

**CALL FOR PAPERS ON THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLES RIGHTS TO HEALTH, WITH
A FOCUS ON CHILDREN AND YOUTHS, SUBMITTED BY THE ASSOCIATION
FOR THE RECONSTRUCTION AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE MOKO-OH
PEOPLES CAMEROON AFTRADEMOP**

It has been established under international law and in accordance with the UN Declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples that, indigenous peoples (IPs) and their communities have their specificities and peculiarities that are unique to their culture, traditions and way of life; which is distinct from the main stream and is ultra-societal. This distinction is considered by the mainstream society as primitive and uncivilized: whereas it is the very essence of IPs and their communities' existence; which pre-exist all human political organizations and institutions, be they health institutions and establishments. Health constitutes just an aspect of this distinct way of life.

INDIGENOUS PEOPLE'S HEALTH (THE CASE OF THE MOKO-OH PEOPLE OF THE UNO-STATE OF CAMEROON)

For a better apprehension of the Moko-oh indigenous peoples' health rights, we will seek to know how this community handles health issues, is it effective? What can be done to ameliorate the situation?

Who are the Moko-oh people?

The Moko-ohs are the indigenous people of Upper Moghamo, a clan of the Widikum tribe, of the present North-West of the UNO-State of Cameroon; They are an industrious, hospitable, Montane-forest, agro-pastoral people; spiritually attached to their land, which contains their shrines, sacred places of worship, ancestral tombs and other sites reserved for the performance of rituals. The Moko-oh's economic prowess and affluence attracted many strangers; such as the Bali-Nyongas (Balis); who by 1845, fled the jihad wars and famine in the North of Cameroon and arrived in the Moko-oh community. By 1889, the German researcher Dr. Zintgraff, had secret plans of diverting the trade from the British sphere (Onitsha-Nigeria), to the German's sphere, but his economic policy, met with stiff resistance from the Moko-ohs and in contravention to international law, Zingraff trained and armed the Bali-Nyongas with 1000 rifles and used them to invaded the Moko-oh Community, burned down their five villages and built the first German administrative unit and a concentration camp, where the populations were subjected to Bali captivity, and also forced to pay taxes till 1914.

In 1914, during the 1st world war, the Germans withdrew their rifles and the Moko-ohs very naturally returned and began rebuilding their villages; but the German's presence in their community constituted yet another catastrophe; as the Allied forces, pursued and waged war on the Germans even in their colonies. The Moko-ohs' country was further devastated by a fierce

battlefield between the British, the French on the one hand and the Germans on the other. Upon the defeat of the Germans in 1916, the British quickly moved in, maintained the administration and organization found on the spot and instituted patrols to attempt to recapture the Moko-ohs for the concentration camp. The population was harassed to near extinction, so they fled and sought refuge in neighboring communities and the Balis took total control over the Moko-oh ancestral lands and exploited the natural resources for their development and education of their children; who now occupy top government's positions and are using them to prevent the Moko-ohs from obtaining justice. This is how the Moko-oh people's development process was interrupted and the population displaced and totally dispossessed of their ancestral lands and natural resources till date. All efforts made before the colonial and independent administration of Cameroon to get resettled in and reconstruct their villages have been futile.

How the Moko-oh people handle health issues

Health is defined by the Microsoft Encarta 2009, as "*the state of being free from illness and injury; a person's mental or physical condition*". So health is both mental and physical. Mental health is a psychological state of well-being, characterized by:

- Continuing personal growth, to means that, nature has provided the conditions and environment in the absence of which an individual cannot develop as he should and in the absence of which his mental health will be affected.
- A sense of purpose in life, which enables the individual to freely determine and pursue his political, economic, social and cultural development. That is, the ability to aspire and to work to accomplish one's aspirations.
- Self-acceptance, which consist of being confident and proud to be what one is and belong to one's ethnic group, nationality or race, without fear of being discriminated against on this basis.
- Positive relations with others, where one can freely, interact, socialize, move and associate; without stigmatization or rejection.

This state of mental health is in the **MIND** and is more disastrous because a person may be seen going about and physically strong, whereas, he is seriously ill with a **dis-ease** that cannot be diagnosed. Factors such as stress; which people experience after traumatic and unpleasant events that later place demands on them which exceed the resources they have available to meet those demands, are responsible for such dis-eases. An example of such persons is the Moko-oh indigenous people, who totally and completely lost their rights to mental health since 1889 till date; as this state of health depends on external forces and circumstance beyond their control. What they can at least control and manage is their physical health.

Physical health is that which is related to the body rather than the mind. So this concerns the physical state of the body. During the pre-colonial era, the Moko-oh people, to keep their bodies especially that of their children free from injury and illnesses, had developed a traditional knowledge that has been handed down from generation to generation. Different families specialized in the knowledge and treatment of specific ailments such as the extraction of bullets an bullet wounds, piles, arthritis, chest pain, lumbago, fractures, sprains, whooping cough, eye diseases, infertility in women, fibroids and all sorts of children's diseases, including midwifery. The whole community was well informed of the families that possess such knowledge and those who could handle delivery cases. All these health issues were handled with medicinal plants available in the Moko-oh community.

There were pre-colonial practices and rites that were performed on the tombs, streams, under trees, in shrines and sacred places; to nurture and maintain a spiritual link with the ancestors in the Moko-oh community to ensure fertility, blessings, success and prosperity for the youths and to, forestall and avert ill luck and misfortune that could befall the members of the community, causing ill health, mishaps, barrenness, miscarriages, stillbirth and premature deaths. When the birth of twins was eminent, very early in the morning and for three days, a twins' song will be heard from the spring where people go to fetch water. The song was usually repeated three times each morning and on the fourth day; the birth of twins will be announced. Then certain rituals will be performed to ensure the health of the twin babies. The Moko-ohs celebrated the birth of a child for one month, and the death of an adult, for two weeks, with festive eating, drinking and dancing. The men grouped themselves into social clubs and revolving contributions, characterized by drinking palm wine accompanied with cola-nuts. A British colonizer confessed that, everything in this community was done to the tune of eating and drinking.

The Physical health of the Moko-oh people also greatly depended on what and how the ate. The men own oil and wine palms that they tap every morning and evening, to ensure the availability of wine in the community throughout; especially to entertain visitors. The men also owned kola-nuts and other cash crop plantations and kept a small livestock and practiced hunting, to provide the family with enough meat for proteins. While the women practiced fishing, grew calabashes, ground-nuts, a variety of yams, beans, corn, coco-yams, melons, and potatoes in abundance, to ensure food security and to prepare delicacies flooded with oil from the oil palms for the family and this kept the people supper healthy.

How the Moko-ohs ate. An average meal of a household in the Moko-oh community used to contain: reasonable amounts of meat or fish, leafy vegetables, pepper and plenty of palm oil, to ensure a balanced diet. The eating was accompanied by fresh palm wine. To ensure freshness, wine and drinkable water was stored in calabashes and foodstuffs, especially vegetables are brought directly from the farm to the pot. It was difficult to find overnight vegetables in a Moko-oh woman's pot and if a child's stomach does not protrude after eating, then it is underfed and should be served additional food. It is a rule that a stranger does not visit in the Moko-oh community and leaves without eating or a least drinking some palm wine. Things were evolving

in the Moko-oh indigenous community, like in the English, German or French communities, until the disruptive forces of colonization were unleashed and the process brought to an abrupt end and the festive life of the Moko-oh people became a night-mere, as they were chased away and deprived of their natural resources and their natural way of life. They were now exposed to malnutrition as they were now forced to **eat what they find to survive and not what they need to be healthy.**

The Moko-ohs interacted with their environment for leisure. The Moko-ohs, especially the children and the youth, go wandering in the woods or on the hills and gathering nutritious wild fruits, insects, a variety of mushrooms, especially good at fighting high blood pressure or fishing and swimming in the streams for pleasure and relaxation. This writer remembers vividly how between mid-December and the end of February of each year, her mother used to asked her children to go with her for fishing and refreshing of their bodies in the River Momo and how carrying her fishing baskets, she delightedly followed her mother to go fishing and refreshing from the baking sun and dryness, the whole day long. As she went away studying and working in the cities, her body keeps longing for that refreshing at this particular period of each year.

Where these practices effective in guaranteeing the health of the Moko-oh people

The Moko-oh medical and health system guaranteed their wellbeing as much as it could as at that time; but there were a number of defects such as: the hygienic and the living conditions in the community that breed diseases, the crude methods of handling patients or administering treatment and conserving the medicines. The dispossession of the Moko-oh people of their ancestral lands and natural resources on which their survival is intricately linked has further compounded their precarious physical and mental health situation that has almost extinct the ethnic group. The remnants are barely existing and not living as they have been dehumanized, oppressed, marginalized, degraded, abandoned to themselves and they have lost all sense of purpose, self-acceptance, continuous personal growth and emptied of all their dignity. The Moko-oh people's medical and health systems have been resilient, all these odds notwithstanding; to the extent that, before a patient is taken for conventional treatment, it is when all traditional knowledge has failed. More so, experience has proved that conventional treatment is unnecessarily expensive, unaffordable and ineffective. While traditional treatment eradicates an ailment definitely, conventional treatment does not and the medicine often leaves deposits or chemical toxins in the patient that often result to other medical complications.

Western colonization did not help indigenous medical and health systems. Colonization did not only disrupt the evolution and development of indigenous medical and health systems; but endeavored and with success to denigrate and relegate them to the background, exulting the convention systems. The use of traditional medicine was condemned, associated with witchcraft, qualified as primitive, archaic and devilish. IPs were brain washed to shy away from their natural essence of live, which is inherent and natural. Meanwhile the desperate colonizers, secretly and wisely explored, researched and illegally exploited and exported their traditional knowledge and

medicinal plants to the western world; developed them in their laboratories and brought back in manufactured form as tablets, injections and capsules to sale to them at exorbitant and unaffordable prices in their communities. The IPs were obliged to embrace an alien and foreign medical policy that rendered them completely and totally dependent on others and exposed to all forms of exploitations and gambling with their health.

What can be done to ameliorate the situation?

The world's IPs have been resilient and the adoption of the UN Declaration on the rights of IPs is eloquent prove. Moko-oh IPs just like the rest of the world's IPs have their medical and health systems that are un-detachably linked to their lands and territories; because they are hereditary. The peoples of the world, governments, trans/multi-nationals should be made to understand this. So that when they see vast forests and expanse of empty land, they should not consider just the physical space. Land and territories do not consist only of the surface, but has incredibly far greater significance to indigenous people as to affect their physical and mental health, especially that of the children and the youth who constitute the world's IPs of tomorrow.

Therefore the world IPs should not relent, but redouble their efforts in advocating before the UN and its states parties, to design policies to research, modernize and promote IPs medical and health systems, which are natural and are part and parcel of their way of life and have stood the test of time and proven their worth; instead of relegating them to the background and promoting conventional systems, whose actors invade indigenous communities and fraudulently extort their traditional knowledge; which is develop in their laboratories and unorthodox means are devised to force them down the throats of IPs to raise revenue for western ailing and desperate economies.