

Solemnly Proclaimed or How to activate Justice?

Iqaluit, Nunavut 9/ United Nation Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues / 2009

UN Declaration

UN Forum on Indigenous Issues

Organizers

Calender

Workshops

Advisory Board

Participants

Blog

The whole question of human rights, ..., was quickly and inextricably blended with the question of national emancipation; only the emancipated sovereignty of the people, of one's own people, seems to be able to ensure them. ... The Rights of Man, ..., had been defined as "inalienable" because they were supposed to be independent of all governments, but it turned out that the moment human beings lacked their own government and had to fall back upon their minimum rights, no authority was left to protect them and no institution was willing to guarantee them.
-Hannah Arendt, *The Perplexities of the Rights of Man, 1951*

On September 13th, 2007, the United Nations General Assembly adopted resolution 61/295, known as "United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples." 30 years in the making with many people committed to its development and success, this declaration is a landmark in many ways. It offers long overdue international acknowledgement and protection of fundamental rights for Indigenous Populations worldwide, addressing issues that Indigenous Peoples have to struggle with for the past centuries as the result of colonialization and settler state politics. With a clear understanding of the trajectory of this declaration on a national and international level, *Solemnly Proclaimed* is a project that works collaboratively with a group of 10 activist Inuit Youth from Iqaluit, Nunavut (Canada) to investigate the way in which this important declaration acts when it reaches their local community, and how it can be used even without an executive reinforcement when it comes to local concerns, local government, language-politics, traditional knowledge, Intellectual Property, (post)colonial situation, anti-assimilation, social/economic/political conditions of the everyday life that any indigenous community faces today. Central to this examination will be a critical analysis of the compatibility of Western legal traditions and the formal doctrine of rights on which any UN Declaration is based, their inherent implications and pre-conceptions, in relation to traditions and understanding of justice that have been developed over centuries within the Inuit community.

Developing from these discussions, the participants will create a collective statement, an assessment of how the UN Declaration for the Rights for Indigenous Peoples can be useful for the specific needs of their community now and in the future. As part of *Solemnly Proclaimed*, the group will deliver this statement to the Eighth Session of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in May 2009. The statement prepared and presented by this group of young Inuit will be developed as a means for facilitating dialogue about the UN Declaration itself and therefore the United Nations as an international body of governance.

The project *Solemnly Proclaimed* aims to facilitate direct feedback by a local community to the United Nations and at the same time supporting Inuit youth to self-educate, to analyze their political/social/economical situation within an international context, to develop concepts and models in which to apply the UN Declaration to their community, to appropriate actively and to activate the complex prism of Inuit and US/Canadian perceptions of rights, responsibility and justice for their own political needs, purpose and aims.

Part of the project's unfolding will be an experimental documentary that will be developed collaboratively with the participants. Video and video documentation will be available to the group throughout the process as a mode of research and to create a moving image document of their process, that will be available for their community.

Background

United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Resolution 61/295. On September 13, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, with 143 member states voting for it and 11 abstaining. Australia, New Zealand, Canada (British Settler Countries) and the United States voted against the adoption. The declaration is a nonbinding document that formally establishes the individual and collective rights of the world's 370 million indigenous peoples, advocates for the protection and enhancement of their cultural identities and right to self-government, and underlines their right to control the lands and territories they have traditionally owned or used as well as their right to restitution for lands that have been taken from them. The full document is available at www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfi.

Iqaluit, Nunavut. The site of the project takes note of the countries that voted against the declaration and situates itself in the capital of Nunavut, Canada. Nunavut is a territory whose inhabitants are 85% Inuit. Nunavut was proclaimed after a massive land settlement agreement passed by the Canadian Parliament on July 9, 1993: the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement Act, and the Nunavut Act. The new territory comprising about 1/5 of the Canadian land mass, 820,000 square miles, is governed by a public government (not exclusively Inuit) which was inaugurated on April 1st, 1999.

United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII). Established in 2002, the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issue acts as an advisory body to the Economic and Social Council, with a mandate to discuss indigenous issues related to economic and social development, culture, the environment, education, health and human rights. The UNPFII meets for 10 days each year, at UN Headquarters in New York City. The Permanent Forum holds a Youth Caucus at the same time as their general meeting.

Process

Solemnly Proclaimed will bring together a group of 10 young activist Inuit living in Iqaluit through an open call and existing networks and communities. This group is part of a generation of persons who grew up with both Inuit and Western traditions and knowledge, in the context of a radically changing environment, full of potentials, but also serious challenges, economic and educational disadvantages and shortcomings. It is only since 1999, that the Inuit have become a strong part of government in Nunavut and the process of appropriately reflecting Inuit culture within all its structures is slowly developing, while it is coping with the consequences of decades of repression and social/economical disadvantage through colonial policies.

The project will start with a series of three formal 10-day workshops held in Iqaluit from December 2008 to April 2009. Offering lectures/seminars by local and non-local speakers and open discussion the workshops will evolve around the history and potential of the UN Declaration For the Rights of Indigenous Peoples for the Iqaluit community as well as collectively defined areas of interest. The workshops will offer a space in which to research and reflect as a group the current situation within the community and the experience and analysis of its social and political conditions. Uneven power relations between Inuit and non-

Inuit decision makers, that root certain political/social/ cultural discussions in Western traditions, can be argued with and moved to more neutral ground. Working towards a collective statement about their community, the group will discuss areas in need of social, economical and cultural restoration and work through the question if and how it can be helpful for them to find ways to express these Inuit perspectives on Inuit issues through Western legal systems. A particular emphasis will be placed on the role of language within the conversations and on the differences and implications of Inuktitut and the English language which both play an integral parts in the Iqaluit community. Concrete topics of discussion could for example include the economic situation of youth, the ancillary effects of poverty, drugs/alcohol abuse and its consequence, youth council, education, seal hunting, language politics, climate change and the high suicide rate among young adults. The discussion will not try to follow a pre-determined format or logic but develop itself through and from the meeting of this group of participants and their interests and ambitions.

At the end of the last workshop, the participants will formulate a collective statement which will be made public in Iqaluit, in New York at the UNPFII. While discussing the issues at stake and working towards this collective statement, the potential forms of such statement, the languages used as well as its mediation will become part of the discussion. The group will aim to produce a statement within an active format — to be determined by its content, rather then by its destination — that will exist outside of and next to the formal statement designated to be delivered to the UN Permanent Forum.

Newspapers/Zines. The workshops will produce a group of newspaper style publications that will offer a medium to make some of the work of the group public during the working process to the local community. (As of now, there is neither a newspapers edited/published from within the Inuit community in Iqaluit, nor a newspaper that uses Inuktitut as its first language.) These simply produced and easily disseminated publications can hold collective statements, poetic and literary writing, transcripts of lectures or discussions, possible interviews, comic stories, drawings and (photographic) images. These newspapers/Zines will be put together collectively and will be available for free to the local community. There is the potential that such publication could be sustained beyond this initial project by the participants of the community and serve as an outlet for local youth.

Video. As an artist organizing this project, I will also offer video cameras and film and myself as a "camera woman" to the project. Video can be used here on the one hand as an active research tool (for the participants) and a form of archivation, and at the same time turning the camera on themselves while working in a group, being or inventing themselves as characters in a document of the process itself. Being part of a generation who has access to video via cell phones and the publishing potentials of youtube, the participants can expand their understanding of the narrative potential of video and film making. Rather then documenting *Solemnly Proclaimed* at large, the videos should become an active part for the project itself, offering their potential as material during the realization of the project as well as afterwards, beyond the life of the project. The politics of representation will be thoroughly discussed during the process and the produced video material will stay common property of all the participating persons and can result in a collectively produced and edited film.

Performance/Music. Music, performance, theater and other forms of artistic expression are an important public forum and integral part of Inuit life. These forms of expression could potentially become part of the outcome of the workshops, depending on the ideas and ambitions of the participating persons. These forms could also develop as satellite projects on their own time. The participants of *Solemnly Proclaimed* will have the possibility to put together an evening of such performances to be presented in Iqaluit as well as in New York.

Summary of Projected Outcome Material

— A group of (at least) three newspaper/Zines publishing material from the process for the local community.

— An official statement towards the conditions and the future of the Iqaluit community from the perspective of the *Solemnly Proclaimed* participants, that will be presented in Iqaluit in one form but also be reformatted to be brought to and read by the group at the 8th session of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues held in May 2009 at the United Nations in New York City.

— A performance-based evening (theater, music, reading, video screening) that will be presented in Iqaluit in June 2009 as well as at a theater in downtown Manhattan during the travel of the group to New York in May 2009 with the possibility of traveling this evening further if funding allows.

— A experimental/narrative/fictional documentary edited from materials produced during the process of *Solemnly Proclaimed*.

Travel to the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. The project will conclude with the collective trip to the Eighth Session of the UNPFII in New York City that will take place from 18 May - 29 May, 2009. Here the group will be officially observing the forum and present their statement/report to the Forum's 8th Session Youth Caucus. This Session is of particular interest to *Solemnly Proclaimed*, because it will discuss among other topics the Implementation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as well as hold a half-day discussion on the Arctic. The participants will have the chance to engage with and experience the United Nations at their headquarters first hand and connect with other Indigenous communities represented at the Forum. Participating in this important forum will allow them to experience the challenges and great possibilities of the emancipated sovereignty of their own peoples within the context of the United Nations.