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INTERNATIONAL EXPERT GROUP MEETING

**Indigenous Languages:
Preservation and Revitalization: Articles 13, 14 and 16 of the
United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
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**Paper Prepared by
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“Indigenous Perspectives and Language Habitats”

KAhô. yUdjEha KAdEfa, szOyaha zA'yaTa. aKAê asOgwa abA. shUshpa hôzOgenE. lenE lenapA-wAnû, nechE s'@chE wAk'y@hanEjî K@shtalA, lechE k'@bE wAnÔk'yûwû abAnchE. hOdenOshOnA-wAnûdA, gOchathla dAkE-wAnûdA n@fig@lA wAnÔwE. abAhû gOchathla gO'wAdAnAha s'Eh@ yalA. gO'wAdAnA yaTEha s'EhA galA. lechE k'@bE Ôk'ayUgwa, neKAdEfa szOyaha nÔ'wAdAnA-A hEdOk'û.

I am standing here as a Yuchi—the People of the Sun. This is how I speak to you today. I am Dr. Richard A. Grounds. We recognize the Lenni Lenape people who cared for this particular land long ago (when the Dutch first arrived here four centuries ago)¹. And we remember the Haudenosaunee and other Indigenous caretakers for these lands, as well. Today the fires of our Indigenous languages have gone dim and are almost lost. And this is what we are talking about as I stand here speaking the language of the People of the Sun.

I am speaking as a representative of the North American context.

I begin by stating *four broad affirmations* about our Indigenous languages.

INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE IS THE MOST IMPORTANT MEASURE OF INDIGENOUS SOVEREIGNTY RIGHTS.

Therefore, I began my remarks by speaking first in my own language.

INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES ARE THE KEYS THAT ARE REQUIRED TO UNLOCK THE STOREHOUSE OF HUMAN KNOWLEDGE THAT IS STILL CARRIED BY OUR ANCIENT AND ORIGINAL PEOPLES.

That is, the only way to gain access into the depths of the vast archives of Indigenous Knowledge is through our original languages.

And it is only through our Indigenous languages that these extensive and complex systems of Indigenous Knowledge have been built up and developed over millennia. And it is only through our Indigenous languages that this knowledge is now passed down to our clan leaders, our ceremonial and medicine people within present day Indigenous Nations.

But it also means that the only sure way to preserve these vast libraries of Indigenous Knowledge is to insure that there are new young speakers of those languages in those traditional communities. Only then—as fluent speakers taking their place in the stream of knowledge carried through their Indigenous languages—can they learn and pass forward those knowledge systems.

¹ We were fortunate to honor the last speaker of the Lenape language in the state of Oklahoma, Mr. Leonard Thompson, then aged 94, as part of celebrating the first Decade of Indigenous Peoples by the Oklahoma Committee on the Decade of Indigenous Peoples.

INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES ARE THE MOST CRITICAL MARKERS OF THE CULTURAL HEALTH OF OUR INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES.

And the cultural health of our Indigenous communities is vital to the success of our Indigenous nations as indicated on more common indexes such as those areas addressed in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) for education, poverty and environmental sustainability.

That is, the strength of our Indigenous languages serves as an important bulwark against the negative indicators that plague our disenfranchised communities such as high rates for dropping out of basic education, suicides and substance abuse. At recent check-in, the Hawaiian immersion educational program, after decades of operation, can still boast that they have 100% high school graduation success. That is, through immersion education in our Indigenous languages, students uniformly show surprising progress in other areas of education, such as mathematics, social studies, and even improved language skills in the national (non-Indigenous) language. These counter-intuitive educational outcomes are typical of immersion language programs² and further evidence that assimilationist policies do not work.

THERE IS NO GREATER CHALLENGE FACING INDIGENOUS PEOPLES THAN THE THREAT OF LOSING OUR ORIGINAL LANGUAGES.

For Indigenous Peoples living on Turtle Island in the North American context, I would argue that the threat against our languages is the most critical issue that our peoples face.³

That is to say, our Indigenous Peoples have faced many brutal assaults, the colonial tide coming in a series of destructive waves: physical genocide, the taking of land and resources, the enslavement of our peoples, forced dislocations through death marches, and the murders of our spiritual and political leaders, our women and youth.

Yet through all of these many waves of colonial assault, our peoples have endured—because they still had their languages. Therefore, they were enabled to maintain their identity, to conduct their ceremonial obligations and adapt to strange new lands with different plants and animals. They still had the internal capacity to adapt and live in an authentic way that expressed their unique gifts as a community. They still knew how to find their place in the world because they were still connected to their original instructions through their languages that gave them the essential DNA to regenerate their nations. In short, they still knew who they were despite all of the colonial assaults and were able to survive.

yUdjEha nAnô, sôKAnAnô.
(We Yuchi people, we are still here.)

² See for example, the testimony given when we attended the 2007 US Senate Hearing on No Child Left Behind legislation in Santa Fe, New Mexico, USA; or Mark Cherrington, “The Language of Success,” in *Cultural Survival Quarterly* 31:2 (Summer 2007).

³ For some of our Indigenous brothers and sisters further south in this hemisphere, or other places on the globe, who are struggling for their physical existence against brutal colonial processes, the survival priorities may vary.

COMMUNITY-BASED LANGUAGE WORK:

The language work that I oversee centers on the last four Yuchi speaking Elders in the world. They are bearers of a unique tongue identified as a language isolate which means that there are not any related languages as part of some larger language family. Our remaining Yuchi Elders are all over 90 years old. Unfortunately, their great age is not an unusual situation for Indigenous language communities. In fact, 3 out of 4 of the 210 Indigenous living languages north of Mexico, are only spoken by Elders from the World War II generation—they were the last kids raised fully fluent in their heritage languages. This means that there is precious little time to engage these Elders in effective language revitalization. The sheer number of speakers has some bearing for planning language revitalization strategies, but the age of the speakers is the most critical issue that determines how long we might expect to have the opportunity to work with them. And once the fluent speakers have passed the child-bearing age, the level of difficulty increases exponentially.

The Yuchi language is spoken within a geographic region that has been identified as one of the 5 worst "hotspots" on the planet for Indigenous language loss, according to research by the Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages.⁴ The Yuchi Elders help us on a daily basis to pass their knowledge on to young Yuchi community members. We now have a dozen new young speakers in our community. This means that we now have three times more new speakers of Yuchi than Elder first-language speakers as a result of the Yuchi Language Project efforts. It is small-scale, grassroots work.

In order to share the strategies, successes and limitations of our language work, I will first talk about a traditional understanding of *the nature of Indigenous languages* as a basis for explaining our approach.

The Nature of Indigenous Languages:

Indigenous Elders tell us that *our original languages are given to us directly from the Creator*. It is our language that connects us to the Creator and connects us to the earth and our community. The sense of identity in the Yuchi community is so profound that everyone speaking Yuchi is obliged, grammatically, to identify whether one is speaking about a fellow Yuchi community member—as distinguished from all non-Yuchi persons (a category that would identify persons from other nations including animal nations). There is a special set of pronouns that all speakers are obliged to use that automatically makes the distinction between who is part of the community and who is not. This intensification of community bonds is built into the language and there is no other way to talk.

One of our Yuchi Elders, Maggie Cumsey Marsey, would often ask,
gOchathla gO'wAdAnA-A n@ne'wAdATaya, gOchathla waKAê yô?
(If you can't speak your own Indigenous language what kind of Indigenous person are you?)

⁴ In fact, two of the 5 worst global hotspots are in North America, with the worst area for language loss being in northern Australia. These language loss "hotspots" are determined by factors such as number of languages, diversity of language families and threat of extinction, *National Geographic Magazine*, October 2007.

According to traditional understanding, Indigenous languages are the core, the beating heart of our peoples, cultures and identities. Our languages tell us who we are. It is through our languages that we speak our worlds into existence. It is through our languages that we know how to live in the world. Indigenous languages are understood to be both alive and powerful. This is why our traditional ceremonies must be conducted in our original languages. Our languages are not thought of as an abstract code of symbols pointing to an external reality where words are distanced from the actual thing being referenced. This is why our traditional people do not give out their ceremonial names. As the fever of genocide in California was finally winding down a hundred years ago, the last living Yana Yahi was captured and compelled to live in an anthropological museum. As the last representative of his 20,000-member nation that had been decimated by a century of genocidal assault, he survived only about 5 years at the museum before his “friends” pickled his brain after his death and sent it to the Smithsonian Museum in Washington, D.C. He was known as Ishi, but that, of course, was not his name. Ishi only means “man” and he dared not trust his colonial hosts with the power of his name.

It can be challenging, as second-language learners, to ascertain the word patterns for natural disasters or for diseases. Our Elders are reluctant to name those forces in the language. It becomes difficult to have an elder give the language form for saying, “she has tuberculosis,” or, “I have diabetes”—since in our language world there is a correlation between what is said in the language and how events in the world unfold. Even though our Elders today are able to speak English they prefer to pray in our Yuchi language because it is more powerful and has more meaning. The practice of traditional healing does not rely on herbal medicines only, but always requires speaking or singing in the Indigenous language for efficacy. As our Yuchi Elder, Vada Tiger, recently reminded us, it is not possible to be a medicine healer if one does not speak the original language.

Many of the ceremonial and healing songs came originally from animals. This presents another urgent reason for keeping alive our languages since the animals do not speak English. The animals of this land do not speak the colonial languages that came from across the ocean.

Implications for Language Revitalization Strategies:

Because of the nature of our Indigenous languages it matters how they are passed on. It matters who is allowed to be involved in more restricted areas of language use. If language is powerful then it matters in what manner that Indigenous languages are handled. Like a number of language communities, traditional Shawnee language programs are not allowed to make recordings of their language, even for teaching purposes. In the Yuchi community, Elders only agreed to allow recordings with the understanding that they were intended for use by Yuchi community members to help grow new young speakers and keep our language alive.

Because of the understanding that our language is living, the Yuchi Language Project uses *breath-to-breath immersion methodologies* in order to receive the full life of our language directly from our Elders. The Elders today are gifted with the full richness of the stream of our unique language that flows from time immemorial. Therefore, *our entire diverse language program is built around getting breath of life from Elders* to younger language learners.

Our approach is built on Indigenous perspectives and demands that we access the stream of language as straight as possible. This means getting Indigenous language from Elders, not from experts.⁵ And it necessarily means using immersion to get us into the stream of our language. This is the only way we can leave English behind with its ideational constructs and colonial overtones that have been corrosive for our Indigenous languages.

The face-to-face approach that we use in revitalizing our language also recognizes what is at risk of being lost: the heart of our cultures, the life-breath of our communities, our spiritual traditions, our original instructions, and our innate sense of who we are.⁶

None of those things can be put in a dictionary or transferred through a long-distance learning module. These are the gifts our Elders bring to our youth.

Because of the deep understanding of the life of our language, growing new speakers is at the core of everything that we do. *Keeping our language alive through growing new fluent speakers is the bottom line* and everything is evaluated in terms of how it helps us to grow new speakers. The goal is getting more young people into the stream of our unique Yuchi language so that they can take their place in the spiritual and cultural life of our community. This focus on growing new fluent speakers has implications for two broad program areas: developing a Yuchi language habitat and the way that we use technology in a secondary support role.

Developing a Language Habitat:

There are many historic and present-day obstacles that make it difficult to grow new fluent speakers. Our Indigenous Peoples have been deluged with colonial languages coupled with relentless cultural assaults over many generations through boarding schools, land allotment, and other assimilationist programs. All of this begins to have a further negative impact through internalized colonialism. As Eduardo Galeano has observed in his *Book of Embraces*: “Blatant colonialism mutilates you without pretense: It forbids you to talk, it forbids you to act, it forbids you to exist. Invisible colonialism, however, convinces you that serfdom is your destiny and impotence is your nature; it convinces you that it’s not possible to speak, not possible to act, not possible to exist.”

After a life-time of being shamed for speaking our Indigenous language the Elders needed a safe place to come together and tell stories, laugh and pray in the language. Because of the impact of government policy in the land allotment process that divided our people into separate land areas, we no longer had any two Elder speakers living together. We no longer had families still able to raise the children speaking the language in the home. In order to deal with these and other challenges, we developed the Yuchi House as a haven for language learning. The Yuchi House became the only place on earth where the language could be heard on a daily basis between first-

⁵ Though, of course, scholarly and technical experts can play important roles.

⁶ Our founding Elder for the Yuchi Language Project, Mose Cahwee, often talked of his monolingual grandmother who tried to prevent him from being taken away to the Euchee Mission Boarding School. Although she spoke no English, she understood the colonial function of the boarding school and told him in Yuchi: “They are going to make you forget your language. They are going to make you forget who you are. They are trying to make you forget that you are a Yuchi. You must always be a Yuchi and keep your language.”

language speakers of Yuchi and where Yuchi Elders were nurturing young speakers and working to grow new ones.⁷ The Yuchi House soon became a model for developing effective programs for other Indigenous communities as far away as Alaska and Florida.

The development of the Yuchi House grew in an organic way out of the needs of the community trying to make the most out of our limited cultural and financial resources but without a very clear framing of the overall process. After we had launched the Yuchi House, Dr. Alice Anderton, a linguist and long-time supporter of the program, articulated for us the need for developing and expanding language habitats so that our Indigenous languages can begin to thrive once again.

The Yuchi House is, admittedly, an intentionally constructed space for language work, but it has functioned as a hothouse for growing our language during a tender stage in the life of our language. The language work itself is authentic and plays a critical role in keeping our language living by growing new speakers. After the unbroken transmission of our language across thousands of generations our unique gift of language was now in need of special care to keep it alive in a special language habitat. This careful process has brought us to the stage of now implementing our long-term strategy of returning the language back to the homes of young parents where the Yuchi language can once again be the mother language for our future generations.⁸

As Dr. Anderton explained, because our Indigenous languages are living they—like other living organisms—need an environment that will nurture and support their special life-form. In fact, research has shown an extraordinary correlation between ecological diversity on the land and language diversity in human communities. The areas with the greatest variety of animal and plant diversity are also those places on the earth with the greatest linguistic diversity. The research of Jonathan Loh and David Harmon, “Biocultural Diversity: Threatened Species, Endangered Languages,” shows the direct linkage between diminished biodiversity due to disappearing habitat and the clear correlation to loss of human languages.⁹ The threats to the earth are also threats to Indigenous languages.

This research clearly demonstrates that Indigenous Peoples play an important role as caretakers of the land in all its diversity. It also suggests that the land itself has a formative role to play in the shaping of Indigenous languages—especially since Indigenous Peoples are so directly connected to particular landscapes. As Jeanette Armstrong says in her essay, “Land Speaking:”¹⁰ “All my elders say that it is land that holds all knowledge of life and death and is a constant teacher. It is said in Okanagan that the land constantly speaks. Not to learn its language is to die.” She makes the argument that Indigenous languages come from the land and amount to human articulations of the land’s own language arising from a particular landscape. It is for

⁷ See Renée h@lA Grounds, “The Yuchi House: A Storehouse of Living Treasure,” *Cultural Survival Quarterly* 35-4 (December 2011).

⁸ See Richard A. Grounds and Renée T. Grounds, “Yuchi: Family Language Without a Language Family,” in *Bringing Our Languages Home: Language Revitalization for Families*, ed. Leanne Hinton, 2013: 41-58.

⁹ As reported in *The Guardian* newspaper, 7 June 2014.

¹⁰ *Speaking for the Generations*, Ed. Simon Ortiz, Univ. of Arizona Press, 1998: 174-194.

these reasons that I can make the further affirmation that we, as Indigenous Peoples, are the voices of this land. Our Indigenous languages are the voices of the earth and we speak on behalf of the earth itself. This further underscores the urgency of keeping alive our Indigenous languages.

Admittedly, we cannot expect completely to reverse the larger colonial and economic forces that have brought devastating climatic shifts on our local Indigenous language landscapes. The inhospitable colonial situation has chased our languages out of everyday use, aggressively silenced them in the schools, and made them unwelcome in daily economic activities and even stopped the languages in the homes. The last bastions of language resistance, for many of our communities, has been in the homes and hearts of our Indigenous Elders and in our ceremonial grounds and Indigenous language churches where the prayers and songs have continued without ceasing. Our task now is to reclaim language habitats and reestablish language domains where languages are once again welcomed and protected. We have to work to facilitate the daily work of our Elders to empower them to share their language gifts with younger generations. In the end we need to recreate the factors for intergenerational transmission of our original languages by restoring Indigenous language habitats.

Harnessing Technology:

The great promise and allure of technology in its largest expression is to relieve the toil of human labor, to simplify the challenges in accomplishing important or useful goals. Technology offers the possibility of enlarging performance abilities for many areas of endeavor, but is especially effective in extending communication capabilities. The ability to digitally document, replicate and disseminate sound and video files has many potential benefits. In terms of Indigenous language revitalization, perhaps, it would be appropriate to ask whether there are also perils that come bundled with the promise of these new communication technologies--especially in relation to Indigenous communities.

It is our view that the use of technology needs to be related to the nature of Indigenous languages and thereby to the critical issue of the appropriate manner of transmission and dissemination for those languages. This means that the use of information technology has only a limited but useful role—although not all Indigenous representatives will necessarily agree with this more critical stance toward technology. Many of our Elders today in the context of the United States are more open toward accepting these new technologies. And governmental officials for Indigenous nations are often pushing for what they may view as quick technological fixes for the vexing language challenges. The very notion that these technological solutions somehow represent a kind of comprehensive and easy fix can itself become a problem that stands in the way of finding more effective directions for growing new fluent speakers. And this too often leads to diverting energy away from more effective paths for restoring the strength of our languages.

In the case of the Yuchi Language Project we do use technology for some documentation purposes—but never as an end in itself. It is not about getting the language recorded and onto the shelves of a museum or university library where it will become accessible primarily to academics and, at the same time, inaccessible to community members. We do not want our efforts of working with our Elders and youth to become coopted into the machinery of intellectual colonialism that has fed off of our cultures in unhealthy ways for many generations

(despite the good intentions of most academic practitioners). In short, the demands of the academic agenda are seldom brought into line with the needs of the Indigenous communities since they are working from fundamentally disparate agendas. There is not a natural unity of purpose. In fact, the academic process of studying our languages is too often assumed to be automatically supportive of the on-the-ground issues of keeping our original languages alive.¹¹ The principle function for the documentation that is carried out by our program is to serve as an aid for community-based language learners who are engaged in immersion learning with Elders.

Since the primary goal for our Indigenous languages is the development of new groups of young fluent speakers, then technology also must be brought into line with this goal. The process for growing conversationally fluent speakers follows a known pathway that necessarily relies on immersion methods. On the other hand, our program has had a long-running Yuchi language radio broadcast. However, that program is not viewed as a vehicle for developing fluency in any direct way. Instead, the primary function of this type of technological practice is to serve as a means for raising the prestige of the language, to help overcome the inertia of internalized colonialism that often paralyzes families and community members. This type of use for technology has a real promise of supporting the youth and elders in gaining pride in their Indigenous culture and community by hearing our Indigenous languages on the airwaves alongside the official language(s) of the nation state.

Indigenous language community radio within Central American states serves an important role of educating in the local languages about Indigenous rights. Indeed, these radio broadcasts are themselves an exercise in expressing Indigenous rights as articulated in the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. But they probably are not a significant tool for advancing fluency in the regional Indigenous languages.

My brief remarks on the question of the use of technology within our traditional language communities have centered around the issue of what may be considered its appropriate uses, given the nature of Indigenous languages and communities. However, these arguments are only one side of the limitations for using technology in Indigenous language revitalization. The other main argument against an overreliance on digital technology is based on measurable results. Research has not shown that the various digital language teaching tools are successful in producing new fluent speakers. These technological applications probably represent the least effective approach for developing speakers with real fluency and cultural competence. Neither I nor my language activist colleagues have seen any new fluent speakers arise from the various digital language programs that have been developed by Indigenous communities at great expense of financial and cultural capital. Language learning remains a quintessentially human exchange across generations.

In offering these remarks I am not trying to overemphasize any single model or perspective or adopt an anti-intellectual stance. But I am trying to move our conversation forward in constructive ways to help us work toward common strategies for addressing the global crisis for Indigenous languages.

¹¹ For a brief but more complete argument, see Richard A. Grounds, "Documentation or Implementation," *Cultural Survival Quarterly* 31:2 (Summer 2007) Rescuing Critically Endangered Native American Languages.

FOUR CRITICAL ISSUES AND RELATED PROPOSALS:

1) There is a **great urgency** in addressing the survival of our Indigenous languages. For many of our language communities with only handfuls of aged speakers the challenges are extremely time-sensitive. And at the same time, there are other Indigenous language groups that number in the 100s of thousands and in the millions. It is helpful to recognize this **difference in scale** because it relates to differences in strategy for addressing the differing language situations.

Those areas with the greatest sustained language decimation include continent wide genocidal policies carried out by (un)settler societies in what became the United States, Canada and Australia. The colonial strategy in these large (and other smaller) regions was to displace completely the Indigenous populations. This has left us with only 7% of the languages north of Mexico that are considered viable, with Australia close behind at only 9%. These regions are in grave danger with very high percentages of these Indigenous languages in extreme stages of language loss. For Northern America there are 163 languages that are listed as dead or dying, and over 300 dying languages in Australia.¹² This division of scale and related urgency along these and other factors means that the stakes are extremely high for hundreds and thousands of language communities around the globe.

PROPOSED RESPONSE: Develop **an active system of triage** that pays particular attention to the most endangered languages. The goal is to keep as many Indigenous languages viable as possible. This would also mean **an inversion of the focus of efforts** by such UN agencies as UNESCO and UNICEF. To be effective this would require a dedicated desk for monitoring and assisting with keeping the focus on the most endangered languages. The main strategy for investing in Indigenous languages would not be controlled by the question of how to have the largest impact on the greatest population of Indigenous community members, but on what can be done to help save the greatest number of individual Indigenous languages. It is these diverse Indigenous languages that are each like a unique ancient library of Alexandria that is now burning.

2) This then leads to consideration of one of the greatest challenges for effectively redressing the crisis in Indigenous languages which is **the lack of awareness** of the issue. There is very little awareness that the Indigenous libraries of Alexandria are burning as we meet here at the U.N. The possibilities for addressing the crisis hinge on bringing visibility to the issue.

PROPOSED RESPONSE: Call for a U.N. International Year of Indigenous Languages. This would specifically highlight the beauty and challenges faced by our Indigenous languages. The unfortunate political reality is that a general celebration built around a broader notion of language diversity or world languages will only leave Indigenous languages on the outside with very little increase in public awareness.

¹² Analysis based on a graded intergenerational disruption scale (EGIDS) by Gary Simons and M. Paul Lewis, "The World's Languages in Crisis: A 20-year Update," in Responses to Language Endangerment, eds. Elena Mihás, Bernard Perley, Gabriel Rei-Doval and Kathleen Wheatley, Studies in Language Companion Series 142, Amsterdam: John Benjamins, pp. 3-19.

3) There is a lack of clear understanding of best practices and viable ways forward for addressing the deep global crisis for Indigenous languages.

PROPOSED RESPONSE: Call for a series of global conferences addressing these issues and disseminating education around best practices that would be a key part of the kick-off in the International Year of Indigenous Languages.

A clearing house for best practices that would be geared to the scales of language endangerment and status of the language community should be established and promoted.

4) The need for funding is almost overwhelming. Most foundations in the U.S., for example, will hardly touch the issue of Indigenous language revitalization. After more than a century of explicit cultural genocide hurled against our Indigenous languages that cost billions of dollars at today's rates, and yet, there is only pennies on the dollar being invested in helping us to reclaim the strength of our Indigenous languages.

PROPOSED RESPONSE: Establish and promote a global fund for supporting Indigenous languages with a level of visibility targeting that of, say, the World Wildlife Fund.

My strong recommendation would be to use the awarding of funding as an incentive to move language communities into more effective language revitalization practices that specifically focus on developing new fluent speakers within the Indigenous community.

Conclusion:

szOyaha nÔ'wAdAnA-A sôKA-A
(the language of the People of the Sun is still here)

achE'ne szOyahanAnô sôKAnAnô
(Because of this, we, the People of the Sun, we are still here)

n@nÔwûnlAnô!
(We must not give up!)

Ôk'ajU k'ala wahala KAêÔthlaTA!
(Together we can accomplish many things!)

KAdaTA
(that is enough)