



Indigenous Resilience and Regeneration

Cultural and Linguistic Revitalization during the Global Pandemic

Conversation with Radhika Borde, Simon Mitambo, and Luisa Maffi

Amid the challenges of the pandemic, communities in India, Kenya,
and Canada find a silver lining.

David Stringer

Above: Women from Tharaka, Kenya, wearing revived traditional beadwork, sing during the Muriira ritual, traditionally performed when the community was threatened by illness or pestilence. Photo: Hannibal Rhoades

Over more than two years of the global COVID-19 pandemic, much of the focus in the media has been on the negative impacts worldwide, particularly on vulnerable minorities and Indigenous Peoples. Yet, paradoxically, as Indigenous communities struggled to cope with the pandemic, remarkable opportunities arose for cultural regrouping and recommitment to ancestral values of communal solidarity and reverence, respect, and reciprocity with the natural world.

Several inspiring stories of Indigenous resilience and regeneration in the face of the pandemic were told in a previous issue of *Langscape Magazine* (Vol. 9, Summer/Winter 2020). On October 13, 2021, I convened and moderated an Indiana University webinar to further explore this theme. The conversation brought together two of the authors of those stories: Radhika Borde (Charles University), who with Siman Hansdak (Santhal tribe) had written about the return of villagers to the forests of eastern India; and Simon Mitambo (African Biodiversity Network), who had discussed the Tharaka people's newfound appreciation for their ancestral culture and rituals in Kenya. They were joined by Luisa Maffi,

Terralingua Director and *Langscape* Editor, who conveyed perspectives from Canada, drawing from another *Langscape*, Vol. 9 story: the account given by Severn Cullis-Suzuki (David Suzuki Foundation) of her family's almost sacramental immersion in the Haida language during pandemic lockdown in Haida Gwaii.

The following is an abridged version of our conversation.

DAVID STRINGER: *Radhika, could you tell us about your work with Siman Hansdak in India and how you got involved?*

RADHIKA BORDE: We've been friends for many years. Siman is a Santhal, so he belongs to an Adivasi [Indigenous] community, and we came up with this idea of documenting what was going on. Things had changed for Adivasis over the course of time. Many had left their villages to go to cities and work, and they would return only at certain times of year. But when the lockdown was announced very suddenly, many people working in cities fled. It was like an exodus. They came back and they were reminded of how precarious their existence outside their communities was—at any moment, something could happen, and they couldn't be sure



Sushma Murmu, a Santhal woman from Jharkhand, India, displays the seeds of the *sarjom* tree (*Shorea robusta*), which she collected from the forest during the 2020 pandemic lockdown. Photo: Siman Hansdak

they would survive. The communities themselves started appreciating their links to the forest, to the land. And they had *time* to do a lot of things that they didn't have time for before. A lot of Adivasis fell back on what they had been taught traditionally. People started consuming more herbal teas and foraging for healthy foods and things like that.

DAVID: *Could you say a little bit about when the children came home from schools?*

RADHIKA: As schools were shut down, children began to accompany adults as they went into the forests to forage. Interestingly, for the Santhals there has always been a tradition of children participating in activities. In fact, children are even involved in sorting out legal disputes, and they have their own committee which is called upon to give evidence. Children are seen as having agency, and I think that this got reinforced when they weren't sent away to school and got a chance to reconnect.

DAVID: *Simon, could you tell us about Tharaka, and how the pandemic has led to a cultural reawakening and regrouping?*

SIMON MITAMBO: I come from an Indigenous community near Mount Kenya, which is a revered, sacred site. I grew up in a very traditional way, but through my education, I disconnected from the community. Somehow, I got to a point where I felt that I needed to reconnect in a process I call "going back to roots." The shock of the pandemic disrupted a lot of things: our farming system, our gathering. At some point, we wanted to do a ritual. The Elders said that we needed to learn from pandemics that had come before. One of the Elders saw that ritual performed when he was very young, so it was a very creative moment of trying to retrace what we know, what we have lost, and how we can go forward with what we can remember. The Muriira ritual brought all members together, whether they were Christians, Muslims, or traditional believers, because it was an issue of coming together in solidarity to face the reality of how things were.

DAVID: *Could you talk about the reaction of Christian members of the community with regards to participation in this traditional ritual?*



Phenilal Hansdak returns from a hunt in the forest, carrying his traditional hunting weapons and some forest fruit in a cloth sling. During the 2020 pandemic lockdown, Santhal men would go into the forest in groups to hunt as their ancestors once did.

Photo: Siman Hansdak

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At some point we reconnect.*



Tharakan Elders and spiritual leaders set out to perform their rituals with cow horns and cow-hair whisks. Photo: Hannibal Rhoades

SIMON: Someone told me that we are born spiritual. Sometimes we try to suppress it. At some point we reconnect. In that community, many people are born as Africans, as Indigenous people first. And the first thing you do is acquire your traditional name. Then sometimes if you are a Catholic, you acquire another name. My first name was actually Ndonco, then later I acquired Simon. Because of that initial, inherent identity, everybody connected with the ritual. It was a surprise when we saw Christians contribute. When we asked them, “Why don’t you feel this is not good?” one of them said, “You know,

we are Christians, but we are Africans. We were first of all Africans, first of all Indigenous people, and then we embraced Christianity from that point of view. That is how it takes on meaning.”

DAVID: *So first of all, there’s a reconnection at the level of the community among human beings, among people. And then there’s a connection with the land that supports the community. And then, there’s room later for other philosophies. Luisa, I would love it if you could join today’s conversation with a perspective from a First Nation not far from where you live in Canada, but also a world away: the Haida people in the Haida Gwaii archipelago.*

LUISA MAFFI: I would like to preface this by saying that what happened on Haida Gwaii was related by Severn Cullis-Suzuki (*Langscape*, Vol. 9); she couldn't be with us today. Many First Nations in Canada, because of the historic memory of what happened with pandemics in the past, barricaded themselves in their communities with blockades on the roads or, as in Haida Gwaii, stopping all maritime traffic coming into the archipelago. The experience of Severn and her family was, during the period of quarantine, to discover that after a while, turning to the language through full immersion just came naturally. Suddenly the language came in and with the language, that connection to the earth. And that is a totally astonishing realization, one that we are so divorced from in our so-called modern life, where we think of language just as a communication tool. Language is so much more than that. It is really the instrument, the vehicle of connection to one another and to the earth. And her lesson learned from this was that it takes an inner calm, and that connectedness, to be able to accomplish what they had been working toward for years: to revive and revitalize the Haida language.

DAVID: *I liked it when Severn said, "All obligations had been removed and we just focused on our own health, the land, and the language. It was as if we were in ceremony." So the pandemic was a kind of blessing. Her children used the language not only at home but also when engaging in activities where traditional ecological knowledge was passed on through the generations. Both her sons participated in their first octopus hunt, for example.*

LUISA: There are some fantastic pictures in that story, including one photo of Severn's older child learning from his grandpa how to skin an octopus!

DAVID: *I'd now like to make some space for the three of you to ask questions of one another or share reflections.*



Chinaay (Grandfather) Gangxwaat (Dull Brown) shows his grandson Ganhlaans how to skin an octopus as part of their Haida language learning during the 2020 pandemic lockdown, Haida Gwaii, Canada. Photo: Kihgula Gaay.ya (Severn Cullis-Suzuki)

“All obligations had been removed and we just focused on our own health, the land, and the language. It was as if we were in ceremony.”

LUISA: I could start with a question to both Radhika and Simon. This paradoxical cultural regrouping in both the communities that you talked about really seems to have led to a sense of reciprocity among people in the community but also respect and relationship with the natural world. Is this your impression, and do you think that it will continue after the pandemic is over?

RADHIKA: During the lockdown in 2020, the first thing was that people were very worried about whether they could get food. Initially, there was no clear-cut plan as to which shops would be open, so a lot of people started relying on other people they knew who grew food of various kinds, and there were exchanges. In [the village of] Chanaro, people started valuing in a new way some of the forest resources that were edible. They had more time to gather them. And there was also the sense that one shouldn't waste them. I think that this forced people to think beyond what their reliance on food supply systems had been. People were saying things like, "you know, we didn't really realize how much money we spent going around here and there to work. And when we couldn't work, we actually ended up saving some money." Among the Adivasi community, I think that there will be some reflection about things like that, and perhaps a greater appreciation for the land and the environment.

LUISA: And Simon, what's your take on that?

SIMON: I think it is very true that when the pandemic came, there was a moment of going deep into cultural values to dig for answers. Trying to understand, trying to remember the stories we had heard from our grandparents. We can talk about Indigenous future thinking: it's like developing a mechanism to move forward into the future by learning from the past.


DAVID: *Tove Skutnabb-Kangas [audience member] sent this comment: "I think there's a certain relationship between what is happening during the pandemic, and what happened, for instance,*

during World War II. People understood some of the same things about the food, the earth, etc." I'd also like to bring in a quick observation. Here in the United States, a lot of people have left low-paying jobs and asked themselves, what am I doing? Is this worth it? What else can I do? I wonder if the panelists have any comments on this as a period of reflection for non-Indigenous people as well.

SIMON: When the pandemic came here to Kenya, people ran away from the factories and things like that, and there was regeneration. I remember when I saw the River Nairobi: the water was very clean, the land was beautiful, and everything was very nice. But then, slowly, we got back to our usual business. We are back to looking for short-term solutions, like vaccines, and we are not learning from how we can build on our immunity from eating indigenous foods. Even the government does not emphasize that. It is very much about how we also make money with the pandemic. So it's no learning, business as usual.

DAVID: *Heather Reynolds [audience member] observes that "the panel has emphasized the importance of time and relief from the rat race of modern corporate-dominated society in order to re-establish balance, and human-human relations as well as human-nature connections. So how can we move forward as the standard corporate-driven way of living re-establishes its hooks?"*

RADHIKA: I think one of the things that will sustain some of the positive momentum is that people experienced nature in a way that they hadn't before. In India, there were a lot of pictures of the Himalayan Mountain Range that had not been visible from a certain city for twenty or thirty years. After both lockdowns, it was visible. There were pictures of the major rivers looking as they had never looked before. I don't know if it's going to be that easy in the long term, but I do believe that some of the things that people have enjoyed may just provide the impetus.



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Rahil Murmu holding “jungle potatoes” (*Dioscorea bulbifera*) she has just unearthed in the forest during the pandemic lockdown. These tubers are known as *genthi* in the Hindi dialects of eastern India and as *baola* in Santhali. Photo: Siman Hansdak

LUISA: Having time on your hands can make a big difference. But undoubtedly, as Simon was pointing out, it's so easy also to be tempted and to start slipping back into the busy ways, the easy ways of being involved with the international and global supply chain for food, and so forth. Undoubtedly, the prevailing economic system is still there. It's still flexing its muscles; it still determines so much of what happens to our ecocultural systems around the world, our ecological and cultural systems. Without a major rethink of the foundations of our economy

to fit into our global ecological boundaries, rather than the other way around, with the economy drawing endlessly and self-destructively from both people and nature to sustain itself, without *that* major rethink, the efforts of communities and of individuals around the world will always be challenged. It's all the more remarkable, admirable, and laudable that all these things did happen and are continuing to happen, but they need a lot of support to be able to withstand the pressures that are coming from the global economic system.



Indigenous Resilience and Regeneration: Beyond the Global Pandemic. Video: Indiana University's Global Gateway Network (Watch at vimeo.com/639670229)

Afterword

One of the striking aspects of this conversation was the revelation that, despite meaningful differences in language and culture, Indigenous communities in distinct parts of the world had comparable positive experiences during the early lockdowns of the COVID-19 pandemic. As the global economic system shuddered and stalled, many people engaged in a similar return to roots. There was time to reflect on relationships with one another and with the earth. These positive stories of rekindled reverence, respect, and reciprocity stand as beacons of hope for the future.

Indigenous Resilience and Regeneration: Beyond the Global Pandemic (October 13, 2021) was organized by David Stringer and Indiana University's Europe Gateway, Berlin (Tim Hellwig, Academic Director; Andrea Adam Moore, Director; Annabell Türk, Program and Communications Manager), as part of the *Global Perspectives on Resilience* webinar series.

Listen to the full version of the conversation in the Indiana University's Global Gateway Network video (vimeo.com/639670229).

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