MAHAGI TERRITORIES
EASTERN ITURI PROVINCE,
DR CONGO AND *SOUTHERN*
PAKWACH DISTRICT,
UGANDA

PARTICIPATORY MAPPING OF THE CULTURAL HERITAGE

ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENDERS

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**Mahagi territories (Eastern Ituri province, DR Congo and Southern
Pakwach district, Uganda)**

INTRODUCTION

Mahagi territories have experienced recurrent internal and regional conflicts and an instability marked by humanitarian crises and generalised poverty for many decades. These conflicts are dynamic and complex but they share common issues related to the exploitation of ethnic tensions, to the shrinking of civic and political space, to state repression and to the incessant violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

This is coupled with rampant corruption and an increasing degree of structural violence often directed towards political opponents, human rights defenders and civil society actors. The degradation in political governance also benefits from and contributes to the unfair exploitation of the region's natural resources, as powerful state and non-state actors scramble over land and the mineral wealth of the region. It is undergoing a gradual decline in dense and secondary forests, triggered by (legal, illegal and unregulated) resource exploitation and their unsustainable use, some detrimental forms of agriculture, rapid urban growth in absence of long-term strategic planning, all linked by instability arising from land conflicts that chronically plague the region. Community rights and individual opportunistic interests increasingly clash since the politico-military- commercial elite seizes the benefits provided by the vacuum of the state and the richness of the natural resources. Indigenous are most vulnerable as they have not been able to secure their land rights and are not always capable of exercising the Free, Prior and Informed Consent.

Environmental Defenders have activated and implemented monitoring and reporting from the ground. In its strategy it uses the study of land dynamics through the collection and analysis of geographic-environmental-social data to frame and implement projects addressing ecological justice, starting from a rights-based approach.

In particular, participatory mapping with communities is aimed in this context as a process for knowledge building, networking and cooperation, supporting community-based biodiversity conservation as the basis for ensuring food security and sustainable livelihoods.

THE IDEA

Participatory mapping of cultural heritage is understood as a process aimed at the identification and recognition of tangible and intangible elements with cultural and social significance, in order to write the memory of this territory.

In the Mahagi territories a collective activity of recognition of the cultural heritage as unprecedented is necessary. The censorship and cancellation of cultural heritage, together with the transformations that began during colonial occupation, have in fact determined a cultural loss that has had disastrous effects in the protection of land rights, triggering conflicts over the use and management of resources.

For this reason, a participatory mapping of cultural heritage, is designed to:

- **create the collective narrative of th Indigenous groups in Mahagi territories from the recognition of cultural heritage and make them aware of cultural and social wealth (so that they can exercise responsibly the free, prior and informed consent in project development);**
- **help researchers and writers gather information to write and publish school books on history and geography, and give teachers new learning materials;**
- **produce supporting documentation required within impact assessments (e.g. Environmental and Social Impact Assessment - ESIA in Uganda) of development projects;**
- **report and file court cases in the context of land litigation involving protected areas.**

A definition for cultural heritage

Cultural Heritage is an expression of the ways of living developed by a community and passed on from generation to generation. It is widely acknowledged that heritage is not only manifested through tangible forms such as artefacts, buildings or landscapes but also through intangible forms such as voices, values, traditions and oral history.

Cultural significance is the *aesthetic, historic, scientific or social value for past, present or future generations.* Cultural significance is also a mechanism that assists in assessing the value of places and thus can provide knowledge on the history of the heritage and enable appreciation of that heritage by future generations.

Therefore, while values are a key factor in heritage formation, however, when there is no social contact, production and dissemination of knowledge as well as spatio-temporal structures in which *such processes can take place, values would simply remain values.*

The significance of African heritage is passed down through the generations by the elders who are considered as the custodians of the Indigenous knowledge. These custodians do not separate natural heritage from cultural heritage and therefore the intangible cultural heritage is perfectly interweaved with the tangible as well as with the supernatural.

Given these theoretical assumptions, we investigate cultural heritage based on its cultural and social significance. *The social significance of a place is derived from a perceived meaning or symbolic, spiritual or moral value in the place that is important to a particular community or cultural group and which generates a strong sense of attachment.*

The language of geography

Geography is more than just knowing territory, environmental problems, climate change, knowing the rivers and the forests. Geography was a way to get to know each other even more, to understand the relationship while with environment, territory, cosmologies, identity and especially autonomy. Geography defined by Western world as the relationship between humans and environment is not real, because there is not integrated knowledge and a dichotomy between physical and human geography. Knowledge of the space where humans and environment interact cannot be dissociated.

Geography is a language, than is an abbreviation for the world's readability. Language creates order. It allows us to enter real, distant, or nonexistent worlds. We need to remember ancient stories, uncover forgotten knowledge, create new narratives, write new creation stories.

Modern maps don't have a memory. We need maps that bring a community voice and perspective back to the land, countering Western notions of place and geography and challenging the arbitrary borders imposed on the Mahagi communities.

Modern maps don't have a memory. The resulted from such orders — atlases, political maps, topographical maps — became unquestioned and lasting truths of ownership and identity. Such maps are widely

assumed to convey objective and universal knowledge of place. They are intended to orient us, to tell us how to get from here to there, to show us precisely where we are. Many of us do not know the stories of the land in the places where we live; we have not thought to look for the topography of a myth in the surrounding rivers and hills. Perhaps this is because we have forgotten how to listen to the land around us. Counter-mapping conveys a relationship to a place grounded in knowledge and sustained presence on the land. They remind us of the names, voices, and stories that reside within the landscape, inviting us to examine our assumptions about what it is that makes up a place and the role that we play in that long and layered story. It's place-making power, through color, relationship, and story, the maps provide directions on how to return home.

Blank spaces in the maps of Western cartographers on the Albertine Region do not represent gaps in knowledge, but instead actively erase (and legitimize the erasure of) existing social, and geo-cultural formations in preparation for the projection and subsequent emplacement of a different order.
Moreover, it is not acceptable that Ugandan students continue to learn the geography of the colonizing countries without knowing the geography of the territories in which they live.

Participatory mapping

Participatory mapping is a practice that seeks to transfer some of this power into the hands of local communities as a way of promoting their active involvement in their own governance and in the management of their resources.

The spatial nature of many community development and resource management problems makes mapping a natural choice when participatory approaches are needed. Maps provide a straightforward means of communicating complex information, and are often the most effective way to depict the relationships between people and their surrounding landscape.
The central tenet is that the community owns the map, dictates what is mapped, and uses the map for their own advocacy. Communicating local knowledge on a map is a logical process for most humans and may be the only efficient way of transferring such knowledge when illiteracy and/or language differences create obstacles to communication between local residents and outside experts.

A case study.
Maps in Court: how the Waorani are upholding their rights in Ecuador

Over the last half-century the oil industry (multinationals and the Ecuadorian state oil company) have opened roads for oil platforms and pipelines into the heart of the Waorani peoples ancestral lands, causing contamination, deforestation, unchecked colonisation, and an influx of illegal loggers and gold miners. Although the threats of oil and roads are real, for the Waorani people the map of their ancestral land produced by the government is nearly unrecognizable.

They only see oil, timber, gold, farmlands in our forest. They don't see us. They don't care how we live. Our forest is our home. It gives us everything. Life itself – Oswando Nenquimo, Waorani.

In response to these mounting, bewildering, and life-taking threats, the Waorani communities of the Curaray River, an area still free from oil drilling, have begun creating territorial maps of their lands that document the historic and actual uses of their territory, and demonstrate that their homelands are not up for grabs.
Whereas the maps of oil companies show petrol deposits and major rivers, the maps that the Waorani peoples are creating identify historic battle sites, ancient cave-carvings, jaguar trails, medicinal plants, animal reproductive zones, important fishing holes, creek-crossings, sacred waterfalls.

The aim of the Waorani mapping project is to bring together elders, women and youth of every Waorani community, and to support them in documenting (and telling the story!) of their rainforest territory – the history, their daily-use of forest resources, and why their territory is important to them. And through this process, which involves spending time in the forest, walking hunting trails and documenting wildlife and botanical life, community members have the opportunity to collectively reflect on the importance of their territory, understand the nature of the threats facing it, reassess their position on destructive industrial projects in their territory, and most importantly, decide collectively the future of their rainforest homelands.

These maps played a critical role in the legal case. They were used to demonstrate context and situation, locating the communities within the vast Ecuadorian

Amazon and showing the overlap with *Block* 22, the particular oil block whose sale the Waorani are fighting. The maps were also used to demonstrate the profound environmental, social, cultural, historical and spiritual knowledge which are embedded in the Waorani's relationship to territory: the sacred waterfalls and fishing spots whose water would be contaminated by oil and toxic run-offs, the burial sites and petroglyph covered caves at risk of being turned into drilling platforms, the ancient groves of peach-palm their ancestors planted that could be felled to level ground for airstrips and the mineral deposits where all the jungle animals congregate, which would be abandoned.

In the same way, the Albertine Region is not only a great reservoir of biodiversity, but also a significant archipelago of tangible and intangible elements of the cultural heritage of the people who live there and thank their ancestors; something we do not want to lose.
From Woarani People we have learned why it is necessary to map the cultural heritage: what is not represented and narrated, is lost.

Indigenuos data governance

Indigenous data sovereignty (IDS), provides a framework for maximising the benefit of open data for Indigenous peoples and other users of Indigenous data and for affecting the stewardship of all data. IDS refers to the right of Indigenous peoples to govern the collection, ownership, and application of data about Indigenous communities, peoples, lands, and resources. Indigenous data is defined here as data in a wide variety of formats inclusive of digital data and data as knowledge and information. It encompasses data, information, and knowledge about Indigenous individuals, collectives, entities, lifeways, cultures, lands, and resources. Under IDS, the data governance rights of Indigenous nations/kingdoms apply regardless of where the data is held or by whom. This includes the right to the generation of the data that Indigenous peoples require to support nation/kingdom rebuilding and governance. IDS concerns itself with binary digital data (e.g. scientific, administrative, corporate), as well as information and knowledge, meaning a somewhat broader scope than normally considered by the open data movement. However, all too often researchers, agency staff, and others digitise Indigenous knowledge and information and enter it into open data arenas without the express permission of Indigenous peoples. While these acts

may be well-intentioned, the result is the co-opting of Indigenous knowledge and the removal of Indigenous peoples from data governance processes. Therefore, IDS also comprises the entitlement to determine how Indigenous data is governed and stewarded, referred to as Indigenous data governance (IDG). IDS covers both data for governance and IDG.

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ANNEX

Ch. 5 of the OPERATIVE PROTOCOL - Identification of elements to be mapped

Tangible cultural heritage elements
(list to be implemented on specific cases):

- artefacts;
- buildings;
- landscape;
- water bodies;
- trees;
- historic battle sites;
- worship places;
- ancient cave-carving;
- hunting trails,
- significant path;
- medicinal plants;
- animal reproductives zones;
- important fishing spots/holes;
- creek crossings;
- sacred waterfalls;
- sacred forests;
- ...

Intangible cultural heritage elements
(list to be implemented on specific cases):

- voices;
- values;
- tradition;
- oral history;
- cosmology;
- ...

Environmental Defenders (ED) is an eco-feminist Environmental and Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs) organization that provide capacity-building support to EHRDs in Albertine Region.

ED was established in 2017 amidst severe threats to the environment and restrictions on the work of land and environmental defenders in Uganda, specifically in the Albertine Region, West Nile and Northern Uganda, concerned for the protection of the environment and wellbeing of indigenous and rural communities who are vulnerable to poorly conceived and executed resource development projects.

ED actions are driven by the idea of protecting the environment through the conservation of forest ecology and the use of nature-based solutions as a strategy of defense against climate change. Promoting equitable governance, effective management and positive conservation outcomes. We believe that accepted environmental and human rights principles embody the right of everyone to a secure, healthy and ecologically sound environment, and that environmental degradation leads to human rights violations such as the right to life, health and culture.

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