

From the Innu of Quebec to the United Nations, via the Yanomami of Brazil: an eventful journey of collaboration

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Translation

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Abstract

This article summarises the professional journey of a historian and geographer from the 1970s to today, from the days when the existence of Indigenous peoples was widely neglected and their territories described as *terra nullius*, to their assertion internationally. First a researcher then at the head of a UN-accredited NGO, Pierrette Birraux deems that, as far as ethics is concerned, there is not much difference between these two activities, and that understanding Indigenous territorialities serves not only to guarantee territorial rights, but also to open up to other modes of knowledge and understanding of the world. Geography, by taking an interest in the same domain as the author's Indigenous interlocutors, for whom the relation to land is crucial, seems particularly suitable to enter into dialogue with them.

Key Words

Indigenous peoples, Territory, UN, Oral history

Indigenous Discourse on Territory and Geography

When, in 1976, I saw and heard for the first time an Amerindian elderly talking about his territory, about the way he lived a nomadic life, about the activities of the hunter, the trapper, the fisherman and the gatherer as practiced by him and his people, I was struck by how rich his words were, by the affection he showed for his forest and by the holistic nature of his discourse. Indeed, the elderly man had also included in it his dialogue with the other living beings, the solidarity that existed between extended families, the destruction of the forest and the game, resistance against forestry and mining companies, red tape or, still, the inspiring dream of decisive actions, mythology and the history of his people. It seemed to me that, for this elderly man, the territory constituted a place where the elements of his thought and experience could be integrated, whether individually or collectively. His way of bringing together all these elements included a specific way of practising space and time, for what was driving his thoughts was his journey in the forest, a journey that stimulated his perception, thoughts and imagination. The inclusive or holistic nature of the discourse of Michel Grégoire, an Innu of the Northern Coast of St-Laurent in Quebec, as filmed by Arthur Lamothe¹, was for me a true revelation. These words have a spiritual dimension which, *a posteriori*, I understand as bearing sacred relations with a territory and its inhabitants, whether these are animals, trees, humans or spirits, the very relations that exist for many Indigenous peoples around the world, as I had the opportunity to hear it said many times thereafter by their representatives at the United Nations.

My second reaction was to tell myself that we, Geographers, had an unexpected opportunity to bring our discipline out of the woods where, I felt, it was entangled. It was the mid-1970s, and

¹ French-Canadian filmmaker and producer Arthur Lamothe (1928-2013) dedicated an important part of his work to introducing Amerindians from Quebec, mainly the Innu, as well as their culture. Cf. <http://collections.cinematheque.qc.ca/recherche/photos-et-affiches/fiche/91105>.

geography was fairly disoriented in wanting to assert its status of science by using quantitative methods, rather than accepting its overarching goal of synthesis to famously detect “human-territory relations” as we put it in those days; an attempt that is never achieved, never reached, and yet so useful to understanding the – real or hidden – concrete realities that characterise territorial dynamics and its retro-action on the societies generating it.

Image 1: Going up the Nutashkuan River (Photo and © Volkmar Ziegler, 1976)



As a result, my journey has been characterised by that fact that I wanted to understand what was later called Indigenous territorialities, including at the level of representations; not with my theoretical background but, on the contrary, by relieving myself of it. Indeed, I had the feeling that my background would restrict my horizons, especially because it was not supposed to include feelings or intuitions. Also, by working with Indigenous peoples and by “simply” listening to them, by putting myself in their time-space as far as possible, I tried to understand the why and how of their way of thinking and doing and, progressively, of understanding their cultural referents. For me, the whole point of my work was, somehow, to venture towards other ways of linking ideas, practices and representations, and to express them. To me, geography seemed particularly conducive to such a process, insofar as it took an interest in the same domain as one’s Indigenous interlocutors. Indeed, we, the geographers, do not study people or societies, but a third object for which we share a common interest: territory. Of course, I have only made a few steps on that path. It always seems important to me that researchers and contributors working on a given field explain their respective trajectories in detail, so as to take into account their impact in the research process. This should partake of what I call an “objectivisation” process, similar to that of the historian who analyses his sources according to the condition and evolution of their authors in particular. That is why I have accepted with great enthusiasm to describe my professional journey, as suggested by Irène Hirt and Béatrice Collignon.

Map 1: Professional journey of the author



Linking Theory and Practice

Linking theory and practice and being useful in one way or another, these were my personal requirements from the beginning. I felt that studying at university was a privilege that was not given to everyone – especially not to the women of my generation – and that in return, I should be giving something back. In 1971, once I completed a BA in modern and contemporary history, and another in geography, both at the University of Geneva, I worked for the Town and Country Planning Department of the Canton of Vaud, with a multidisciplinary team of architects, geographers, pedologists, ecologists, agronomists, economists and sociologists, all of them male. The idea was to elaborate plans to protect sites and promote these plans with municipal or local authorities and ultimately the local people during the public inquiries. It was an exciting job, involving in particular – symbolically and financially – important issues in a small but densely populated multilingual country, where real-estate speculation is high and where the beauty of the landscape constitutes one of the cements between cultures. However, I wanted to discover other horizons and decided to study for a Master’s degree at the Faculty of Environmental Planning, but this time at the University of Montreal.

Quebec, in those days, was just coming out of the Quiet Revolution that had led it to become part of the contemporary world. The Province was characterised by the rise of nationalism and the defence of the French language, a defence that seemed obvious to me, as a French-speaking citizen in a country where the majority was Alemannic. The place was bubbling with excitement; people began to challenge ideologies and practices, all the more radically since it was also the period of counter-culture in North America, that of community life experiences and the desire to “return to the source” with, in the background, libertarian ideology. In this context, doing a Master’s degree in Town Planning, then conducting research and teaching Town and Country

Planning as well as “nature” conservation, was for me an unforgettable experience; especially since the multidisciplinary teams I worked with used an inductive approach, starting with problems and focusing on solutions.

Cultures and Natures

Different research mandates progressively led me to become aware of Indigenous realities in North America, and the fact that it was being eclipsed. A study attributed by the *Ministère des Terres et Forêts* (*Department of Lands and Forests*) of Quebec to the Urban Research and Innovation Centre of the University of Montreal, led us to question the history of nature conservation in North America. The Ministère asked us how they could implement a new law on ecological reserves, as promoted by the scientific world in relation with UNESCO’s International Biological Programme, a law that would prohibit the population from accessing these reserves. Seeing that large portions of the territory and several rivers of the Belle Province had been granted to forest or mining companies or, still, to private fishing clubs (all usually Anglo-Canadians or Americans), and therefore for their exclusive usage, this new measure was perceived by many Quebecois as a new form of territorial expropriation in the name of some foreign conservationist ideology. This law appeared to have landed in a specific socio-cultural context that had not been taken into account. By looking critically at the history of nature conservation in North America, it appeared that the ideology underlying it was part of the same Man-Nature logic as that of nature destroyers, an opposition that led to the reification of nature and opened the way for its destruction. While this might be widely admitted today in the Social Sciences at least, in those days it was far from obvious. In this conservationist perspective, human beings, the masters of nature, became the ultimate predators, irrespective of their culture and origin, and irrespective of their responsibilities in destroying the environment, more specifically that of the East Coast of the United States. It was for this reason that national parks needed to be created in regions that had not been damaged by industrialisation, as in the West of the United States. The first of these parks, the Yellowstone National Park, required the forced deportation of Shoshone Indians to the Wind River reserve, one “example” of territorial dispossession among many others against Indigenous peoples, which will be subsequently promoted on all continents. To me, this seemed particularly illogical and appalling, since these peoples had not developed the techniques or values needed to destroy their habitat. To me, these conservationist policies – promoted by the representatives of the wealthy classes – seemed to emanate from some laboratory epistemology dissecting knowledge into artificial bits. For this reason, they could not be very efficient and, when all is said and done, they were not truly ecological! In this approach, which is still current, scientists took on the role of all powerful subjects in the face of a nature they transformed into some unchanging object, while we considered nature as historical and cultural. Today, the International Union for Conservation of Nature as well as other conservationist organisations, have started to admit that the creation of protected areas, including national parks, has barely reached its conservation objectives.

During the same years, another research mandate having to do with the “Man and Biosphere” programme, also a UNESCO programme, and which consisted in studying the history of urbanisation in Quebec, rapidly became a history of the territorial occupation of the Belle Province. A surprise awaited me: for my colleagues, it was clear that this study was to go back to the 18th century, i.e. to the time of the arrival of Jacques Cartier, the first European explorer of the Saint Laurent River. As a foreigner who sympathised greatly with the Quebec nationalist cause and its denunciation of (Anglo-American and Anglo-Canadian) economic and (French) cultural colonialism, I did not dare showing my surprise openly about the fact that such a study would not go back further in time, and I began to inquire about the occupation of the territory by the Amerindians.

This is how I discovered the first of a series of thirteen documentary films entitled *La Chronique des Indiens du Nord-Est du Québec*, directed by filmmaker Arthur Lamothe, who was accompanied by anthropologist Rémi Savard. What a surprise it was for me to learn that, for example, the 27 000 km² – i.e. an area the size of the Benelux – that had been granted by the government of Quebec to a subsidiary of multinational company *International Telegraph Telephone*, was in fact situated in Amerindian territory. And what a surprise it was, again for me, to see Innu women and men using the law to fight on site, and prevent engineers and workers from entering the area with their machines and, as such, enable their hunters to carry on practising traditional activities. Consequently, how could I accept the negative image the “white” population of Quebec was painting about the First Nations, while the latter were fighting virulently to defend their rights? How could I accept that, when I decided to tackle the subject with my colleagues, no one wanted to talk about it? How could one accept that one is colonised and coloniser? Especially when one comes from elsewhere and one does not want to behave like a sermonizer².

Sedentarisation and Dispossession

I wanted to understand this new reality, and one way to begin to do so was to take part in the production of the first documentary film of Volkmar Ziegler (1979)³, with Joséphine Bacon, the Innu translator-interpreter of Arthur Lamothe’s films. Today, Joséphine is a poet, “a film director and lyric writer considered as a leading author in Quebec”, in the words of her publishing house *Mémoire d’encrier* (<http://bit.ly/JosBacon>). This documentary, which was entitled by her as *Tshikainshinut - Notre Parenté*, highlights three situations of un-/intentional marginalisation in North America: that of the Puerto Rican residents of a ghetto in New York, that of an ecological community in Vermont, and that of the Innu people in the reserves and in the city of Montreal. The documentary opens with one question addressed to Joséphine:

- What should we do if we decide to make a movie together?
 - We should make a fictional work; a movie based on a scenario but that goes very far, with everything in it, you know, inner conflict and all that..
- Like for example what is it like for an Indian woman to live in Montreal and what does it mean when she lives among her people, when she goes back to her roots, you know, one is always a bit lost, rootless. (...)
- We could transform a fictional movie into a monologue.
- We could look for what people really think, deep down (...) in their guts.
- Whether that person is or not Indian.
- Someone who represents everybody, all the people who have always been prohibited from expressing their thoughts, for example, and I’m not talking about Indians only, there are many people like that (...).

In another sequence, while we were filming on the reserve of Nutashkuan, Joséphine speaks about the trauma of their sedentarisation on the shores of the Gulf of St-Laurent where the Innu used to spend only two months of the year in summer, while they used to spend the other ten in the forest:

- Old Marie-Louise travelled a lot, she did miles upon miles.

² During the same period, I wrote a small ironic article in a local newspaper on the memoirs of Father Babel, a missionary oblate from Geneva, who was considered as the “discoverer” of the iron ores of Labrador and whose guides were of course Innu!

³ Ethnologist, filmmaker and photographer, Volkmar Ziegler (1944 -) also accompanied me among the Yanomami and made several documentaries with them, as he did with the Indigenous delegates at the UN (see further on).

Once, I asked her if she was still thinking about the time when she was still living inland.

She said that she thought of nothing else. (...).

That's all that remained, memories... of when she had a good life, she says.

- What doesn't she like in the reserve?

- The fact that she no longer moves around!

And of course, when you don't move around, you start getting old!

When she lived inland, there was no time to think about getting old. She was always busy setting traps, hunting, going back to the camp site, cutting wood, moving the camp, moving to another camp... There, you're constantly busy; there is no time to think. (...)

It must be something else to smoke a pipe on the land rather than in the reserve... which is empty, There is not even any wood...

...

It has changed...

Being sedentary has destroyed us a little.

This situation between the Indigenous world and that of Quebec, neither of which being mine, was all the more difficult to bear since at the time I could not see what skills I could bring the Innu in order to continue being with them, and be useful to them. I therefore decided to leave Quebec in 1979. Nonetheless, it was clear for me that my personal and intellectual journey would continue to lead me on the path of forest peoples.

Indigenous peoples and Land – The Yanomami and “Urihi”⁴

Back in Geneva, anthropologist Isabelle Schulte-Tenckhoff introduced me to the Docip, the Indigenous Peoples' Centre for Documentation, Research and Information (see further on). The way the Docip team of volunteers worked, corresponded to what the Innu of my acquaintance wanted to hear from non-Indigenous people. It was for that reason that I joined the Docip team at the beginning of the 1980s. One of its founding members, Swiss ethnologist René Fuerst, known for his commitment to the Indians of the Amazonia, encouraged me to conduct research on the territoriality of the Yanomami in North Brazil. Why the Yanomami? Because an international campaign conducted from Brazil (if such a campaign could not be conducted by the Yanomami themselves, for me it was indispensable that it was at least to be conducted by nationals and not international NGOs), militated in favour of demarcating their land, and because I had already worked on the notions of parks and reserves in Quebec.

In Brazil, the military were in power at the time, and the courageous demonstrations against the construction of the Trans-Amazonian Highway were often due to anthropologists and lawyers. I was impressed by the quality of their work. An advanced research bursary from the Swiss National Fund for Scientific Research came at the right time, and made it possible for me to spend time with the Yanomami on three occasions: eight months (1981-1982) and seven months (1986-1987) in Brazil, as well as three months (1988) in Venezuela.

After my first stay during which I became acquainted with Yanomami life and learned basic knowledge of the language, I had the opportunity to read the papers of delegations of Indigenous peoples at the 2nd International Conference, organised by UN-accredited NGOs, and entitled “Indigenous Peoples and the Land”, and which took place at the United Nations in Geneva, in 1981. In the papers read by the Indigenous delegates, I felt the same emotion and the same holistic thought as that which I felt in Quebec when listening to the words of Michel Grégoire. I felt that

⁴ *Urihi* means “forest, land or territory” with the connotation “home” in the Yanomami language.

there was something more universal than usually thought of, in the relationship between Indigenous peoples and land or territory. My research project then became very clear. Using mapping, I wanted to show that the Yanomami were actually occupying their territory – as vast as it was – via their migration paths and inter-community relations. As such, it was not my extensive reading of anthropological literature on the Yanomami that determined the choice of this research thematic, but my previous work on the fact that Innu territoriality was being eclipsed in Quebec, the denunciation of this situation by the delegations of Indigenous peoples at the United Nations, and my detailed study of the historical origins of the notion of *terra nullius*, as used in many national legislations (Gonnella Frichner, 2010) and commonly translated on maps and in the terminology used by the authorities as *terras vazias* or “empty lands”.

Image 2: Yanomami hunter on the Surucucu Plateau (Photo and © Volkmar Ziegler, 1987)



I chose the region of Surucucu in Brazil because, there, communities lived closer to one another, which was to make my many trips (on foot) easier when conducting topographical surveys, to locate semi-permanent villages and the paths linking them. At the time, GPSs were not performant enough to be in any way useful. Moreover, searching for (very basic) maps and aerial photos was like running an obstacle course. Only radar images useful for mining were easily accessible. Each document had a different – and small – scale and none of them mentioned the presence of the Yanomami. It was first necessary to establish an acceptable base map so as to subsequently locate the place names and other elements of the territoriality of the Yanomami communities in the region.

To my great satisfaction, the Yanomami of Surucucu – who had already experienced an invasion of gold-miners in 1975-76 who in the end were thrown out by the Federal Police – understood my intentions perfectly, even if they did not know what a geographic map was. To begin our

collaboration, all I had to do was to tell them that the Whites claimed that their territory was empty and that I wanted to show them that it was full. I undoubtedly would not have received such a welcome in a community that had not been subjected to the presence of gold-miners. In Surucucu, at no point have I had any problems in gathering the necessary information, as long as I adapted of course to their activity calendar.

Was this an idyllic collaboration? Not always. Life among the Yanomami is full of sometimes trying emotions, full of fears and shortages, but also humour. One needs to accept their mockery and understand that one is also entitled to mock them... As to the map, it never came into being. After seven months in the field in Surucucu, our behaviour was deemed "inadequate" by the Brazilian authorities, our work was interrupted and my maps, aerial photos, notes etc. were confiscated. I had to wait for another seven months to get everything back. At this stage, I still don't know whether I should have published these maps, had they been completed, because they could have been used against the Yanomami. Under such circumstances, a researcher's responsibility is enormous, and the decision to publish or not must be taken together with the Indigenous communities. From a purely ethno-geographic viewpoint, I also had my doubts about the notion of "community" that seemed problematic, when characterising semi-nomadic entities, these being subjected to inter-community mergings and splittings, and their names changing according to where they were settled. The boundaries between them could be flowing, were negotiated and depended on the potentially changing relations with neighbours. The name of a river varied also from one end to the other, depending on the community doing the naming. Naming places escaped me altogether. A relief could be a "high forest" (*urihi tire*) or a mountain (*maamakè*) if the rock was bare.

Our expulsion coincided with the beginning of the invasion of the Brazilian Yanomami territory where 10 000 Yanomami lived by 30 000 to 40 000 gold-miners (from 1987 to 1991), which resulted in the death of between 1 500 and 2 000 Indians. Under these conditions and from an ethics point of view, how could one carry out research work, especially when taking into account one's commitment to the Yanomami? How could one not take part in the international campaign that led to demarcating the whole of the Brazilian Yanomami territory in 1992? A few scientific articles resulted from my work with the Yanomami (Birraux, 1992; 1995; 1997; 2005). A fairly significant number of articles, interviews, conference-projections of the three films directed by Volkmar Ziegler (1984; 1986; 1994) contributed to the campaign in several European countries; films with soundtracks mainly dedicated to voicing Yanomami opinion. Today, it seems obvious that Indigenous peoples express themselves about their reality, but at the time, it was not so. Neither was the idea of following the Yanomami in the forest where they spent half of their time. By doing so, we were showing our disagreement with the usual flown-in TV or film crews that would land at a governmental or missionary post with their sophisticated equipment, stay in the adjacent village for one week and choose the most spectacular pictures but did not care about what the Indians were thinking and had to say. This last remark also concerns the ethnographic films of the time that were shot among the Yanomami, even if their authors spent more time there. The following short speeches are extracted from the film *La Maison et la Forêt: les Yanomami au temps de la conquête* (Ziegler, 1994); they are uttered respectively by Esmeraldo, a headman from the Tihisiporautheri community, and by a young man from Yutupitheri⁵, concerning the gold-miners:

- Before, when I was naive, I thought that the Whites were generous.

⁵ The Yanomami keep their name secret.

We are going to live together, I will be their friend, I thought (...).
Today, I will be their enemy.
I was their friend, I was naive, I believed them. Now, I will be hostile to them.
Do not come here! You do not protect my forest! You already have a place to live!
You steal my tin ore!
When I was naive, I let it be. Now I refuse, I want to protect my forest.

- I spoke harshly to the gold-miners but they are ferocious, they do not listen.
Do not send them to us anymore!
Send them back to where they come from!
They must go back home!
When I go to Boa Vista, I do not go on their lands; therefore, they must not destroy mine!
Stay home! Do not come to my forest.
But my words are lost.

Image 3: Two Yanomami headmen - Esmeraldo from Hakoma and his counterpart from Xitee – tell me about the arrival of the first “Whites” in 1960, North American evangelical missionaries (Photo and © Volkmar Ziegler, 1987)



Research and Commitment: Is it so different?

In Quebec, I discovered the Amerindian world, how much it was being eclipsed, how much Amerindian discourse on territory was strong and alive, and how much sedentarisation and territorial despoilment were traumatising. In Brazil, I saw up close how much responsibility is involved when working with people whose very existence is threatened: our actions can aggravate their situation as well as ours, although to a much lesser extent. The Yanomami taught me the value of reciprocity: sooner or later I would give them what they asked of me, and I was also entitled to ask them something they would give me sooner or later. This is how trust was built

between us. They showed me how to respect others: to them, I was made from a different wood, but it didn't matter, I was what I was. In both countries, I felt the effects of racial discrimination from the authorities and from the local populations. I also came to understand that the Innu and the Yanomami wanted to be free of any interference whatsoever, and wanted to decide their fate on their own. These experiences are at the root of the approach I tried to implement within the framework of the Docip. As such, I am not certain that research and NGO work are so different. Both entail strictness, ethics, commitment, responsibility and a deep respect for otherness.

Docip, a Centre for Documentation, Research and Information at the Service of Indigenous Peoples

The Docip was created in 1978, following a request by the delegations of Indigenous peoples taking part in the first international conference on their rights – the International Conference on Discrimination against the Indigenous Peoples of the Americas – which took place at the United Nations in Geneva in 1977⁶. This conference was organised by the International Indian Treaty Council and by NGOs grouped together within the framework of the Sub-Committee on Racism of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, and not by the latter as is too often believed. A request was put to the Docip to gather and distribute the documentation brought to the UN by the Indigenous delegations, and to serve as their multilingual secretariat. Since then, the Docip has supplied these delegations with logistical, documentary and informational services throughout their way to the United Nations, in Geneva and New York. During the last four decades, the Docip did concretely support Indigenous delegations in their mission before, during and after the drafting and negotiation process of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (referred to as the Declaration hereinafter), adopted in 2007 by the UN General Assembly (ONU/UN, 2007). At the UN, during the conferences, the Docip opens offices equipped with the necessary office automation for the delegations to carry out their mission: communication systems have been established between the delegations and their organisations back home; translation services have been set up for all written speeches (involving four or even five languages); interpretation services have also been set up for all informal discussions between delegations or with the States, including all preparatory meetings (unfortunately also called "caucus") to which all delegations took part before and during the conferences; as well as documentation collection and distribution⁷ services, among others.

All the activities of the Docip have resulted and still result from consultations with the Indigenous delegations or from requests made by them. We know that, particularly in this domain, "hell is paved with good intentions", that we do not live the situation of their people and we cannot decide what is or not useful to them. Indigenous peoples fight for the right to self-determination and take on all responsibilities in this regard, all the more since they will be the first ones to suffer from the consequences of the decisions taken. On the other hand, we can reduce the wide gap, where means are concerned, that separates them from governmental delegations. Otherwise, how can one be in a position to negotiate, if one does not have the minimum means made available

⁶Among the founding members of the Docip, let us mention Augusto Willemsen-Díaz, a Guatemalan jurist at the service of the Centre for Human Rights of the UN, a real instigator and the writer of the reference work in Indigenous matters at the UN, the Martinez-Cobo Report (from the name of the expert officially responsible for the said report but who, in actual fact, did not write it) (1986); Edith Ballantyne, from the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, and two Swiss ethnologists, Louis Necker and René Fuerst. All have contributed to organising the Conference together with Jimmie Durham, Cherokee delegate from the International Indian Treaty Council in Geneva.

⁷To read about the activities of the Docip, please visit www.docip.org. Moreover, the journal *Update/Informativo* makes it possible to follow the evolution of the debates at the UN concerning Indigenous peoples, from 1993 to date: <http://bit.ly/DocipUpdateInfo>.

unconditionally? Relations of reciprocity link us: we supply them with services and they support us in our applications for funds. We can offer advice on UN procedures to newcomers and, reciprocally, we can call on the most experienced delegates when we find ourselves in an embarrassing situation. As such, they also have a right to inspection on what we do. We are on their side but do not take a stand in their debates with governments or between them (neutrality principle), and we work with all of them, whatever their position (impartiality principle); the information we supply is purely factual: who said what and when. It is up to them to make their own analyses with their communities, considering their situation, the country in which they are, with their own cultural referents. And especially we do not lobby on their behalf.

This means that we should be recognising our Indigenous interlocutors for what they are, and not for what we would like them to be or not: idealising them or their cultures is also denying them. We are aware of the process of dispossession and discrimination suffered (and often still ongoing), including within the framework of research work. We recognise that they have their own intellectual worlds and ways of doing, and we try to avoid any form of paternalism. While all this seems obvious in theory, it is not so in practice. Our cultural ways run deep and it is not always easy to see beyond, even momentarily.

The Exemplary Nature of the Indigenous Process at the United Nations

Considering themselves as peoples and nations, Indigenous peoples endeavoured, from the very first conference in 1977, to do away with the NGO status (attributed by the Economic and Social Council of the UN after approval by the States), even if they often have had to use that status to be able to take the floor. The Working Group on Indigenous Populations or WGIP (1982-2006)⁸ distinguished itself by its unprecedented openness: all Indigenous delegations, irrespective of their status, could use this working group to denounce human rights abuses committed against their peoples, not with a view to lodging a "complaint", as has been heard sometimes, but to preventing them from sinking into oblivion where governments had relegated them. Their powerful speeches were in sharp contrast with the forever smiling world of diplomats. Governments first showed how little respect they had for Indigenous delegations by sending trainees to take notes... Then, thanks to the energetic, competent and empathetic Dr Erica Irene Daes, who became Chairperson of the WGIP in 1984, a draft Declaration took shape and was adopted in 1993 by the Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, an entity made up of independent experts. States then created a new Working Group at the level of the Human Rights Commission, made up of governmental representatives. This led to a new draft Declaration which was adopted in 2006 by the Human Rights Council. This Declaration was closer to the position of the States than the previous one. Then a final and unusual negotiation was imposed in New York, at the General Assembly, during which Indigenous representatives could not speak directly... In other words, the whole process was not short of obstacles. But every time, Indigenous delegations insisted and obtained a specific status (except with the General Assembly, which is what they are attempting to obtain nowadays).

Despite all this, the 2007 Declaration is probably the UN document that was elaborated in the most democratic way, with ample participation from the main stakeholders. In this regard, there is a clear difference with the Declaration on minority rights, which was written with very limited participation from minority group representatives. Today, the main challenge is its implementation. The

⁸ According to resolution 1982/34, the WGIP was mandated to review new facts relating to the rights of Indigenous peoples, and to follow the evolution of international norms relating to the rights of Indigenous populations. In 1984, the idea of a Declaration on the rights of Indigenous Peoples was up for discussion.

Declaration requires that anyone planning to take certain measures or promote a project that will impact on an Indigenous community, first obtains the latter's consent, which must be given freely (with no form of intimidation), beforehand (before the measure or project is carried out) and with full knowledge of the facts (after the community/-ties concerned have been presented with sufficient information to enable them to figure out the consequences the project will have on them and their environment). This concept must be differentiated from that of consultation, which is not as comprehensive and powerful.

International recognition was made possible because Indigenous peoples have always insisted on their status of Nations and Peoples. The term "Indigenous Nation" has been used in the history of the Americas for a long time. The treaties concluded by and between various Indigenous Nations and the governments of the United States and Canada, testify to this, as do for example works recording the reports between the Portuguese Crown and Amerindian tribes in Brazil. The terms "nation" and "peoples" appear in the documents of the League of Nations dealing with the procedures of Ambassador Cayuga Deskaheh, in 1923-24, who represented the Six Nations Iroquois Confederacy. It is interesting here to note that the letter requesting the Confederacy's membership of the League of Nations is entitled *The Red Man's Appeal For Justice*.

Today, one speaks about indigenoussness; a recent expression which I am not certain is totally appropriate due to its abstract, unusual and somewhat static nature. Indigenous peoples have fought for several decades to have their peoples status and the collective rights attached to it recognised again, both of which they used to enjoy in the past. Why replace an expression – Indigenous peoples – which has a specific meaning in international law, to introduce another? Well, and this is one of the main inputs from the UN, Indigenous peoples from around the world are clearly linked on the same grounds: the racial discrimination suffered by them, their will for self-determination, the despoilment of their territories and resources, as well as the specificity of their relationship with the land, their territories and the world. This link brings them together and gives them the strength to fight together, despite their differences. In fact, their wide diversity is a blessing: a diversity that would be unfortunate to reducing to one word only – indigenoussness – which does not reflect it directly, no more than it expresses the dynamism and flexibility of their various ways of thinking. In my opinion, it is more likely to close than open the door of understanding of the ways of thinking and doing of the peoples we speak about. Moreover, why define "indigenoussness", and how, when the Indigenous delegations at the UN have themselves clearly stated that they do not wish to see the concept of "Indigenous peoples" being defined? Indeed:

"Indigenous representatives on several occasions have expressed the view, before the Working Group, that a definition of the concept 'Indigenous peoples' is not necessary, or desirable. They have stressed the importance of self-identification as an essential component of any definition which might be elaborated by the United Nations system" (Daes, 1996).

The Indigenous delegations have given several arguments in this regard. The most important one being that a definition could exclude peoples who consider themselves as Indigenous, but who do not meet the criteria elaborated by the UN (i.e. in agreement with the States). This is easily understood when one tackles the issue from a historical perspective. Indeed, there are many Indigenous peoples who have had and still have to hide their identity, to avoid discrimination or even persecution. Other peoples have been defined as Indigenous by the States with the intention of restricting their rights, in the name of a racist ideology that brought (or still brings) to the fore their "Indian bloodline" so as to categorise them as "Indigenous". Furthermore, delegations insist

on the fact that the word “peoples” is not defined in international law. Consequently, why should it be absolutely necessary to define the expression “Indigenous peoples”?

This discussion is interesting because it shows that a definition always excludes that which does not fit into it. Moreover, the fact that Indigenous delegations refuse to adopt a definition once and for all, does not – in my opinion – have to do with a simple political position, but also needs to be placed in the context of a flexible thinking refusing the establishment of rigid boundaries because it is an integrating thinking, as shown by the first quotation of Joséphine Bacon, at the beginning of this article.

Conclusion: Working with Indigenous peoples

My professional journey with Indigenous peoples has been characterised by various questionings, including that of the subject-object relationship, as advocated by Positivism which prevailed in the Social Sciences in the 1970s. Is this question truly resolved? In theory probably yes, but what about in practice? Of course, today one speaks of “Indigenous partners”, as much in the scientific world as that of NGOs, to evoke a more collaborative and egalitarian relationship than in the past. All the better, but still, who are these partners? Do we know their history as experienced by them or only the official history? Who is financing the joint work? How are agreements between partners entered into? Are the partners really able to express themselves on an equal footing? Let’s say this is the case. The fact remains that, faced with the dominant way of thinking, there is still a long way to go before Indigenous peoples are truly heard and understood. In my opinion, it is essential to multiply the recording of their History and their stories, their visions of the world, their own way of positioning themselves in the face of their own situations. The way to say it, to transmit it, is as important as the content as such. That is why one must avoid reducing their discourses to our Western concepts and analyses. In this way, our own way of thinking will be enriched.

Image 4: Participants at the 1st Symposium of Oral History on the Indigenous Peoples at the United Nations entitled “Indigenous Peoples at the United Nations: From the Experience of the First Delegates to the Empowerment of the Younger Generations” (P. Birraux is in the first row, on the far left; photo and © Stephane Pecorini, 2013)



It is in this perspective that the Docip opened a new sector of activity in 2013, following a proposal by Aymara historian Carlos Mamani and a recommendation (n°073/2009) by the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, to organise a Symposium on the subject. Entitled “Indigenous Peoples at the United Nations: From the Experience of the First Delegates to the Empowerment of the Younger Generations”, the Symposium was run by an Indigenous Organising Committee. It brought together participants from the first conferences held in 1979 and 1981 at the UN concerning Indigenous peoples, and young people trained beforehand to record the first delegates on video. This led to the making of a film entitled *Bridge to the Future* (Docip, 2013), a second symposium in 2014 and new training sessions in Geneva, South Dakota and Argentina (others are planned in Africa, Asia and the Pacific Region). Finally, a publication in Spanish and English of the 2013 Symposium is on the verge of publication (Docip, 2017).

Is such a task possible in the academic context? Can one reconcile the different temporalities of Indigenous peoples on the one hand, and academics on the other, as well as the needs of the former and the career requirements of the latter who must accumulate publications and elaborate new knowledge? While I am convinced that working with Indigenous peoples can lead to highly interesting innovations as regards the production of knowledge and practices, I am not so sure that the accumulation of publications in the short term is the best way to do it.

Making Indigenous territoriality visible always constitutes a challenge, due to the fact that there is a lot at stake. I'm very happy to see that geographers are working on it, including Indigenous geographers and cartographers. In the 1980s, neither anthropologists nor geographers working in Amazonia considered this subject pertinent. The fact remains that the issue of financing such

research is never insignificant, and must also be taken into account when assessing the results of a joint collaboration.

An increasing number of Indigenous intellectuals, particularly in the English-speaking world, endeavour to explain how to work with their communities: from the definition of needs, priorities and the method, to the responsibility of sharing results with these communities, via the training of Indigenous researchers, the development of culturally and ethically appropriate methods, and constant self-criticism. I am thinking here of the work of Maori researcher Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) in particular. At this stage, I can but hope that research teams and NGOs are inspired by and spread such methodologies.

To conclude, I would like to express the wish that other researchers make their own career paths public, so that we can perhaps draw constants from them and exchange notes more especially, for we are often alone when faced with important questionings. It seems to me that this would be a way of progressively moving forward, towards innovative collaboration with Indigenous peoples.

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Concerning the author

Pierrette Birraux, member of the Foundation Board and of the Docip Committee.

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