While we are accustomed to discussing the situation of particular minority and indigenous communities in economic and political terms – their limited access to resources and opportunities, their lack of representation within national or local governments – the cultural dimensions are no less important. Indeed, the right to culture is central to the enjoyment of a whole host of other rights, from education and health to language and livelihoods. Without it, a fair and equitable life is impossible to achieve.

Free and full participation means the ability to engage in mainstream culture as well as the ability to maintain an identity that is distinct from it. This requires, simultaneously, a respect for equality and difference – principles that many states have failed to reconcile. Some states may amplify differences to stigmatize the communities in question. In either case, the end result is the silencing of marginalized communities and the atrophy of their unique traditions.

Even in contexts where the cultural rights of minorities and indigenous peoples are well established, their continued freedoms depend on a constant reaffirmation of tolerance, awareness and understanding between different groups. Nor is it simply the case that the struggle for the cultural rights of minorities and indigenous peoples is external – it is also reflected in the need to accommodate diverse and dissenting voices within their communities, particularly among women, in the interpretation and practice of their beliefs and customs. Otherwise, culture can become a tool of oppression rather than emancipation, with the rights of some members subordinated in the name of caste, religion or tradition. Where cultural practices violate human rights, the latter must take precedence, in line with international norms.

Though the definition of culture has been contested for decades, there is now widespread recognition that it underpins almost every area of life. Its repression, in turn, can devastate the health, dignity and well-being of minorities and indigenous peoples. This includes, to take some of the examples in this volume, the displacement of entire communities by state-led development projects, the inability of minority and indigenous children to learn their own language at school and official restrictions on diet or attire. For perpetrators of hate crime, too, cultural markers such as language or dress are often the primary focus of their attacks – a situation that may result in minorities and indigenous peoples being forced to conceal their identity.

Tragically, the active targeting of culture and the deep trauma this can inflict on communities has become more evident than ever with the recent rise of extremist groups, including the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham (ISIS). The destruction of shrines, monuments, manuscripts and other irreplaceable heritage belonging to religious minorities such as Christians, Kakai and Yezidis, as well as numerous Shi’a Muslim shrines, is part of a wider attempt to demoralize such communities and ultimately eradicate them permanently from the region. While efforts are at present concentrated on security, protection and humanitarian relief, it is essential that the eventual return and reintegration of displaced communities is accompanied by the restoration of their cultures and traditions.

Encouragingly, many minority and indigenous communities around the world are themselves drawing on their rich cultural traditions – often in vigorously new ways – to advocate for change. And many policy-makers, governments and international agencies are now focusing more attention on cultural rights, including those of minorities and indigenous peoples. However, we still have a long way to go. While violent extremists such as ISIS continue to generate publicity through their destructive acts, the erosion of minority and indigenous cultures persists elsewhere in other forms. In Europe, amid increased fears of terrorism and the impact of austerity, the resurgence of the far right has encouraged renewed assaults on minorities and their beliefs. In the United States, a country that has long celebrated the diversity of its population, the legacy of land loss and forcible assimilation continues to have a devastating impact on its indigenous peoples. The cultural vitality of minorities and indigenous peoples should therefore never be taken for granted, even in countries where their rights and protections appear to be well developed.

Nevertheless, while they continue to face bar-
riers to their cultural rights and freedoms, art, music, literature and other forms of creativity remain vital elements in minority and indigenous identities. In fact, though their ability to engage in these activities is frequently constrained by lack of resources or official restrictions, cultural expression has often served as a platform for marginalized communities to mobilize collectively for other rights. Cultural programmes are also a powerful way to engage with other groups and counter harmful stereotypes. And in those countries where minorities and indigenous peoples are able to practise their cultures freely, the benefits not only for their own communities but society as a whole are plain to see. Where different cultures are recognized and respected, life is richer for all.

Above: Two young Coptic Christians celebrate Sham El Nessim, a traditional festival, at a church in Egypt. Xinhua/Pan Chaoyue.