

Who Are The Indigenous Peoples of Africa

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Ask someone to name an **Indigenous People of Africa** and they will likely say the Maori of New Zealand, the American Indians of North America, or the Aboriginals of Australia. These groups were the First Peoples that were colonized, marginalized, and all too often demonized. For better or for worse, membership to these groups is now government-regulated and they are widely recognized culturally and politically by the surrounding society.

However, who are the Indigenous Peoples in Africa? The term “First Peoples” is unhelpful since it applies to most Africans. It is important to identify Indigenous Peoples in Africa not to call them out as different, but to call attention to the marginalization and discrimination these people suffer, and recognize their unique cultural heritage that they want to maintain.

Therefore, in Africa, the term “Indigenous” is defined by a collection of shared characteristics among certain communities. These characteristics, as outlined by the [Indigenous Peoples of Africa Coordinating Committee](#) (IPACC) and expanded upon by the [African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights](#) (ACHPR) and the International Working Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA) include:

Political and economic marginalization rooted in colonialism – Indigenous peoples’ cultures and ways of life differ considerably from the dominant society and are often under threat, with some to the point of extinction.

Particularities of culture, identity, economy, and territoriality that link hunting and herding peoples to their home environments in deserts and forests – Most indigenous groups in Africa today maintain a living through hunting and gathering, transhumant pastoralism, and traditional drylands horticulture. These groups are often geographically isolated or live in inaccessible regions. Survival of the indigenous way of life depends on access and rights to traditional lands and the natural resources on them.

De facto discrimination based often on the dominance of agricultural peoples in the state system, and institutionalized or blatant societal discrimination, domination, and marginalization – These groups are vulnerable to domination and exploitation by national political and economic structures designed to reflect the interests and activities of the national majority. These forces violate indigenous peoples’ human rights, threaten the continuation of their cultures and ways of life, and prevent them from being able to genuinely participate in decisions regarding their own future and ways of life. This discrimination has a variety of effects on the indigenous communities:

- Some groups, such as the San and Pygmy, are physically distinct, which makes them subject to specific forms of discrimination.
- Indigenous peoples are often regarded as less developed and less advanced than the dominant sectors of society. They may be stereotyped as backward, primitive, uncultured, or embarrassing to national identity, and these stereotypes help legitimize official discrimination.

Indigenous peoples are routinely victims of dispossession and eviction from land, which aggravates poverty levels and disrupts traditional knowledge systems,

They are more likely to be denied the right to justice due to arbitrary arrests, unjust punishment,

beatings, and harassment, suffer a lack of representation and legislation as few countries recognize the existence of indigenous peoples or include protection for them in their constitution.

These groups also often face a lack of access to health and education due to lack of infrastructure, services, and the unsuitability of mainstream curriculum. Indigenous communities in Africa have low literacy rates and school attendance often 50 percent below the national level. These communities may suffer from high rates of domestic violence, crime, and depression as a result of the above-mentioned factors.

Though many characteristics overlap with those assigned to minority groups, it is important to note that referring to indigenous peoples as “minorities” is inadequate, as minority rights are formulated as individual rights, whereas indigenous rights focus on collective rights, e.g. a group’s right to their land, culture, language, religion, and resources.

The most common misconception when discussing the indigenous movement in Africa is that indigenous groups are seeking special rights. This is not true – groups that label themselves as “indigenous” adopt the term to bring attention to the fact that they have been routinely marginalized and discriminated against as a people. The modern usage of “indigenous” does not carry the patriarchal connotations that it was ascribed when used by settlers or the government, nor does it seek to establish hierarchy based on “who was here first.” Rather, according to IWGIA, “indigenous” today refers to a “global movement fighting for rights and justice for those particular groups who have been left on the margins of development paradigms and whose cultures and lives are subject to discrimination and contempt.” Self-identifying as indigenous “is a way for those groups to try to address their situation, analyze the specific forms of inequalities and repression they suffer from, and overcome the human rights violations by also invoking the protection of international law.”

The indigenous movement in Africa, in general, is still weak, with minimal capacity, though the [movement is clearly growing](#). East Africa, in particular Kenya, has the strongest indigenous network with groups such as [the Pastoralist Development Network of Kenya](#), the Pastoralists and Hunter Gatherers Ethnic Minorities Network, the [PINGOS Forum](#), and the [Tanzania Pastoralist and Hunter Gatherer Organization](#). The movement is weak in central Africa with some success in Rwanda and Burundi. The San of southern Africa are weak but mobilizing under the [Working Group of Indigenous Minorities in South Africa](#), while the indigenous movement is basically non-existent in West Africa. IPACC is currently the only pan-African indigenous organization.

Some fear that identifying groups as indigenous will lead to increased tribalism and ethnic conflict within Africa, but in fact the opposite is usually true – recognizing all groups, respecting their differences, and supporting their goals only enhances the democratization and stability of the region. Though the state of indigenous peoples in Africa remains tenuous, establishing a clear understanding of who is indigenous and the commonalities between indigenous groups is crucial to these groups gaining recognition, protection, and status from their governments.

[Source](#)