

*Human Rights, Afrocentrism and African Re-membering: Examining the Kurukan Fuga Charter
(Manden Charter)*

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**Human Rights, Afrocentrism and African Re-membering?: Examining the Kurukan Fuga
Charter (Manden Charter)**

Kariuki Muigua*

Abstract

This paper critically examines the Kurukan Fuga Charter (Manden Charter). The paper observes that the Manden Charter is a historic proclamation that has played a key role in shaping the human rights discourse both globally and in Africa. The paper discusses the salient provisions of the Manden Charter and their role in the protection of human rights. Due to its role in defining and protecting human rights, the paper observes that remembering and adhering to the values and principles of the Manden Charter is key towards achieving peace, justice and development. The paper discusses how the Manden Charter can be effectively remembered, protected and implemented towards protecting human rights for Sustainable Development.

1.0 Introduction

The pursuit of human rights is at the heart of Sustainable Development. Human rights refer to standards that recognize and protect the dignity of all human beings¹. In addition, human rights have also been described as basic entitlements and freedoms that belong to every person in the world, from birth until death². The United Nations correctly points out that human rights are inherent to all human beings, regardless of race, sex, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, or any other status³. It has been argued that human rights are central towards achieving Sustainable Development agenda since they are a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world⁴.

* PhD in Law (Nrb),SC, FCI Arb (Chartered Arbitrator),OGW, LL. B (Hons) Nrb, LL.M (Environmental Law) Nrb; Dip. In Law (KSL); FCPS (K); Dip. in Arbitration (UK); MKIM; Mediator; Consultant: Lead expert EIA/EA NEMA; BSI ISO/IEC 27001:2005 ISMS Lead Auditor/ Implementer; ESG Consultant; Advocate of the High Court of Kenya; Professor of Environmental Law and Conflict Management at the University of Nairobi, Faculty of Law; Member of the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) [May, 2026].

¹ United Nations Children's Fund., 'What are Human Rights?' Available at <https://www.unicef.org/child-rights-convention/what-are-human-rights> (Accessed on 18/05/2026)

² Equality and Human Rights Commission., 'What are Human Rights?' Available at <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/human-rights/what-are-human-rights> (Accessed on 18/05/2026)

³ United Nations., 'Human Rights' Available at <https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/human-rights> (Accessed on 18/05/2026)

⁴ United Nations Development Programme., 'Human Rights for Sustainable Development' Available at <https://www.undp.org/rolhr/publications/human-rights-sustainable-development> (Accessed on 18/05/2026)

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Efforts to codify human rights gained international support following the atrocities witnessed during the 2nd world war. It has been observed that in the aftermath of the 2nd world war, a series of declarations and covenants began to articulate universal human rights. For instance, the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)*⁵ was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948. UDHR represents the universal recognition that human rights and fundamental freedoms are inherent to all human beings, inalienable and equally applicable to everyone, and that every person is born free and equal in dignity and rights⁶. It stipulates fundamental human rights and freedoms to be universally protected and common standards for achievement of these rights for all people in every nation⁷. Further, in 1966 the United Nations General Assembly adopted the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)*⁸, and the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)*⁹, two major human right instruments. The UDHR, ICCPR and ICESCR are collectively known as the International Bill of Human Rights and set out global standards towards realising human rights for all without distinction¹⁰. In addition, at a continental level, the *African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights*¹¹ was adopted in 1981 towards promoting and protecting human rights and fundamental freedoms for the people of Africa.

Despite the progress made towards recognising human rights at the international and regional level in the 20th century, attempts to codify fundamental rights and freedoms have existed for many centuries. For example, the *Kurukan Fuga Charter (Manden Charter)*, is one of the oldest constitutions in the world which was adopted in the 13th century¹². The Manden Charter has been hailed as a historic charter that represents one of the earliest attempts by humanity to define and protect human rights¹³.

This paper critically examines the Kurukan Fuga Charter (Manden Charter). The paper observes that the Manden Charter is a historic proclamation that has played a key role in shaping the human rights discourse both globally and in Africa. The paper discusses the salient provisions of the Manden Charter and their

⁵ United Nations General Assembly. *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)*. New York: United Nations General Assembly, 1948

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Ibid

⁸ United Nations General Assembly, *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 999, p. 171, 16 December 1966

⁹ United Nations General Assembly, *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 993, p. 3, 16 December 1966

¹⁰ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights., 'International Bill of Human Rights' Available at <https://www.ohchr.org/en/what-are-human-rights/international-bill-human-rights> (Accessed on 18/04/2026)

¹¹ Organization of African Unity (OAU), *African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights ("Banjul Charter")*, CAB/LEG/67/3 rev. 5, 21 I.L.M. 58 (1982), 27 June 1981

¹² United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization., 'Manden Charter, proclaimed in Kurukan Fuga' Available at <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/manden-charter-proclaimed-in-kurukan-fuga-00290> (Accessed on 18/05/2026)

¹³ Ibid

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role in the protection of human rights. Due to its role in defining and protecting human rights, the paper observes that remembering and adhering to the values and principles of the Manden Charter is key towards achieving peace, justice and development. The paper discusses how the Manden Charter can be effectively remembered, protected and implemented towards protecting human rights for Sustainable Development.

2.0 The Kurukan Fuga Charter (Manden Charter), Human Rights and Afrocentrism

The Manden Charter has been identified as one of the oldest constitutions in the world, although mainly in oral form¹⁴. The Charter was issued by Sundiata Keita, founder of the Mali Empire, in the early 13th century following a major military victory¹⁵. It has been observed that the Manden Charter was proclaimed in order to ensure good relations between the various ethnic groups and peaceful coexistence among all people in the Mali Empire¹⁶.

The Manden Charter which was proclaimed in Kuruka Fuga in the form of an oath, comprises a preamble and seven chapters concerning the rules of behaviour governing public and family life¹⁷. It has been observed that the chapters of the Manden Charter focus on fostering mutual understanding and social peace among diverse ethnic and cultural groups who lived in the Mali Empire¹⁸. For instance, chapters one and two of the Manden Charter focus on the sanctity of human life and the prohibition of physical and mental torture¹⁹. Chapter three focuses on the role of education in the society and seeks to promote education within the family to in order to ensure respect for parents, the upkeep of family members and the virtuous upbringing of children²⁰. Chapter four on the other hand focuses on the integrity of the Mali Empire and the protection of the human person²¹. The Manden Charter also focuses on food security (chapter five), abolition of slave raiding (chapter six), and freedom of expression and enterprise (chapter seven)²².

¹⁴ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization., 'Manden Charter, proclaimed in Kurukan Fuga' Op Cit

¹⁵ Manden Charter: as early as the 13th century, the Mali Empire defined human rights., Available at <https://diplomatie.belgium.be/en/policy/policy-areas/highlighted/manden-charter-early-13th-century-mali-empire-defined-human-rights> (Accessed on 19/05/2026)

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization., 'Nomination for inscription on the Representative List in 2009 (Reference No. 00290): The Manden Charter, proclaimed in Kurukan Fuga' Available at <https://ich.unesco.org/doc/src/28118-EN.doc> (Accessed on 19/05/2026)

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Ibid

²² Ibid

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Despite the demise of the Mali Empire, it has been observed that the provisions of the Manden Charter and the rituals associated with it are still transmitted orally from father to son in a codified way within the Malinke clans²³. Further, commemorative annual ceremonies are held in order to keep the spirit of the Manden Charter alive²⁴. It has been observed that the Manden Charter continues to underlie the basis of the values of peace, love, unity, solidarity, integrity and identity of the populations concerned²⁵.

From the foregoing, it is evident that the Manden Charter represents one of the earliest attempts to recognise and uphold human rights. It has been described as an oral declaration of rights and law developed in the 13th century way before the current human rights discourse²⁶. The Manden Charter has been identified as a premodern example of a statement of human rights since it discusses and covers the rights of every person including enslaved people, children, and women²⁷. In addition to the rights of people, the Manden Charter also covers the rights of nature including trees, animals and ecosystems²⁸. The salient features of the Manden Charter including social peace, diversity, the inviolability of the human being, education, the integrity of the motherland, food security, the abolition of slavery, and environmental protection are some of the core provisions of both international and regional human right instruments²⁹.

The Manden Charter has therefore influenced the growth of human rights both globally and in Africa. It represents an Afrocentric approach towards the codification of human rights. It has been observed that the Charter contains aspects such as the right to life, individual freedom, equality, food security, social harmony within diversity, and freedom of expression and enterprise which have been embraced as fundamental rights and freedoms in the modern era³⁰. The Charter covers both individual and collective rights and duties which is in accordance with modern human right instruments³¹. Due to its significance and emphasis on individual and communal well-being and proactive social order, the Manden Charter has

²³ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization., 'Manden Charter, proclaimed in Kurukan Fuga'
Op Cit

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ The Manden Charter., Available at https://human.libretexts.org/Courses/The_Westminster_Schools/The_Manden_Charter (Accessed on 19/05/2026)

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization., 'Manden Charter, proclaimed in Kurukan Fuga'
Op Cit

³⁰ Manden Charter: as early as the 13th century, the Mali Empire defined human rights., Op Cit

³¹ Sidibe. F.M., 'Chapter 4 The Manden Charter: Initiatic oral sources at the foundation of an endogenous governance'
Available at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/387183085_Chapter_4_The_Manden_Charter_Initiativ_oral_sources_at_the_foundation_of_an_endogenous_governance (Accessed on 19/05/2026)

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been compared to the Magna Carter of Western Europe in terms of stipulating the fundamental rights and freedoms inherent for all persons³².

The significance of the Manden Charter has been recognised by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) which inscribed the Charter on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2009³³. This recognition demonstrates that the Manden Charter is still applicable in the modern era and consequently, there is need to live by its aspirations towards upholding human rights and dignity.

3.0 Conclusion

The recognition, respect and promotion of human rights is key towards achieving Sustainable Development. It has been observed that without recognition, respect, implementation, and protection of human rights, it is impossible to build just, inclusive, equal and prosperous societies as envisaged under the Sustainable Development agenda³⁴. By promoting human rights, it is possible to appreciate the dignity and value of each person towards achieving social stability, environmental balance, and economic prosperity as envisaged under the idea of Sustainable Development³⁵.

Despite the progress made towards codifying human rights at the international and regional levels in the 20th century, protection of human rights has been a fundamental agenda for many centuries. For example, the Manden Charter which was proclaimed in Kurukan Fuga in the 20th century represents an Afrocentric approach towards recognising and protecting fundamental rights and freedoms³⁶. The core provisions of the Manden Charter including social peace, diversity, the inviolability of the human being, education, the integrity of the motherland, food security, the abolition of slavery, and environmental protection are in accordance with the modern human rights agenda³⁷. The concept of human rights is therefore not a foreign agenda since it has existed in Africa for many centuries as evidenced by the Manden Charter³⁸. In particular, the Manden Charter takes a holistic view of human rights covering individual, communal and environmental

³² Kouroukan Fouga-Indigenous Constitution of Ancient Mali: The Mandem Charter., Available at https://ccaf.africa/books/The_Manden_Charter.pdf (Accessed on 19/05/2026)

³³ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization., 'Nomination for inscription on the Representative List in 2009 (Reference No. 00290): The Manden Charter, proclaimed in Kurukan Fuga' Op Cit

³⁴ United Nations Development Programme., 'Human Rights as a Foundation for Sustainable Development' Available at <https://www.undp.org/kazakhstan/blog/human-rights-foundation-sustainable-development> (Accessed on 19/05/2026)

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization., 'Manden Charter, proclaimed in Kurukan Fuga' Op Cit

³⁷ Ibid

³⁸ Sidibe. F.M., 'Chapter 4 The Manden Charter: Initiatic oral sources at the foundation of an endogenous governance' Op Cit

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rights³⁹. The inscription of the Manden Charter into the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2009 provides a basis for the recognition of its contribution to the human rights discourse⁴⁰.

It is therefore imperative to remember, value and live in accordance with the spirit of the Manden Charter in order to effectively promote and protect human rights for Sustainable Development.

³⁹ Kouroukan Fougá-Indigenous Constitution of Ancient Mali: The Mandem Charter., Op Cit

⁴⁰ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization., 'Nomination for inscription on the Representative List in 2009 (Reference No. 00290): The Manden Charter, proclaimed in Kurukan Fuga' Op Cit

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