

## Presentation by Method Gundidza

On the Interactive dialogue of the UN General Assembly on Harmony with Nature in commemoration of International Mother Earth day

### **Title: “Reweaving the basket of Life: Restoring the Earth Jurisprudence practices of reciprocity - Case study from Bikita, Zimbabwe”**

#### Introduction:

1. Greeting Protocol of the Big People of the UN General Assembly (Maria to advice on this)
2. Introduction of myself, Organisation, and country

#### Background

Most indigenous peoples have stories of origin in which they describe in mythical ways how they came to be in the territories and lands where they live now. Most of these stories, including the story of creation, show how human beings arrived in a place that already was, a place that already had an abundance of life on it, a place that already had rhythms, cycles, patterns and systems that already supported life there. The human being, together with other late arrivals whom we cannot enumerate, arrived to participate and enrich an already thriving life system.

When humans arrived, the sun and the moon did not stop rising and setting; the air, water and the Earth did not stop moving either and neither did the plants and the animals and everybody else whom the humans found already there. Such is the order which humans found, the order into which future generations would be born. An order that is itself a manifestation of very intricate systems working behind the scenes without assistance from the humans. It is this complex system that supports all life and humans are not an exception. Human beings are actually truly human when they find their rightful place in this vast, ancient Earth and Cosmic system, which has inspired complex yet similar ways to acknowledge life through their different belief systems.

Indigenous peoples found ways to acknowledge the transcendent power that they believed held and animated this complex natural system that provided them with material and spiritual wellbeing, including food and other materials they needed for their lives. They engaged in countless rituals to ask when they were in need and importantly to show gratitude and respect. This reflects an understanding of the reciprocal and mutually enhancing relationship human beings developed and nurtured over generations with Mother Earth, the source of all life and wellbeing. It was a relationship based on respect for all forms of life and was embedded in all aspects of human life - from hunting to gathering to procreation, farming and fishing etc.

I now want to tell you a story to bring this to life through an indigenous perspective. This is a story of revival and transformation in which I am participating.

I am one of the first graduates of a 3 year training course in Earth Jurisprudence developed by the Gaia Foundation. Through this I was inspired to 'go back to my roots', to reconnect with my indigenous origins with my community in Bikita, Zimbabwe. I have done this through my organisation EarthLore Foundation and in collaboration with many others, especially the Gaia Foundation, African Biodiversity Network (ABN), the African Earth Jurisprudence (EJ) Network, the Seed and Knowledge Initiative (SKI) and others.

### **The Story of Bikita, Zimbabwe**

I was born and brought up in Bikita, in South East Zimbabwe - a very hilly area with lots of rivers and streams that flow down from the many hills and mountains. There are very few flat lands and so most of the fields are on undulating lands too. Most houses sit atop the hills and highlands, away from the rivers. Homesteads are scattered all over - approximately 500-800 metres away from each other.

When I grew up, the forests and the mountains were all lush, with perennial rivers and streams like one near my home called Chivaka, full of deep pools all along its course. Wetlands and springs were a common sight as were water berry trees and their other tree friends, on the foot of many mountains and hills. The elders grew wetland crops like *Madhumbe* a tuber, *brown rice* and *Tsenza* another local tuber. Farmers in my community generally harvested in excess of their household needs and would let their fields lay fallow for up to two years, resting the land while eating from previous harvests.

**Today** most of the rivers no longer flow all year around, but only periodically when there is rain. In addition overgrazing and cutting of trees has resulted in the topsoil being washed into the riverbeds, and so choking the rivers and reducing their flow over the years. Gulleys are now a common sight. The mountains feel very barren as very few trees are seen on them. Wild animals have deserted the area except for a few rabbits and hyenas that are seen mostly at night when one drives through the village. The bird population has itself reduced drastically. The people seem to go about their household chores without noticing all this but to an outsider, a sense of desperateness is apparent in this community. The few boreholes that some NGOs drilled are dry and have now been vandalized.

When I initiated going back to my roots in 2014, learning from the Amazonians, I began by looking for knowledgeable elders as they advised. I asked each of them how things used to be in the past. Then we began community dialogues to encourage the elders to remind the community about how it was before the disorder we see today, when the

community followed their traditions and their customary laws and governance systems were in place. These dialogues give space to the community to reflect how the erosion of the land and the fragmentation of communities has come about. As the community recognises the wisdom and traditional knowledge of the elders, they are able to recover their role of finding the solutions to their challenges from within.

In Bikita district, millet has been grown for centuries and has been the staple to most households. Over time and especially at the turn of the eighties into the nineties, families began to abandon it. They spoke about the fact that it is too laborious and that their children have left for the cities and they cannot work on it alone any more. No one really picks up when exactly this process of losing millet started nor what triggered it. However, due to persistent droughts, food became an issue as people began to depend more on food aid and purchases to supplement their poor harvests.

After years of abandoning their millet crop in Bikita, as in many other parts of Zimbabwe and South Africa, many excuses were put forward for the loss of the seed, including that the crop was very laborious to work with - from planting to harvest and also in processing it for food. More community dialogues revealed how this loss of seed was itself a deep reflection of the loss of the connection between the community itself and the environment around it. Those few who held on to millet for the many years complained of how when they grew it, the birds would eat and leave very little for them and this made it increasingly discouraging. Again deeper dialogues with the communities uncovered how in the first place the community was in such a communion with the birds that by growing millet all together in the community, they ensured that while they had enough food themselves, they shared with the birds who would also eat enough. Long back the bird population was much higher than it is right now – and yet there was still enough for everyone to eat.

The community dialogues further uncovered the fact that these traditional crops like millet and sorghum are crops that keep the community together. They are very labour intensive and make it impossible for a single family to have the capacity to produce enough food without needing assistance from fellow community members. In Bikita they therefore talk of *Jangano/Jaka/Humwe*. This is an arrangement where the community comes together to work on a particular activity e.g. millet threshing and then afterwards share in such a way that everyone who participates in the threshing and winnowing gets a portion of the millet in agreed proportions. The communal work also happened for activities like weeding. Widows, elderly and orphaned people would be assisted by the whole community to work on their land and ensure that they did not starve.

After a series of community dialogues reflecting on how things used to be, the community finally decided to walk the journey to revive their indigenous seeds and land. The community dialogues that had started in December 2014 went on and in the 2015/16

farming season some farmers went looking for seed of pearl and finger millet in the community and planted bigger portions in their fields. Unfortunately that season turned out to be a bad one in Southern Africa as a whole and many farmers lost their crops to the drought. Those farmers who had planted the millet however smiled all the way. An uncle of mine who harvested 30 X 50kgs of pearl millet and 4 X 50kgs of finger millet during that season decided to rest his field in the next season because he had harvested enough to feed his family until the following year. It was time to allow the land to recover as a show of gratitude for the good harvest. This was in stark contrast to the farmers who had planted hybrid maize and who watched miserably as their crops wilted. As future community dialogues would reveal, this season marked a turning point for most farmers who had experienced first-hand how growing more resilient traditional seeds was more secure than the hybrid seeds that didn't know the land. The issue that remained unresolved was the fact that the birds ate the millet once the millet head appeared and grains were visible on it.

The two Chiefs of Chiroorwe and Mamutse communities who had been participating in the Earthlore facilitated dialogues, also resolved to revive their traditional rituals to ask for rain and do first fruits and thanks giving rituals. These two Chiefs actually performed the ritual to ask for rain in late September 2016 with the help of their various Headmen and female spirit mediums. The rest of the communities members were very excited to contribute materials and participate in them after nearly two decades of abandonment. It was a big reunion with the great spirits of the land and their ancestors. Mai Banga, the Spirit medium in Chiroorwe, had this to say about the final revival of the rituals by the Chief: *“A big revelation has now happened to my brother the Chief. I had been encouraging and asking him to do this all these years but he was just adamant against performing these rituals. Finally he agreed, all thanks to you vaGundidza. I know the Spirits of this our land are finally happy and connected to us again and these good rains we have now are the testimony...tinotenda zvikuru. Thank you very much for all this good work...”*

Later reflections by the community indicated that they were all happy about the return of the rituals but something worried them. It was the physical state of the Sacred Natural Sites where the rituals were performed. They were much degraded and almost bare. They resolved that this was to be the next area of work to gather around and concentrate efforts to reforest and protect these areas so they can truly be natural as they used to be. They were very clear that this was a path they had started and that they would journey towards a full revival of their territories.

As lessons had been learnt in the 2015/16 season, the uptake of millet and Agroecology practices that had been shared since the beginning of the community engagements increased in 2016/17 farming season. The *Jangano* practice was activated to dig big water harvesting pits in Chiroorwe and Mamutse. Almost all farmers who had been part of the community dialogues grew the different millet varieties in this season. A lost seed called

“svoboda” that had been shared by the only elderly woman who still had it, in Mamutse, was also shared with the other two communities on a deliberate programme to multiply the seed for wider sharing. With most farmers having grown millet and having had a good season, the next question was how and where to store the grain and the seed. It was as if people had forgotten what to do in times of good harvest. The community once again came together to share skills to build “tsapi” for temporary storage of millet heads before the threshing and winnowing and ‘udzvu’ for the storage of the millet and other seeds. These two structures began to take shape as the crops were becoming ready for harvesting in March 2017.

As the “tsapi” and “udzvu” were taking shape, baskets weavers and potters were getting busy making baskets needed during millet harvesting and winnowing. The community became a hive of activity as the long forgotten skills of building, grass thatching, weaving and pottery were all reactivated. One got the sense of a very vibrant local economy in which the community were back in control and worked collectively for the common good, including the other species with whom they share the land.

As the prevalence of the millet crop increased in 2017, different bird species began to appear e.g. long tailed red and black birds. The elders also observed the appearance of 2 grasshopper species “gwaramasikati” and “borimhori” that had been last seen many years back.

In this hive of activity by people and other animals, insects and birds appearing, the community began to remember the wetlands that used to provide the reeds and the forests and hills that used to supply the threshing sticks. An earnest journey begins to protect those areas as a sign of respect and thanksgiving for what they provide for the community.

Indeed the basket of life is being reweoven again as the birds, animals, insects and humans once again take their rightful places in the community and revive the lost affair between humans and nature for the greater good - while the precious wetlands and forests and Sacred Natural Sites are protected to make comfortable habitats for all.

## **Conclusion**

More work is planned by EarthLore together with the communities to revive and protect wild biodiversity, especially SNS through the guidance of elders , involving the youth, women and men. When we listen to indigenous elders, in these dialogues, they speak with a feeling for the interconnected web of life that we are part of - we can hear how knowledgeable elders for example, do not see farming as an end in itself. For them farming requires a holistic understanding of the ecosystem, the climate, the constellations, the moon cycle and a deep capacity to read the whole interrelated system.

It is not about maximizing our capacity to extract food from the Earth and get rid of any species that we believe interferes with our single ambition. It is about participating with humility in the dance of life; working in harmony with Nature; contributing to the food system of the land, and sharing with other species as they are part of the web of life.

As an elder woman from Zimbabwe explained *“there is now so little rain, the rivers and wetlands do not hold water anymore, so the land is dry. We have cut down the trees which bring the rain, we do not respect the required rituals to give thanks and ask for rain at our sacred sites. We have disrupted the cycle and disordered the land. Then there is the bigger climate disruption. At least if we restored order locally the impact would be less. “*

Fortunately, Africa still holds the memory and practices of indigenous peoples that supported living in harmony with nature. We will continue to work hard to revive and adapt these traditions in the modern context. We realise that the well-being of people is inextricably linked to the wellbeing of Mother Earth and all other living beings on this planet. Related stories are told by my fellow EJ Graduates working in similar ways in Uganda, Ethiopia, Benin, and Kenya. The African Commission Resolution on Sacred Natural Sites, passed in June 2017, has offered the much needed legal support for this work on the ground.

In conclusion, we at EarthLore commend the work of the General Assembly on the Harmony with Nature Initiative. This is the work of our time. You are indeed thinking of the kind of world our own human children and those of the ants and the elephants – and all other species - will inherit from us. As our ancestors before us, we need to challenge ourselves to pass on to the future generations a planet vibrant with life.

THANK YOU