

Reclaiming Indigenous Knowledge of Mafwe in a Post-colonial Namibian Curriculum

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ABSTRACT Using the Mafwe ethnic/cultural group as a test case, the situation in post-colonial Namibia can be interpreted to mean that as long as indigenous knowledge remains outside the official school curriculum, ideologically, 'power' continues to elude the people in the country which for over a century had been under the control of various Western colonial powers. It is suggested that there is an urgent need for Namibia to adopt a diverse culturally sensitive form of education which firmly embeds indigenous knowledge in the way the curriculum is conceptualised, designed and delivered. The study used methodologies such as conceptual analysis, oral traditions and phenomenological analysis. The overall findings in the study suggest the need for a comprehensive theory regarding how indigenous knowledge can become the bedrock and not merely an ancillary to a modern education in Namibia. The emphasis here is that learning about indigenous knowledge enables children and the communities they represent to feel authentic, respected and connected.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper the discourse focuses on the relevance of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) and its sustainable economic development among the Mafwe people of the Caprivi Region in Namibia. It argues that IKS among this group of people has been lost and relegated to the social and political doldrums of history due to Western education system. The main argument is that Western education system has not provided long – lasting solutions in the manner in which the Mafwe should preserve their IKS, but instead assisted in eroding it to such an extent that it is almost extinct. This discourse is in agreement with many African theorists today who believe that there is a grave risk and danger that much of indigenous knowledge is being lost and, along with it, valuable knowledge about ways of living sustainably both ecologically and socially. This observation is perhaps most real in Africa, where little interest is shown in its discourse nowadays. This orientation is brought about by the physical and psychological invasion which colonization brought about in many countries. As a result many communities now hold that indigenous knowledge is outdated and irrelevant in the current situation in terms of developmental issues affecting the world, as Nyathi (2005) argues that Africans embrace European "official knowledge" without a qualm and be-

cause of its influence, they have lost their "identity" and are now "confused".

The confusion has been brought about by what Lamb (1990) and Hochschild (1998) lament as mistreatment, misunderstanding and misreporting of the African continent over many years by colonizers who felt it was just a piece of land, occupied by worthless inhabitants. But contrary to this mentality is that Europeans when arriving in Africa, encountered indigenous states with their own cultural settings, which they disrupted (Chazan et al. 1992). Equally, during the colonial period (1885-1989) Namibians witnessed many years in which their lives were dehumanized by the German and South African colonial masters in keeping with the European racist arrogance (Moleah 1983). In reality with the interruption of the African education system, the Western education has led to a situation in which African children found themselves living in the Western and African worlds.

Notwithstanding this negative attitude towards IKS, many African elders and indigenous knowledge practitioners view it as *sine qua non* of imparting desirable values, attitudes and form a strong foundation of new knowledge acquisition (Burger 1990).

Background and Context

This discussion focuses on the IKS of the Mafwe of the Caprivi Region in Namibia. Locat-

ed in South West of the African continent, Namibia is a large, mostly desert country (825,418 sq. km) but with a small population of 2.1 million (World Fact Book 2012). It is a unitary state comprising 13 regions each under a governor now unilaterally appointed by the state president. Politically, it is the last country in Africa to break the bonds of colonialism when it demanded full independence from South Africa on 21st March 1990, following a 25 year (1965-1990) protracted liberation struggle led by the South West African People's Organisation (SWAPO) of Sam Nujoma (Bauer 2001; Jansen 1995; Pomuti et al. 1998; Saunders 2009; Simon 1994). Ethnically, the majority of the population (87.5%) is Black African, followed by people of mixed race or Coloureds (6.5%) and then Whites (6%). Indigenous Black Africans are clustered around a number of different tribal groups, many of which have also several sub-groups under them. The main tribal groups include: Owambo, Kavango, Herero, Himba, Damara, Nama, Topnaars, Rehoboth Basters, Caprivians, Bushmen (San) and Tswanas (Forrest 1994; Suzman 2002).

Since gaining independence the country has undertaken a comprehensive review of education to align teaching and learning with the ethos (that is access, equity, quality and democracy) and aspirations towards nation building in a new non-racial African state (Dahlstrom 1995; Fumanti 2006; Gonzales 2000; Lombard 2011; Tapscott 1993). An important task undertaken by the new Namibian government was to fast track educational access for the majority of the Black population whose education had been largely ignored over time by the combined influence of missionary/colonial regimes (that is German, British and South Africa) that had imposed themselves and their values on African tribal life in the country. As part of this change structural changes have been introduced such as compulsory schooling up to the end of primary education (i.e. from ages six to 16), introduction of free primary education, increased enrollment in teacher education and relevant curricular reforms (that is changes in pedagogy, material content and introduction of new subject disciplines) (Government of Namibia 2004; Harber 1993; Howard 2002; O'Sullivan 2001; Shemeikka 2000).

Conceptual Definitions

This discourse takes indigenous knowledge to mean what Burger (1993) defines as the local

knowledge that is unique to a particular culture or society. It is also known as local knowledge, folk knowledge, people's knowledge, traditional wisdom or traditional science. This knowledge is passed from generation to generation, usually by word of mouth and cultural rituals, and has been the basis for agriculture, food preparation, health care, education, conservation, moral values and the wide range of other activities that sustain a society and its environment in many parts of the world for many centuries. It cannot be disputed that indigenous people have a wide knowledge of the ecosystems in which they live and of ways of using natural resources sustainably.

The definition also includes what Gupta (2005) states as a way of knowing things which may be indigenous to a community or a culture, but other elements of other cultures may be assimilated over time. This knowledge is seen as indigenous because the meanings as well as the categories of sense making are generated internally within a cultural community. But Gupta (2005) cautions that indigenous knowledge may not be traditional in nature and not all aspects of indigenous knowledge are worth sustaining or preserving like the tragic and dishonourable practice of killing female fetus or newborn twins through local indigenous practices.

OBSERVATIONS

Indigenous Knowledge and the Environment

Dewes (1993) indicates that indigenous knowledge among the people in sub-Saharan Africa is vital to their survival while Barrow (1996) and Boffa (1999) concur that in sub-Saharan Africa, local people preserve some trees on farm fields because of benefits such as food, wood, fodder, medicine, climatic amelioration and boundary demarcation. Among the Mafwe community in the Caprivi Region of Namibia, it is equally true that the local communities always protect some trees like *mumaka*, *mungongo*, *mubuyu*, *muzauli* and many others as they are sources of food. Many other trees types have been preserved for ages because they are considered sacred or used for medicine. Among the *Kwanyama* of Namibia, the process of *olumana* ceremony is an important event where any fresh cut tree except *omutime* is used for pregnancy test by letting the suspected lady jump over it.

This test is conducted to test the virginity of the young lady who is about to get married. If the lady had lost virginity before marriage, she will fail to jump over the test tree. Using IKS the San and *Oshiwambo* people of Namibia both use sun rays as means of transmitting knowledge to the young ones. The *Owambo* elders will determine whether a young lady is pregnant when made to sit in the sun for reasonable length of time. This will manifest itself when the lady starts dozing and as she does the verdict is passed in the affirmative. In the case of the San, the reflection of the sun rays on the tar road can illustrate whether the owner of the foot prints was carrying a lighter or heavier load as compared to others.

In complementing the relevance of IKS, Burger (1993) believes that for indigenous people, the land is the source of life and a gift from the Creator that nourishes, supports and teaches them. Although indigenous peoples vary widely in their customs, culture, and impact on the land, all consider the Earth like a parent and revere it accordingly. They maintain that "Mother Earth" is the centre of the universe, the core of their culture, the origin of their identity as a people. They further contend that She connects them with their past (as the home of the ancestors), with the present (as provider of their material needs), and with the future (as the legacy they hold in trust for their children and grandchildren). In this way, indigenesness carries with it a sense of belonging to a place. At the heart of this deep bond is a perception, an awareness, that all of life, mountains, rivers, skies, animals, plants, insects, rocks, people are inseparably interconnected. In this way, material and spiritual worlds are woven together in one complex web, all living things imbued with a sacred meaning. Unfortunately this living sense of connectedness that grounds indigenous peoples in the soil has all but disappeared among city dwellers and as a result is the cause of much modern alienation and despair. In addition indigenous people work on body and mind together to help cure illness. Medicinal plants are used to treat the spiritual origins of disease as well as the physical symptoms. The vast knowledge of such plants is now beginning to be acknowledged by the rest of the world.

The Mafwe in the Caprivi Region and other Namibians recognize the importance of the physical world for their survival, by forbidding the young ones, to aimlessly cut some of the trees

in the forest, particularly fruit trees, because these are their source of food. They know that for trees to continue supplying them with food, the latter need care and life. According to them, trees do not only supply them with food and shelter, but also serve as medicines to heal their different ailments and therefore are supposed to be spared from aimless destruction.

Contrary to the colonizers' perception about African ways of living, the Mafwe could read the works of a supernatural being, and hence related the real or physical world to nature. The Mafwe taught their young ones many things about the physical world, particularly how to care for the flora and fauna in it. Above that, there were trees, which were sacred, which children were not allowed to touch or let alone play near them. For many years the secluded baobab and ant-hills hidden in trees were regarded as sacred among the Mafwe and children were not allowed to play under them. In the case of an ant-hill, they had a fable or riddle, '*masamu onse ala hunga, siluzumina ka hungi*,' meaning all trees can be shaken by the wind except the ant-hill. This implied the inflexibility of the ant-hill, which consequently meant no matter how strong the wind can be, it cannot shake the ant-hill. The saying was intended to scare the young ones from destroying or playing around it, and in the process conserving nature.

Knowledge, Knowing and Pedagogy

In African traditional societies, people's psychological connectedness and response to their cosmology (that is the physical environment, spiritual reality, human existence, and so on) has been the basis from which knowledge, as a philosophical entity, has emerged (Mbiti 1999). The Mafwe strongly believe that knowledge is derived from either real or perceived experience. Anyone who did not go through a particular experience or where the experience was not related to him/her will not know or have a personal knowledge of the experience hence the concept '*kulobone*' (that is grow and see or witness for yourself). The Mafwe used their knowledge to help them have an in-depth understanding of the world around them; become responsible people towards themselves and each other; develop a sense of unshakeable affiliation to the traditional group; respect for their gods and the power of their tribal leaders; become competent

to make moral decisions and solve moral dilemmas; have competent knowledge on certain skills. On such skills, respondents in this study noted that in the past the Mafwe had expert knowledge in the skills such as:

- ♦ *Kufura machinka* (skill in picking wild fruit)
- ♦ *Kutafuna mungabwa* (skill chewing a wild fruit)
- ♦ *Kufura maka* (skill in picking wild fruit)
- ♦ *Kuhika malyacizo* (skill in cooking a wild tuber)
- ♦ *Kutwa ngalangala* (skill in pounding wild cereal)
- ♦ *Kusa magoncela* (skill in digging wild tuber)
- ♦ *Kukoshaura maonde* (skill in cutting water lilies)
- ♦ *Kumina ntete* (skill in swallowing bitter taste wild fruit)

From the respondents' statements it is evident that the Mafwe traditional education was advanced in its own right. It also becomes clear that Whites were wrong to assume that the Mafwe had no activities which could be termed 'educational'. This research has unearthed many examples proving that before the arrival of Westerners the Mafwe already had an advanced 'education'. For example, activities such as *kanamundame* and *mulabalaba* enhanced reasoning, logic, mathematical calculations and the skills of numeracy. They also had a system of counting system developed particularly to count livestock, for example, numbers such as *ngoshile* (one), *kangala* (two), *kangala* (three), *mbuntamo* (four), *mbilimbwishwa* (five), *miyosho* (six), *chokange* (seven), *ngolilo* (eight), *mindule* (nine) and *kumi* (ten). This counting system bordered on holistic approach which saw objects as a whole – meaning that objects were counted in large numbers as per group.

The Mafwe also had a concept of time and a lunar calendar of thirteen months. They were able to tell differences and changes in seasons as demonstrated in names given to months of the year such as *Kuzyangure* (harvesting time as in April); *Kamwiana* (meaning a little warm in August); *Ndimbila* (meaning very hot as in September); *Nkumbulisa balimi* (meaning it will rain, hence time for ploughing as in October). Further, certain traditional games such as *kanamundame*, *mulabalaba*, *mayumbo* were known to improve the counting skills agility of the Mafwe youth.

Competing with and Losing to the Western 'Others'

In response to the specific issue regarding how Westernisation impacted Mafwe traditional culture, participants indicated that the people have had a raw deal, culturally, from their interaction with the Western 'others' (that is missionaries, settlers and colonial rulers). They noted that since the arrival of Westerners from the mid-1860s onwards and up to this day, Mafwe traditional culture and the means through which it was transmitted has been weakened, condemned and ultimately excluded from Western knowledge systems and modern-day educational institutions. The study argues that was the contempt which Westerners had for African culture in Namibia that, in the case of the Mafwe, their indigenous knowledge was 'invisible' in national life. The consequence of this was that there was no systematic means of capturing and storing rare and sensitive aspects of the culture, some which sadly the Mafwe have permanently lost.

In fact had it not been that the Mafwe had a vibrant *oral* culture, even the little of their culture that has remained to this today could have been lost because Western culture was hell-bent to erase what they considered as a 'pagan' and static knowledge system irrelevant to a Eurocentric vision of society (Abernethy 1969; Comaroff and Comaroff 1986). From respondents a number of issues were noted which show the extent to which Western education and influence impacted on the Mafwe traditional culture, which are summarised below:

- ♦ Minimized *zyalyi system* (communal eating system)
- ♦ Undermined *chiningamo* (evening gathering)
- ♦ Discouraged *entango* (traditional story telling time)
- ♦ Discarded *kashwi* (initiation)
- ♦ Underrated *kushakiwa* (courting)
- ♦ Discouraged *malobolo* (bride price)
- ♦ Altered *milaka* system (cattle posts)
- ♦ Undermined *njambi* (communal ploughing self-help)
- ♦ Prohibited *luwanga* (communal meat-eating place)
- ♦ Illegalised *mbelesa* (riding expedition)
- ♦ Led to the abandonment of *kanamundame*, *mulabalaba*, *kudoda* (traditional games)

In addition, the study also reveals that Western influence led to the abolition of certain traditional dances such as *chiyaya*, *chisongo*, *likulunga*, *tuwollowolo*, *muuba/njangula* and *tuðombyo* because such dances were perceived by Europeans to be barbaric and tilted towards superstition, which was against their Western religion and beliefs. It was thus unsurprising to hear sentiments from the respondents in the study lamenting about the onslaught of Westernisation on their culture

Respondents provided a rich array of viewpoints on corrective measures to be undertaken in ensuring that indigenous knowledge can, once again, be part of formal education. Respondents suggested that effective policies should be introduced to encourage the flourishing of a moral cultural in schools for Mafwe youth and other young Namibians. The respondents were sure that this would also help to teach Mafwe youth not to discriminate against others on the basis of race or tribal affiliation. They also felt that this would expose young people to moral behavior such as adhering to a good dress code, and avoiding vices and other immoral things that entrap the youth in modern times.

Further, respondents advocated the need for Namibia to introduce, first, cultural education as a compulsory subject for all learners in public education, and more importantly ensuring that indigenous knowledge is used as the key factor that underpins how the curriculum is developed (content) and delivered (pedagogy). Several examples and advantages of an African orientated curriculum were given. Respondents noted that if taught as part of cultural education, traditional dances had in fact curative effects as well. For example, besides providing entertainment in African communities, they claimed, though unsubstantiated, that Mafwe dances such as *pela*, *chiyaya*, *chisongo*, *chingubu* were known to lessen high blood pressure and also deal with stress. They also observed that time was ripe for education in Namibia to include the teaching traditional religions which for a long time had been condemned as heathen and completely left out in preference for Christianity as the main subject of study in school Religious Education (Hartman 2011). In doing so, they pointed out that people will have greater awareness and respect for traditional religion as the driving force which historically has united tribal communities and provided them with coherent and systemat-

ic structure that embodies a measure of African identity and belonging.

DISCUSSION

Crucially, the paper has challenged the Eurocentric assumptions and prejudices that it is only Western societies that have 'proper' knowledge worth of study. In other words, using the Mafwe as a test case, it has demonstrated the richness, viability and importance of African indigenous knowledge in Namibia. Clearly, the findings in the study suggest the need for a comprehensive theory regarding how indigenous knowledge can become the bedrock and not merely an ancillary to a modern education in Namibia. We must emphasize here that learning about indigenous knowledge enables children and the communities they represent to feel authentic, respected and connected.

Examining the evidence presented in this paper more critically, it is clear that the issue about knowledge is actually an issue about power. This is the point the Foucauldian theory, based on the work of Michel Foucault, an influential 20th Century French philosopher, is keen to emphasize regarding the relationship between power and knowledge and the implication of this on the social and political *functions* of education (Deacon 2006). For Foucault, power offers a strategic situation in a given society and power relations have a specific purpose to maintain social hierarchy through day to day activities of the individuals in the society (Foucault 1984; Foucault and Gordon 1980). Foucauldian theory sees power and knowledge as intertwined entities, and in this way power may limit what is acceptable to be known and in turn knowledge can develop as response and resistance to the limits set by power relations (Foucault 1982).

Foucauldian thinking on the nexus between power and knowledge when applied to the field of education informs us that formal schooling provides the structure which the state may use to regulate social conduct in practice. This is done when the state exercises its power by controlling and managing the schooling process which includes (but not exclusively) decisions about aims of education, nature of the curriculum and its material content, approval of particular textbooks for schools and how knowledge is evaluated (i.e. scholastic performance and assessment) (Apple and Aasen 2003). Thus, for

us the idiom 'knowledge is power' or inversely 'he who controls knowledge has power' underscores the power play that exists between those who create and control knowledge (that is the state/schools) and those who consume that knowledge (that is learners).

CONCLUSION

The main purpose of this paper was to argue for the necessity of an indigenous knowledge based curriculum for post-colonial Namibia. To that extent we have provided evidence of the nature of indigenous knowledge, the various ways this knowledge has been repressed in a Western political and social context and finally how such knowledge can be reclaimed in the contemporary Namibian educational framework. Given the background of education in Namibia where, as we have seen, African indigenous knowledge was condemned and marginalized, this situation gave Westerners (that is missionaries, colonialists and settlers) not only *political* but also *ideological* power. Putting this differently, for over a century African children were denied the opportunity to receive a kind of education which was relevant to and consistent with their cultural setting. And yet, rather disappointingly, even after independence in 1990 and despite some attempts to reform education, as we have earlier observed, the curriculum in Namibia has essentially remained Eurocentric. What this means is that sadly ideological power has not as yet completely been transferred to indigenous Africans in Namibia, similar to what Altbach (1977) has described as 'servitude of the mind'. Altbach makes the convincing point that in post-independent Africa, education serves the neo-colonial interests of the political elite who, instead of transforming education, have merely adjusted it to suit their needs as a weapon of power and social control in tune with a Eurocentric framework.

Evidently, in line with the Foucauldian dictum that *knowledge is power*, there is need for fundamental reforms in Namibia education so that, ideologically, power can be returned to the African masses. This is an important point to emphasise because the current format of education in Namibia has failed to address the specific needs of the African masses. This is also the point independent commentators are already making about the new Namibian basic educa-

tion implemented in 2010 (Engelhardt 2012; Hango 2012). Thus, it is small wonder that even before the new curriculum has 'cooled' its heels, there are already criticisms that it is not fit for purpose for example, that it lacks clarity on the language policy in education and if nothing is done schools will continue to use English as the 'official' language in education (that is in the lower primary grades 1-3 where this is intended). Respondents were also quick to point out that an indigenous based curriculum will help the Mafwe community and other tribal groups in Namibia to recapture and document traditional knowledge, which at the moment is the verge of being lost forever. Traditional science/medicine was one area where they feared vital knowledge may already be lost. They said that it is a known fact that traditional healers had knowledge to heal and cure some illnesses and yet since the advent of Western medicine this knowledge and those that posse it were condemned. Respondents wished to see the day when school children would be able to identify trees and other plants which traditionally the Mafwe used for medicine, and even better if they could be able to use this knowledge.

Given the country's previous political background under the control of apartheid South Africa in which discrimination against Black Africans was endemic, respondents felt that an indigenous based moral code of *Ubuntu* (an African moral code/philosophy that stresses the importance of community and not selfish self) would help heal the wounds of the past.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the context of further educational reform in the future there is need to acknowledge how perverse Eurocentric education has been to African education particularly as far as the curriculum is framed and how schools, perhaps unwittingly, are the conduit of information which promotes Western culture and the ideals it entails at the expense of African traditional culture. Educators, policymakers and educational technocrats need to make a conscious decision to nurture indigenous cultural knowledge by making fundamental changes to the curriculum and schooling (that is philosophy, pedagogy and practice) – only then will, *real* power return in the hands of indigenous communities.

If indeed further curriculum reform is to be undertaken soon, indigenous knowledge should feature prominently in that reform agenda. However, in pondering this development there are two questions that must be seriously considered: (a) How should indigenous communities in Namibia transform their traditional structures to enable them to adopt effective ways of capturing and storing their indigenous knowledge in such a way that it is accessible not only to themselves but to the wider society? (b) How should Namibia's modern education create spaces which not only incorporate indigenous knowledge but also one which guarantee that such knowledge will be respected within a common and multi-ethnic schooling experience?

Finally, in order to take the issue of indigenous knowledge as a central part of formal education forward, here are some recommendations. First, specific policies that address the issue of indigenous knowledge in education should be introduced. Such a policy will compel the government to commit itself and its resources in supporting ways in which indigenous knowledge can become the backbone of formal education. The policy will also ensure that indigenous knowledge is respected and promoted in the school system. Secondly, indigenous communities (that is traditional leaders, elders and other 'gate keepers' of indigenous knowledge) should be consulted in any future plans to make the national curriculum culturally sensitive and indigenous knowledge based. Third, the use of traditional languages should be encouraged throughout the education system not only for primary Grades 1-3, as is currently the case. Fourth, schools, teachers and textbook writers should be encouraged to use traditional pedagogies and languages. Fifth, where possible, indigenous leaders and elders should be used to offer in-puts in schools. Sixth and last, measures should be taken to indigenise post-secondary education, in particular, the curriculum of pre-service teacher education.

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