrument of resistance. It allows Kurdish communities to articulate their rights, aspirations, and grievances effectively.

Preserving the Kurdish language strengthens political identity and fosters unity among Kurdish speakers. It empowers individuals to advocate for their rights and demands for autonomy, ultimately leading to greater social cohesion and collective action.

III. Linguistic Diversity and Global Significance

The preservation of the Kurdish language contributes to global linguistic diversity, which is vital for a rich and varied human experience. Each language offers unique insights into the world, representing distinct ways of thinking and understanding. By safeguarding Kurdish, we affirm the value of all languages and recognize that each one plays an essential role in the tapestry of human culture.

In a world where globalization often leads to the dominance of a few major languages,

preserving indigenous languages like Kurdish is crucial for maintaining cultural diversity and ensuring that the voices of marginalized communities are heard. Initiatives like the International Year of Indigenous Languages (2019) and the ongoing efforts to include languages like Kurdish in global cultural heritage frameworks underscore the need for international advocacy and support.

IV. The Threats to the Kurdish Language

Despite its significance, the Kurdish language faces numerous threats that jeopardize its survival:

- One of the most significant threats to the Kurdish language is the implementation of assimilation policies by governments in the region.

In Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria, policies aimed at promoting dominant national languages often marginalize Kurdish. These policies restrict the use of Kurdish in education, media, and public life, creating an environment where younger generations feel pressured to abandon their mother tongue.

- Censorship regarding the Kurdish language manifests in various forms, from the banning of Kurdish literature to restrictions on public expressions of Kurdish culture. Language violence defined as the discrimination and suppression of minority languages has severe consequences. It undermines the identity of Kurdish speakers and fosters a culture of silence and fear.

According to UNESCO's Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger, Danger, Kurdish is classified as "vulnerable" in many regions. Factors contributing to this status include governmental policies that restrict the use of Kurdish in education, media, and public life, particularly in Turkey, Iran, and Syria.

The impact of language violence extends beyond the individual; it erodes social cohesion and fosters divisions within communities. When people cannot freely express themselves in their native language, it creates an atmosphere of mistrust and resentment.

- Ongoing geopolitical conflicts in the Middle East have exacerbated the challenges facing the Kurdish language. Civil wars, political instability, and military operations have led to significant displacement and disruption of community structures. Displacement often results in the loss of cultural ties and the inability to pass down the language to younger generations.

In these tumultuous contexts, the preservation of language can become a secondary concern amid the immediate struggles for survival and safety. When communities are forced to flee or adapt to new environments, the transmission of language and culture is disrupted.

- Environmental changes, including climate change and resource depletion, disproportionately affect marginalized communities, including Kurdish populations. These changes disrupt traditional ways of life, further complicating the transmission of language and culture. As communities are forced to migrate or adapt, the chances of language loss increase.

- Limited education resources Access to quality educational resources that support Kurdish language instruction is often scarce. Many Kurdish communities lack the necessary infrastructure and funding to provide effective language education. This scarcity diminishes opportunities for children to learn their mother tongue and limits their ability to engage with their cultural heritage.

Inadequate educational resources not only hinder language acquisition but also deprive children of the chance to develop critical thinking and analytical skills in their native language.

V. The Role of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)

The establishment of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq represents a significant milestone in the preservation and promotion of the Kurdish language. Since its formation, the KRG has taken considerable steps to support Kurdish as an official language, facilitating its use in government, education, media, and public life.

However, while the KRG has made strides, much work remains. The region continues to face challenges such as limited resources for educational infrastructure, a shortage of trained teachers, and the influence of dominant languages in areas outside the Kurdistan region. To ensure the continued vitality of the Kurdish language, we must enhance our revitalization efforts and seek international support.

To secure the future of the Kurdish language, we must adopt a comprehensive approach that encompasses various strategies:

1. Advocacy and Policy Change

Engaging with international bodies, including the United Nations, is crucial for advocating the rights of Kurdish speakers. UN General Assembly Resolution A/RES/74/135 emphasizes the importance of protecting and promoting indigenous languages. We must leverage this resolution to push for policies that recognize Kurdish as a legitimate and valuable language. This advocacy should target the governments of Syria, Turkey, and Iran, raising awareness of the importance of linguistic diversity and the negative consequences of language violence. By emphasizing the value of Kurdish, we can foster a more inclusive societal framework that respects and upholds the rights of minority language speakers.

2. Community Initiatives

Grassroots movements play a vital role in language preservation. Community centers should offer Kurdish language classes, cultural events, and storytelling sessions. These initiatives foster pride in the language and encourage its use in daily life. By creating spaces where Kurdish is spoken and celebrated, we can strengthen community bonds and enhance language proficiency.

Encouraging community participation in cultural activities can help bridge generational divides and instill a sense of pride and ownership over the language. Engaging elders to share stories and traditions in Kurdish can also serve as a powerful method for transmitting knowledge.

3. Cultural Promotion

Promoting Kurdish literature, music, and art is essential for revitalizing the language. Cultural festivals, workshops, and exhibitions can showcase the richness of Kurdish heritage and provide platforms for artistic expression. By highlighting the creative potential of the Kurdish language, we can inspire younger generations to embrace their linguistic identity. Media plays a crucial role in this regard. Supporting Kurdish filmmakers, authors, and musicians can create visibility and appreciation for Kurdish culture, fostering a vibrant cultural scene that values the language.

4. Utilizing Technology

In today's digital age, technology can serve as a powerful tool for language preservation. Developing online resources, apps, and social media campaigns can engage younger generations and facilitate language learning. E-learning platforms can provide accessible Kurdish language courses, fostering a new wave of speakers equipped to navigate both local and global contexts.

By harnessing the power of technology, we can make the Kurdish language more accessible and appealing, particularly to youth who are often more comfortable in digital spaces.

5. Collaboration with Experts

Engaging with linguists, educators, and cultural experts can help develop effective strategies for promoting the Kurdish language. Collaborative efforts can lead to the creation of educational materials and resources tailored to the needs of Kurdish speakers. By working with scholars and practitioners in the field, we can ensure that our approaches are informed and impactful.

This collaboration should extend beyond the Kurdish community, seeking partnerships with international organizations that specialize in language preservation and education.

6. International Support

Seeking partnerships with international organizations, NGOs, and academic institutions is crucial for garnering support for Kurdish language initiatives. Organizations like UNESCO have a pivotal role to play in supporting language preservation initiatives.

In a remarkable development, UNESCO recently announced its partnership to place a nano-engraved nickel plate on the moon, featuring approximately 275 languages, including Kurdish. This initiative is not just a symbolic gesture; it serves as a powerful affirmation of the value of linguistic diversity.

By placing the Kurdish language on the moon, we assert its significance in the broader narrative of humanity, ensuring that it is remembered for generations to come. This initiative serves as a reminder that every language, including Kurdish, contributes to the rich tapestry of human culture.

7. Raising Awareness Among Governments

We must engage in dialogue with policymakers, highlighting the detrimental impacts of language suppression on Kurdish communities. This includes not only the loss of cultural

heritage but also the broader societal implications of diminished linguistic diversity, which can lead to increased social tensions and conflict.

It is imperative that we raise awareness among the governments regarding the importance of linguistic diversity and the negative consequences of language violence.

By advocating for policies that protect and promote indigenous language, we can contribute to a more inclusive society that values and celebrates its linguistic heritage. This approach benefits not only the Kurdish people but also enhances social cohesion and cultural understanding among all citizens.

In conclusion, the preservation of the Kurdish language is not merely an issue for the Kurdish people; it is a matter of global significance. By safeguarding our indigenous languages, we honor the diverse tapestry of human experience and contribute to a richer, more inclusive world.

The preservation of the Kurdish language is a multifaceted issue that intersects with cultural identity, education, human rights, and technological innovation. By addressing the external threats and promoting grassroots initiatives, it is possible to revitalize the Kurdish language and ensure its survival for future generations.

With commitment, collaboration, and international support, we can create a future where the Kurdish language thrives, where cultural diversity is celebrated, and the richness of human heritage is preserved for generations to come.

The languages of minorities and indigenous peoples in the Middle East and South America

By:Somaya Slim

Good afternoon, everyone.

I'm honored to be here today to shed light on an often overlooked but critical issue: the languages of minorities and indigenous peoples in the Middle East, North Africa, and South America, and the challenges they face in preserving and passing them on to future generations.

Language is a person's window to the world. Through it, we learn, grow, and connect. It shapes our identity, culture, and the way we perceive the world around us.

1. The Role of Language in a Person's Early Life

From the first years of life, language plays a profound role in how we interact with the world. Through it, children learn about their environment, social structures, and their place in society.

Language shapes us even before birth—studies show that it influences children as early as in the womb. A University of Kansas study demonstrated that fetuses can distinguish between different speech sounds late in pregnancy, responding to their mother's native language before they are even born. This fascinating finding highlights how deeply ingrained language is in our early development and our identity.

In the Middle East, indigenous languages like Tamazight (Berber), Nubian, and the language of the nomadic Bedouins in the Sinai in Egypt and the desert of the Arabian Peninsula are vital to cultural identity. Similarly, in South America, native languages like Quechua, Aymara, and Guarani connect people to their ancient heritage. Passing on their language to the next generation is essential to ensuring their children maintain a connection to their heritage, values, and worldview.

2. The Deliberate Marginalization of Indigenous and Minority Languages

In both regions, indigenous languages face not only natural decline but deliberate erasure under the guise of national unity. Policies that promote a single language in the name of social cohesion often lead to the suppression of minority languages.

The Nubians in Egypt, is an ancient language that has survived for millennia but is now facing a critical threat due to lack of institutional support. It remains only a spoken language, with no official recognition, and is not allowed to be written or taught in schools. This has led to a significant decline in its use, with many contemporary Nubians becoming unfamiliar with their own language, knowing only a few words or phrases. The younger generations, growing up in a

system that prioritizes Arabic for education, jobs, and societal communication, are often disconnected from their linguistic heritage.

Similarly, in South America, languages like Mapudungun in Chile and Guaraní in Paraguay face challenges as Spanish and Portuguese dominate education and employment, leading younger generations to disconnect from their native languages.

3. The Impact of Wars and Conflicts

Wars and conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa have further accelerated the extinction of some languages. Wars displace communities, severing the ties that preserve oral histories and linguistic traditions.

For example, in the Middle East, the archive at the Islamic University in Gaza, which housed 250 video recordings and 1,259 audio recordings containing oral narratives about contemporary Palestinian history. These records represented a cultural and historical reference for key events in Palestinian history, preserving the dialects and stories of different cities and villages. In the same time, there was even a student-led project to transform this archive into an electronic library to ensure its preservation and make it accessible to historians, researchers, and linguists. Sadly, after the October 7, 2023, war, the Islamic University building was destroyed, its professors and students displaced or killed. This tragic event has not only halted a significant historical preservation project but has also disrupted the transmission of dialects that are an integral part of Palestinian identity and history.

In South America, indigenous communities face displacement due to land disputes, deforestation, and resource extraction. In the Amazon, the displacement of communities has disrupted the transmission of native languages such as Ticuna and Kayapó. Forced assimilation into dominant cultures often leads to a decline in the use of these indigenous languages, threatening their survival.

As Silvia Quattrini stated in 2019, “language endangerment is connected to diaspora and internal displacement. Fragmented communities are more likely to lose usage of their language.” This rings true for conflict zones across the Middle East, North Africa, and South America.

4. The Struggle to Preserve Indigenous and Minority Languages

In addition to the impacts of war, globalization and modernization further threaten the survival of indigenous languages. Many of these languages lack official recognition, leaving them without institutional support in education, media, or public life.

In the Middle East, languages like Nubian and nomadic Bedouins struggle to gain recognition and protection. In South America, the Mapuche people in Chile are fighting to preserve the Mapudungun language, which is at risk as Spanish dominates education and governance.

When children are educated solely in the dominant language of the majority, their linguistic

window to the world narrows. This deprives them of a full view of their history and identity, and we risk losing the richness of cultural diversity.

5. The Consequences of Language Loss

When a language dies, more than just words disappear. Entire histories, knowledge systems, and cultural identities vanish. The loss of a language is the loss of a worldview—a unique lens through which a community understands the world.

In South America, the disappearance of native languages like Yaghan, once spoken in southern Chile, illustrates how entire cultures fade with language loss. Similarly, in the Middle East, the decline of languages like Nubian threatens to erase thousands of years of history and knowledge.

This erosion undermines self-determination for indigenous and minority groups. It is not only a cultural issue but a violation of their basic human rights.

6. The Way Forward

We must stand in solidarity with indigenous and minority communities in their fight to preserve their languages. This requires governmental policies that recognize and support linguistic diversity, including multilingual education, media programming in minority languages, and digital preservation of oral histories.

In Paraguay, the government has recognized Guaraní as an official language alongside Spanish, a positive step toward preserving linguistic diversity. Similarly, we must push for policies in the Middle East that support languages like Nubian, nomadic Bedouins and Berber.

Rather than seeing indigenous languages as obstacles to national unity, we should recognize them as vital elements of our shared cultural richness. Language diversity strengthens our societies, and the survival of these languages is crucial to maintaining the rich heritage of regions like the Middle East and South America.

[Conclusion]

The languages of minorities and indigenous peoples are more than tools for communication—they are windows into rich cultural heritages, histories, and identities. Preserving these languages is not just an act of cultural preservation; it is a defense of the right of communities to define their own identities and futures.

Let us work together to keep these windows open for generations to come. Thank you.

Somaya Selim

