

Inter Pares

BULLETIN

Vol. 19, No. 2, March 1997

Cultural Action and Social Change: *The struggle for self-determination*

In one of the articles in this *Bulletin* we talk about our Bangladeshi colleague, Michael Soren, a leader of the aboriginal Santal people who are waging a struggle for survival in their traditional forest enclaves in the north of Bangladesh. The dilemma that Michael and his people face, along with other counterparts described in this *Bulletin*, is how to conserve and defend the very best that their society has to offer while directing the processes of cultural and social change that ultimately are the key to revitalization and survival.

Culture is the dynamic among all of the inventions of society: art, philosophy, religion, technology, leisure, production and economic relations, and social and political institutions. Inevitably and inexorably, all cultures adapt and change. This process is indispensable to human development and cultural renewal. From this point of view, there is nothing inherently good or positive about culture. All cultures contain elements that are oppressive, morbid, destructive and cruel, just as they contain the elements of beauty, nurturance, creativity and transformation. Culture is a permanent dynamic of integral change, as all of these elements interact with the social and physical environment to develop and reinvent society in all of its social, political and economic manifestations.

Yet respect for "culture" is often used as an excuse to preserve traditions, institutions and norms that are destructive of the prospects of a people. This cultural relativism often condones the most oppressive of practices – most universally the vicious subordination of women, and other forms of repression, discrimination, and restriction of freedom – and justifies the constraint of human creativity by norms imposed and protected by privileged cultural



Inter Pares

and religious guardians.

Respect for cultural integrity has nothing to do with conservation or preservation of culture as artifact, nor should it be used to justify domination or to protect privilege. It does have to do with defending and promoting the integrity of the process of cultural change and self-determination.

In the present world order it is precisely this element – the integrity of the process of cultural change and self-determination – that has been most seriously undermined. With the economic dislocation and social disintegration that have accompanied a world increasingly polarized between those with wealth and opportunity and those without, the richest and most vital elements of cultural existence and expression have been corroded. With the destruction of local economies, the economic engine of cultural life – as expressed in communal economic relationships and vibrant interactions of production and trade – has been lost. People are experiencing a discontinuity between economic relationships and all other elements of cultural life, a situation that reduces culture to form and artifact, a mere mourning for another time and place.

In this context, not only are existing cultural communities undermined but, most tragically, the life blood of communities – the young – are losing their sense of community and "place", reaching maturity bereft of a sense of social identity, inclusion and cultural cohesion. Young people are being forced by necessity to leave their place and often their country for economic opportunity, retaining only the most tenuous of family links to the community. Faced with the deterioration of social and economic cohesion, and increasingly without the possibility to regenerate community through the nurturance and maturation of youth, people everywhere are losing the capacity for cultural expression through political action, and with it the opportunity for sustained self-determination and cultural renewal.

This is a problematic that *Inter Pares* seeks to address through support for processes of cultural action and social renewal. This *Bulletin* attempts to illustrate experiences where *Inter Pares* counterparts are reconstructing elements of self-sufficiency, and participating in political processes to defend and promote the capacity for self-determination and cultural change.

Youth: *A Passion for Change*

“To know is to love; to love is to protect.” This is how the first public awareness campaign was launched on the preservation of the oldest forest in Guinea Bissau, a small coastal country in West Africa. Organized by Tiniguéna, a local development agency, the goal of the campaign is to educate the public on issues related to the protection and sustainable use of their environments, and to mobilize people to influence public policy.

An important component of the campaign exposes young people to their rural heritage. For a period of 10 days, twenty secondary school students from the capital city of Bissau visit rural areas of special cultural and environmental significance, to learn about how people live and sustain themselves. They learn about the challenges and opportunities that people face in conserving their environment. The students participate in discussions with young rural people, and record their impressions through drawings, photos, poetry, journals, or posters.

The young people then engage in a five-day campaign of public debates, radio and television interviews, photo and drawing exhibits, round-table discussions, and cultural events with local artists. Tiniguéna reaches a wide public with this campaign, including government officials, national and international NGO representatives, and the urban population. People from rural areas also take part in the activities, and for many of them it is their first opportunity to discuss these issues with government officials and the urban public.

Tiniguéna’s strategy is to help young people learn more about their social and cultural context – rural and urban – so that they can participate in mobilizing public interest and support. With their refreshingly straightforward accounts of what they have seen, and how they have been moved by the people they met, the young people are able to attract broad public interest and attention. The public discussions

demonstrate that youth grasp quickly how their environment and their culture are linked to development. They understand how their future is bound to their country’s use of its natural resources and how society must recognize the needs and contributions of peasant communities. And they speak passionately of the need to involve local communities in conservation strategies and the need for development policies that recognize and strengthen the link

between rural and urban realities.

“To know is to love; to love is to protect.” For Tiniguéna, and increasing numbers of young Guineans, this campaign theme is more than just a slogan. Through this process, young urban and rural people are developing a deeper and more inclusive sense of their “place” and their identity, and a commitment to the promotion of public policies and change for the benefit of all.

Popular Theatre and the Dialogue of

A few years ago, leaders of the hamlet of Buena Vista, an isolated rural community in southern Nicaragua, invited the theatre group Quetzalcoatl to perform at the inauguration of their community centre. The entire village gathered for the show, the first ever to be presented in Buena Vista.

The play, although written by the members of Quetzalcoatl as a comedy, focused on the dramatic theme of violence against children. The audience, especially the children, reacted with laughter at the comic characters, the funny costumes and the dialogue which was flavoured with local humour. However, the laughter was punctuated with moments of deep silence, and a growing malaise could be felt among the adults in the audience as the play evolved into a satirical criticism of “machismo”. After the performance, a dialogue between the actors and the audience generated a lot of enthusiasm and questions from the children. But for the most part, the adults remained silent.

Later that evening, as the people slowly left the community centre, several groups spontaneously assembled in the narrow streets. The calm of the tropical night was broken by animated discussions among the women and the men. The debates carried well into the night as people reached their homes

and continued their conversations on the porches of their modest huts.

The next morning, the local leaders, mostly men, shared some thoughts with Inter Pares staff member, Roch Tassé. They confessed that family violence and “machismo” were serious issues that had never been addressed by the community. They had not anticipated the courage and the assertiveness of the women who had confronted them throughout the night. They said that “machismo” was deeply ingrained in the culture of the village and that it would take a long time to change this. But they recognized that the issue of family violence could no longer be ignored. Quetzalcoatl’s performance had provided the women an opportunity to speak out, and forced the men to reflect on their behaviour.

Members of the Quetzalcoatl collective have returned to Buena Vista and the surrounding villages a few times since then, at the invitation of the community. With the support of Inter Pares, they have also toured in other remote regions of Nicaragua, creating plays that challenge people to examine issues such as war and reconciliation, social and domestic violence, and power relations among men, women and children. Through training workshops and cultural animation aimed at children and young people, Quetzalcoatl

The Seeds of Wisdom

In South Asian mythology, Khona was a wise woman in the court of King Bikramaditya. Khona's wisdom was widely admired and she became increasingly famous. Her popularity, however, caused great envy among the wise men in the King's court. In a fit of jealous rage, the King's senior counsellor ordered her tongue to be cut out. Before the sentence was carried out, Khona recited as many of her verses as she could which were then passed on as the Khonar Bochan proverbs.

Khona's wisdom lives on in her proverbs. She knew a great deal about agriculture – about when seeds should be planted to ensure germination, how to save and store seeds from season to season. Khona insisted that women be responsible for seed preservation, one of the most important tasks in the agricultural household. Her knowledge of seeds was preserved by women who passed this knowledge on to their daughters.

The advent of the green revolution in the early 1960s brought about a

dramatic change in the role of women in agriculture. Since the green revolution emphasized high-yielding seed varieties marketed by multinational companies, women's central role in seeds selection and preservation diminished. Over time, women began to lose their specialized knowledge and became more and more marginal to the new agricultural economy.

During the past decade, however, women in South Asia have begun to reassert their central role in agriculture. In India, Dr. Vandana Shiva and the Third World Network have championed the cause of farmers and helped them resist the control of multinational companies. Dr. Shiva's book, *The Violence of the Green Revolution*, was an important contribution to the analyses of the impact of modern agriculture on women.


In Bangladesh, UBINIG has established a support program for farmers practising and promoting ecological approaches to agriculture. A key part of this strategy has been to establish village "seed wealth" centres where farmers collect, preserve and freely share their best seeds. These centres are almost entirely operated by women who know that seeds are a vital part of the common wealth of their communities. These women are not only preserving and sharing seeds, but are also regenerating and sharing knowledge. As they return to their central role in agriculture, women are regaining the opportunity to innovate, to experiment and to share with each other what they have learned. This is how knowledge is created – not knowledge gained in a laboratory under controlled conditions, but rather a living and breathing knowledge, based on social innovation and peoples' real needs and experiences. This is the essence of cultural action.

In the Bangla language today, Khona is an expression which means speechless. Peasant women know that if they lose their role and place in agriculture, like Khona, they too will lose their voices and the power to shape their lives. As one village woman involved in the seeds wealth program said, "If women lose the seeds from their hands, all will be lost."

Change

also contributes to the emergence and the integration of new social and cultural values among Nicaragua's youth.

The work of Quetzalcoatl illustrates the importance of engaging and intervening, respectfully and honestly, in order to challenge, confront and transform oppressive aspects of community life.



Quetzalcoatl member, Pablo Pubiro, performing to a student audience.

Indigenous Peoples & Cultural Action

Michael Soren is a Santal, one of the largest groups of indigenous people in South Asia. Michael was in Canada recently on a visit sponsored by Inter Pares. He spoke about the conditions of his people and the work of his organization, the North Bengal Indigenous People's Organization.

"Once our people lived in the forests," Michael told us. "The forests gave us food and shelter, and had all the resources we needed for our livelihoods. The forest was also the source of our myths and the birthplace of our gods and goddesses. The forest shaped our lives and was the basis of our culture."

Now, however, the forests of South Asia have all but disappeared. And with them, so disappear cultures and peoples who have lived in these forests for a thousand years.

For the Santals living today in northern Bangladesh, absolute impoverishment is the norm. The Santals lost much of their forest land to the colonial masters who needed wood products for their industrial expansion. Now the last remnants of the forests are being cut down in order to accommodate commercial woodlots and rubber plantations. Government refuses

to recognize forest peoples' traditional land rights, viewing them as interlopers and illegal migrants. As a result, forest peoples continue to be dispossessed of their forest lands and homesteads and are being pushed into meagre livelihoods as farm labourers, or into the cities as slum dwellers.

But Michael refuses to allow this process to destroy his people. Michael and his colleagues are helping people to defend themselves while at the same time creating new means of livelihood and new forms of community.

Michael knows that the old ways are fast disappearing. Rather than attempting to merely preserve the past, the Santals are trying to create a future based on the best elements that their culture offers. Sometimes this involves challenging deeply-rooted beliefs that people have acted upon for generations. But building a future also involves bringing people together to discuss their situation, and helping them develop the confidence and capacity to confront and resist injustice. Michael himself is a lawyer and his legal skills are an important part of this resistance strategy. The North Bengal Indigenous Peoples Organization is also involved in education programs,

language training and political organizing. Through these activities, Michael and his colleagues are involved in cultural transformation.

While he was in Canada, Michael met with First Nations leaders and visited several First Nations communities. At a public meeting in Ottawa, Assembly of First Nations National Chief, Ovide Mercredi, welcomed Michael and his colleagues and drew parallels between the situations in Canada and Bangladesh. "When I heard you speak," Chief Mercredi told Michael, "it was as if I myself was speaking." Chief Mercredi went on to say that despite centuries of oppression, First Nations peoples are still ready to reach out to others and work together for change.

There are many similarities between the situation of First Nations peoples in Canada and the Santals of Bangladesh. And what Michael saw here encouraged him. "People here are also resisting," he said. "Through political organizing, through education and cultural action, First Nations peoples everywhere are engaged in a struggle for renewal and self-determination. This is our common struggle. We all have the right to say what happens to us."

Inter Pares joins *La Course*

This year, for the first time, Inter Pares is a sponsor of the popular Quebec television program, *La Course destination monde*. Eight young québécois are selected each year to participate in *La Course* by travelling around the world making short films of the places they visit. Their films are sent home each week, for 27 weeks, and broadcast to Radio-Canada viewers on Sunday evenings.



La Course participants, 1996-1997

Through *La Course*, a vast audience gets a fresh look at the world through the eyes of the young film

makers who share their discoveries about other cultures and their insights into international issues.

The film makers are eligible for awards for excellence in a variety of categories. At a CBC ceremony in April, Inter Pares will be presenting an award for the film

that best illustrates the efforts of women and men to bring about social justice.

