The Challenge of a New Ethics for Indigenous Peoples
An African Perspective

1. It is for me interesting and rather curious that the continent of Africa is conspicuously absent in the list of Indigenous Peoples (IPs) of interest for this session. My contribution is therefore like an “after thought”, but which I am glad to take up, with gratitude since it gives me an opportunity to tell a bit of the “African Story”.

2. But the emphasis, not without reason, seems to be on the plight of the remnant of nations and peoples invaded, conquered and oppressed to near extinction by more powerful groups within the last 500 years. It is a question of the invasion of many parts of the world by people from Europe, especially the Americas, Australia and New Zealand, and also to a lesser extent Southern Africa, Caribbean islands, Philippines and other places.

   The basic ethical issue raised here is the fact that nations, peoples and cultures were practically wiped out of the face of the earth with no other justification than the rule of the survival of the fittest, the law of force. The victims were those we now call “Indians” in the Americas or “aborigines” in Australia and New Zealand. Their ancestral lands have been taken over by others who came from across the seas and who now claim the right to exclude others from entering. Whatever may have been the causes and the course of events that took place, from an ethical point of view, it was a historic crime that was nothing less than genocide.
3. The African peoples by and large escaped this process of extinction not so much by their ability to resist as by the hostile and unfavorable climatic conditions. My country Nigeria used to be called with dread “the White Man’s Grave”, thanks to the deadly malaria and other tropical diseases. Southern Africa, including Mozambique and Angola, did not enjoy this natural defense, and so were overrun by white settlers who controlled the land until the end of Apartheid. It was a similar story for the French in Algeria, and the Italians in Libya, Ethiopia and Eritrea. The rest of the continent was considered a “no man's land” taken over to be shared among colonial powers from Europe. Despite all forms of excuses and justifications, (civilization, Christianization, pacification etc) the colonial enterprise was also another case of the law of force, with lasting negative effects even today on our nations.

4. Perhaps of more ethical significance was the case of the millions of African indigenous peoples transported by force from their homes to distant foreign lands as slaves across the Atlantic Ocean to the Americas some 300 years ago. It was a massive human atrocity whose effects are still felt today by the descendants of the victims. It has also left a negative stamp on the perception that many people have of the black race all over the world until today. The black people of the Americas may not be considered “indigenous people” there, but they have certainly become a permanent factor in the demographic landscape of those lands, and therefore should not be left out of consideration in this discourse.

5. The perpetrators of the historic crimes of forceful displacement of peoples, slave trade and slavery, and colonial domination of peoples across our planet generally called themselves Christians. This should not leave us, Christians of today, ethically and morally indifferent. The historic gesture of deep apology by Pope St. John Paul II at the infamous “Gate of No Return” on the island of Goree in Senegal was done on behalf of
all Christians. There is a crying need for sincere repentance and purpose of amendment.

6. We cannot however close our eyes to the no less gruesome crime of enslavement of black Africans in the opposite direction by Muslim Arabs to the Arabian gulf regions and Northern Africa. This has not received the level of attention and condemnation that the trans-Atlantic slave trade has been given. This also must be put on record, especially because the very institution of slavery is still enjoying legal status in some Muslim nations, e.g. Mauritania. On a related note, we can also mention the cases of Arabic Islamic colonization of some parts of Africa. Examples can be found in Northern Africa, where the indigenous Berber peoples are quite marginalized, as well as Eastern African coasts, where, for example, the Island of Zanzibar was for a long time ruled from a Gulf emirate.

7. Finally there is the rather curious case of freed slaves from the Americas forcefully resettled on the African territory some two hundred years ago. This was the origin of the modern nation of Liberia. Ironically, the freed slaves soon set themselves up as new masters over the original indigenous inhabitants. This situation persisted until quite recently when the indigenous peoples of Liberia began to emerge on the mainstream of national life, not without some inter-communal friction and crisis. There were cases of such freed slave settlers all along the West Coast of Africa, like in Sierra Leone, Togo, Benin Republic and Nigeria. These used to be known by the foreign English and Portuguese names they proudly carried. In our days however, many have either retrieved their original indigenous identities or simply added an African name to their family name.

8. Before we conclude this conversation, let us look at the inter-ethnic interactions on the continent of Africa itself. The modern post-independence nations of Africa have tended to stabilize and formalize ethnic identities within modern boundaries generally inherited from the colonial powers. But there is
evidence of a much more fluid situation before the colonial era. There were migrations and settlements of ethnic groups and tribes mentioned in local folk-lore and clan stories but whose details are no longer accessible with any degree of certainty. While the movements of peoples were often gradual and peaceful, there were also cases of military conquests with various outcomes:

- At times there was outright replacement, with the stronger conquerors pushing away the original inhabitants to less fertile grounds.
- More often both victor and vanquished occupied the same territory, with recognized distinctions in social structures and clan identities. There could therefore be situations of rulers and commoners, with everyone knowing where he or she belongs.
- There are also more complex cases of multi-ethnic agglomerations, all occupying the same territory, with the same or with different languages, at times distinguished even by occupation or trade.
- This can at times result in what can be described in terms of a “caste system”, with strict differentiation of roles, social positions and political status. The situation can be either peaceful or conflictual, depending on how well the mutual relationships are managed.

These are among the issues that make governance and political organization in many African nations so problematic. It calls for a high level of wisdom and political sagacity that is often not available.

**Conclusion:**

In Africa today, most countries are made up of a multiplicity of ethnic nationalities, or “indigenous peoples”. Each has its own culture, traditional religion, political organization, language and often also a recognized territory. To weave all these peoples into one united modern state is an ongoing challenge in almost every African country.

From the ethical and moral point of view, we often have to deal with the gap which modern education and social stratification have
created between the relatively few elite in charge of state affairs and
the vast masses of the poor majority both on the rural and urban
areas. This gap cuts across all the ethnic groups, thus spreading
inequality and injustice among every indigenous people.

    The Church in Africa seeks to be among the few actors
effectively working on bridging these gaps, and reconciling estranged
indigenous peoples. This is a task that is both pressing and exciting,
which is why “the struggle continues”, with God’s grace.