

Even among international human rights circles there is a total neglect of a particular form of ongoing colonization of non-European societies, which is hardly noticed or even discussed: worldwide, the destruction of traditional religions, beliefs and worldviews of indigenous peoples has increased, in recent years. New forms of corresponding violence have taken on systematic patterns.

On the one hand, the background of this development is the radicalization of evangelical Christianity and non-Christian (Hindu, Muslim) fundamentalist groups, for whom so-called “traditional ethnic religions” are an expression of a primitive and pagan way of life; a way of life which these fundamentalist groups are attempting to combat. However, the “inter-religious” conflicts often involve concrete economic interests as well. While religious “traditionalists” oppose agribusiness involvement and extracting because of their spiritual relationship with, and responsibility for, land and resources, evangelical Christians see the commercial exploitation of natural riches as progress, sanctioned and endowed by God.

In many parts of the world, individuals are threatened or intimidated in order to stop them from practicing their traditional religions; sacred objects are confiscated or destroyed; and sacred sites and areas are desecrated or access to them is denied. Whether in Bolsonaro’s Brazil or in Guatemala, physical attacks against traditional healers, shamans and holders of spiritual knowledge are supported by local economic elites and ideologically fuelled at the State level. In contemporary southern Brazil, prayer houses of the indigenous Guaraní people are destroyed and burned, sacred sites are turned into soya farmland, traditional believers are expelled from their home reserves, and formal “witch trials” take place, which in some cases even result in the burning of the victims.

On the other side of the world, in central Kenya, traditional believers of the Samburu religion are intimidated into not burying their dead near a traditional sacred mountain (“sacred shrine”, as they call it) and activists of the Wycliffe Bible Translators are actively destroying certain traditional clothing due to their “pagan” symbolism.

These patterns of religious intolerance, harassment and persecution do not only violate the religious freedom of indigenous persons, but they undermine other important rights of Indigenous Peoples, like the spiritual foundation of indigenous land, territorial and resource rights, the religious background of many forms of indigenous self-government, and the right

to cultural existence and to the protection of cultural heritage.

Article 8 of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007), adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 2007, states, among other things:

“1. Indigenous peoples and individuals have the right not to be subjected to forced assimilation or destruction of their culture.

2. States shall provide effective mechanisms for prevention of, and redress for:

(a) Any action which has the aim or effect of depriving them of their integrity as distinct peoples, or of their cultural values or ethnic identities;

[...]

(d) Any form of forced assimilation or integration;

[...]”

The aggressive attack on Indigenous Peoples’ worldview and spirituality is not only a violation of their right to religious freedom, but also undermines their very continued existence as distinct peoples, and prepares the ground for situations that threaten even their physical survival. As the wording of the cited article expresses, States have the obligation to safeguard the rights to cultural continuity against third parties. However, hardly any State protects the followers of traditional religions against denigration, violence and personal attacks by radicalized Christians.

In my contribution, I would like to take a closer look at the connection between the threats to sacred sites and attacks on traditional religions of Indigenous Peoples. I would work out to what extent standards defined by the UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples are being breached and, finally, how much Indigenous Peoples and their organizations are developing legal and other strategies to defend themselves against the violation of their rights.

My work will be based on cooperation with selected indigenous organization in three different regions (probably situated in Brazil, Ecuador and Kenya).