

[Re]vitalize Khoisan Art and Culture via a Community Outreach Initiative

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ABSTRACT During the last decade, community engagement has emerged as an important priority among many universities in South Africa. The concept of community engagement can be defined as the “collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity. The *rieldans* is one of the oldest forms of tradition, cultural and entertainment practices by the Khoisan as indigenous peoples of Southern Africa. This paper explores the impact of a community outreach project to [re]vitalize the *rieldans* as Khoisan cultural knowledge in which a community inquiry-based research approach is employed. Data were collected through oral history and focus group interviews. A way forward is plotted for the [re]vitalisation of Khoisan art and culture to advance indigenous knowledge in a democratic South Africa.

INTRODUCTION

I owe my being to the Khoi and the San whose desolate souls haunt the great expanses of the beautiful Cape – they who fell victim to the most merciless genocide our native land has ever seen, they who were the first to lose their lives in the struggle to defend our freedom and dependence ... (Mbeki 1996: 23)

Mbeki acknowledged, supported and advocated to preserve Khoisan traditions and cultural heritage in a democratic South Africa. This statement recognises the historical contribution of Khoisan traditions and culture as indigenous knowledge. These statements, and the subsequent adoption of the Bill and promulgation of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (South African Constitution 1996) later the same year, paved the way for robust debates at national, provincial and local levels of government and in civil society about the meaning of an *African-Khoisan*” in different spheres of society, including the cultural heritage sector.

Literature Review

Knowing and Traditional Values of Indigenous Peoples

Indigenous peoples throughout the world have sustained their unique worldviews and associated knowledge systems for millennia, even while undergoing major social upheavals as a result of

transformative forces beyond their control. Many of the core values, beliefs, and practices associated with those worldviews have survived and are beginning to be recognized as being just as valid for today’s generations as they were for generations past. The depth of indigenous knowledge rooted in the long inhabitation of a particular place offers lessons that can benefit everyone, from educator to scientist, as we search for a more satisfying and sustainable way to live on this planet (Bhola 2002). Actions currently being taken by indigenous people in communities throughout the world clearly demonstrate that a significant “paradigm shift” is under way in which indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing are recognized as constituting complex knowledge systems with an adaptive integrity of their own (Bhola 2002). As this shift evolves, indigenous people are not the only beneficiaries—the issues are of equal significance in non-indigenous contexts. Many problems manifested within conditions of marginalization have gravitated from the periphery to the centre of industrial societies, so that new (but old) insights emerging from indigenous societies are of equal benefit to the broader educational community. Over many generations, indigenous people have constructed their own ways of looking at and relating to the world, the universe, and to each other (Dei 2000). Their traditional education processes were carefully crafted around observing natural processes, adapting modes of survival, obtaining sustenance from the plant and animal

world, and using natural materials to make their tools and implements. All of this was made understandable through demonstration and observation accompanied by thoughtful stories in which the lessons were imbedded (Dei 2000; Lee et al. 2001). However, indigenous views of the world and approaches to education have been brought into jeopardy with the spread of Western values, social structures and institutionalized forms of cultural transmission. Over the past years, Korana, Nama, Khiosan and San Elders and educators from every cultural region in the Northern Cape and Namibia have sought to reconnect with their cultural traditions through a variety of initiatives aimed at making explicit their expectations for drawing upon their own ways in the upbringing of their children and grandchildren. For example, the following cultural values were drawn from several lists of values adopted by Nama, Korana, Khoisan and San Elders from each cultural region in the Northern Cape Province and Namibia to serve as the core values by the community.

Now, as a democratic country, South Africa is engaged in the unfolding process of bringing indigenous knowledge systems (IKSs) into focus as a legitimate field of academic enquiry in its own right. The researcher is born from a Nama family, then registered as Cape Malayan, then reclassified as Cape Coloured, then after 1994, democratically classified as Coloured but acknowledged an African-Khoisan. The researcher has attended several conferences and workshops nationally and internationally where debates and issues have become critical and intense regarding conceptual frameworks and methodological procedures relating to the IKS field. It is in the light of this that the researcher explores the Afrocentric-indigenous approach as an alternative method of studying IKSs, especially “Khoisan cultural knowledge”. To conclude, the above statement prompted the researcher to investigate why the *rieldans* is the oldest entertainment form used as a social, cultural and educational tool through a community engagement project to [re]vitalize Khoisan traditions and culture in South Africa. Emanating from this motivation, the Afrocentric paradigm which foreground this paper, explores African identity, and especially Khoisan tradition and cultural identity. This perspective of the African people, including Khoisan, as centred, located, oriented, and grounded in this philosophy. This idea has been coined as “Afrocentricity” by Molefe

Asante (1987, 1990) in order to convey the profound need for African people to be [re]located historically, economically, socially, politically, and philosophically. From a research point of view, Asante argues that Afrocentricity can have a significant impact upon the way African researchers view their identity, specifically considering the African people as centred, located, oriented, and grounded. The argument is that, for a millennium, Africans have been moved off social, political, philosophical, and economic agendas. Consequently it becomes necessary to examine all data from the standpoint of Africans as subjects and human agents rather than as objects in a European frame of reference. Of course, this means that Afrocentricity has implications for indigenous African culture. The Afrocentric method suggests cultural and social immersion, as opposed to scientific distance, as the best approach to understanding African phenomena (Asante 1995). The democratic government of South Africa provided new impetus and direction to the national discourse about culture, nation building and social cohesion. The main point of departure of the national government was to strive towards building a uniquely prosperous nation, conscious of its diverse heritage of peoples. Through these actions, the democratic government demonstrated real commitment to the spirit of Ubuntu. Ubuntu is a communal way of life which deems that society must be run for the sake of all, requiring cooperation as well as sharing and charity (Broodryk 2006). Therefore, Ubuntu is the quality of being human (Murithi 2006). Additionally, Ubuntu involves caring, sharing, respect, and compassion and ensures a happy and qualitative human community life in the spirit of family (Broodryk 2006).

Community Engagement

During the last decade, community engagement has emerged as an important priority among many universities in South Africa. The concept of community engagement can be define as the “collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity” (Carnegie 2006). As the Carnegie definition suggests, engagement differs from traditional conceptualizations of public service and outreach in important ways. Specifically, service and out-

reach are typically conceived as *one-way* approaches to delivering knowledge and service to the public, whereas engagement emphasizes a *two-way* approach in which institutions and community partners collaborate to develop and apply knowledge to address societal needs (Boyer 1996). Engagement has gained momentum over the past five years due to a number of important influences. As clear example is the Carnegie Foundation who created an elective classification system recognizing campuses by their commitment to community engagement via curricular and community partnerships (Carnegie 2006). In the South African context the rieldans project was officially launched by the *Afrikaanse Taalen Kultuurvereniging* (ATKV) as one of their cultural community projects. This ATKV Khoisan cultural project was a community outreach which creates a social value which impact on a specific community such as the Khoisan as indigenous people. Through this project positive social outcomes were achieved. These outcomes include private benefits such as improved overall Khoisan culture recognition by government and private business. According to Hatherell (2007), engagement referred to achieving mutually beneficial outcomes from university collaborations with external partners. According to Gillian (2002), an engaged university can better prepare students to meet life's challenges, implement new knowledge, and solve real problems faced by communities. Engaged universities can "advance knowledge while building community through collaboration" (Westney et al. 2006). The motivation for universities and colleges to engage with their communities might also be viewed from the perspective of what would happen if they did not become involved in this kind of relationship.

Purpose of the Study

This paper explores the impact of a community engagement project to [re]vitalize the riel as Khoisan cultural knowledge in which a community inquiry-based research approach is employed.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Paradigm

The purpose of this paper is to [re]vitalize Khoisan indigenous knowledge by showing ways in which the community inquiry-based paradigm

was used for researching indigenous culture (Mutema 2003; Mishler 1999).

Community Inquiry-based Design

The narrative-based and community-inquiry-based methods as research designs were used. Tutu (2004) identifies Ubuntu-based research with participative research paradigms by stating that "we are bound with others . . . in Ubuntu". Broodryk (2006) supports Tutu's view: The emphasis is on togetherness . . . as a cooperative and community we are heading for the same end result . . . we can share what we have, our thoughts included." Thus, among other things, Ubuntu implies empowering participants in research (that is, as social responsibility), and emphasises unity or consensus in decision making, and the processes that lead to decisions. Essentially, as a research philosophy, Ubuntu gives the research process a human face, as opposed to some top-down imposed research processes, and advocates humane collaboration with the participants and community, in respect of their spirituality, values, needs, norms, and mores. The researcher integrated tenets of Ubuntu, which were in accord with traditional Western evaluation methodology: (1) a respect for others; (2) an agreement on criteria; and (3) dialogue or "mutual exposure" of beliefs. Research methodologies, as understood from Mkabela and Luthuli (1997) and Reviere (2001) that were compatible with the three tenets of Ubuntu briefly explained below included: ethical considerations, action evaluation, interpretative approaches, case studies and discourse analysis.

Participants and Data-Collection Procedure

Three groups responded to my official invitation for the focus group 1, 2, and 3 (FG1 to FG3) interviews. Data were collected through oral history (story telling), field notes and focus group interviews. Interviews with the participants were conducted at different, agreed times (Bathmaker and Harnett 2010). The interviews were conducted in places where they felt comfortable and lasted from one to two hours. The interviews were first transcribed in detail and saved as original versions. To make the participants' narratives more visible and readable, the transcribed interviews were then rewritten as condensed and coherent stories. To ensure that

there were no major changes to the content of the refined participants' narratives, they were compared with the original transcript and the tapes from the interviews.

Ethical Considerations

Assurance was given to the participants that data collected was only research purpose. The researcher did obtain permission from the community leader and elders from the area to conduct evaluation (Mkabela and Luthuli 1997; Yin 2013), but also an ubuntu obligation to acknowledge the elderly, spiritual leaders, chiefs, and other forms of leadership around the community, including those who were not participants. Additionally, in view of oneness in ubuntu, seeking approval from elders and community leader increased the participants' participation because their local leadership blessed the evaluation, and therefore reduced tensions and improved power relations between participants and researcher (Giurchescu 2001; Mkabela and Luthuli 1997; Mkabela 2005). According to ubuntu ethical requirements, the researcher explained the purpose of the study. The researcher then explained the purpose of confidentiality to the participants.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data was analysed and themes emerged from *focus groups* (FG1 to FG3) narratives conducted that highlight the *rieldans* as the oldest and original entertainment form of dance in Khoisan culture.

***Rieldans* as a Community Engagement Project**

Asante (1995) points out that, "as a pan-African idea, Afrocentricity becomes the key to the proper education of children and the essence of an African cultural revival and, indeed, survival". Needless to say, this is exactly why the Khoisan people [re]vitalized and claimed their traditions and cultural heritage and acknowledged their legitimate stance to the current government and the world at large. The *rieldans* started in the early 1956 as a means to socialize and later it grows amongst as entertainment form at social events such as schools concerts in rural villages and towns in the Northern Cape Province. In 2000 it started as small initiative in the commu-

nity as a means for socialization at cultural events, marriages and other festival events. The *rieldans* as form of dance spread to the rural villages and towns dance by adults. In 2006 the *rieldans* was spearheaded by the current leader of the *rieldans* project and was officially launched by the *Afrikaanse Taal- en Kultuurvereniging* (ATKV) as one of their cultural community projects. It started out with only four groups who compete against it other. Eight years into project, the *rieldans* has grown remarkably from four small adult groups into several adult groups. The *rieldans* competition grew into more than fourteen adults groups and twelve youth groups competing for honors. This shows that the *rieldans* is a huge success story which has been grown remarkably amongst the youth in the rural villages and towns of the Northern Cape Province but also spread to other provinces such as the Eastern Cape and Western Cape. In each of the regions in participating provinces semi-finals is held. The regional category finalists compete in different group categories for honors. The official finals are held each year at the *Taalmonument* in the wine producing rural town of Paarl in the Western Cape Province. The ultimate youth and adults category winners are also exposed to participate at different arts and cultural events around South Africa. Arts and Cultural events such as the well known *Klein Karoo Nasionale Kunstefees* (Oudsthoorn), *Vryfees* (Bloemfontein), *Oppikoppie festival* (Potchefstroom), *Suidooster* (Southeaster) festival (Cape Town), *Whale watching festival* (Hermanus) and other arts and cultural festivals around South Africa.

The *Rieldans* a Real Arts and Culture Success Story

According to FG1 (focus group 1) the *rieldans* brought a new learning experience to them. They believe it could be used as an educational tool to eradicate poverty and promote community involvement. FG1 experienced the *rieldans* as a sense of belonging. FG2 (focus group 2) mentioned that the *rieldans* is an exciting community engagement project with great potential:

Our project is a runaway success so far and now more youth teams are involved especially the rural areas of the Northern and Eastern Cape provinces. What we experienced now, is that our youth is really part of this project. This project is moving and is still growing." One of the group

members' faces changed; a big smile appeared. He could not sit still. In his chair, he is like a child who is so excited to answer this one.

FG2 continued:

We are so excited about this project. We believe it is the excitement around the competition; the ultimate rieldans winner will be crowned. The trip to "Taalmonument" in Paarl for the participants and the media exposure are huge attraction.

According to the Afrocentric curriculum, researchers and scholars attempt to provide a framework for the reconstruction of African cultures and identities around the best morals, values, and cultural practices that both traditional and contemporary African societies have to offer (Asante 1987; Asante 1991). The *rieldans* community art and cultural project is the reconstruction of an original Khoisan cultural heritage. However, not all cultural practices of African societies are automatically to be considered "authentic," useful, and/or positive (Giddings 2001; Alivizatou 2011). Furthermore, African-centred curriculum researchers and scholars do not teach children about traditional African societies so that they might relive them (as if they were ever fixed or could ever be fixed).

[Re]vitalized Khoisan Tradition and Promote Culture Identity

The purpose of teaching about and re-appropriating aspects of traditional African societies is to construct a more correct version of African history and to reconstruct culture and identity to help African children solve their present and future problems (Alivizatou 2011; Giddings 2001). In this case, the *rieldans* as art and culture form must be [re]vitalized by its legitimate owners, the Khoisan people of a democracy South Africa. Giddings (2001), as well as Lee et al. (2001) contend that Afrocentric content must be infused into the school curriculum. The researcher argues for the advancement of the *rieldans* as an art form to [re]vitalize Khoisan cultural identity. The *rieldans* must also get the financial support from government regarding Khoisan cultural heritage to advance and preserve this art and culture form in a democratic South Africa. Most of the respondents believe that the focus being on the youth of the country. Moreover FG3 said they are happy and that the ultimate objective of the *rieldans*:

We want to see more rural youngsters involve in this ATKV arts and other cultural projects. You see of these youngsters have no formal training after matric [grade 12] and entrainment [sic] in their home townships non exist. Some of them hardly ever have the opportunity to go away[I mean to other big cities like Cape Town to see Table mountain]. This event gives the young people several opportunities to exposed them to change their lives for the better. Our goal is to help our children and decrease teenage pregnancies and alcohol abuse in our areas. What I can say, we are a proud people of the soil, we are true sons and daughters of South Africa. We believe we must also bring storytelling, art works, and drama of the Khoisan people. This project gives "voice to the voiceless". We must expand the vision.

The Rieldans Must be Advanced as Khoisan Culture Identity

Most of the respondent indicated for the *rieldans* as an art form and cultural treasures must be kept alive and preserve for generations to come. They also indicated more advocacy must be done. They believed that the indigenous knowledge is of great importance to the legitimate inhabitants of Southern African. The *rieldans* and the other cultural heritage such as the *Namastap* (Nama step) must get it rightful place and to be acknowledged by the democratic government of this country. The FG1 were very highly motivated and demanded their rightful place:

We believed from the onset that the rieldans and the Namastap of our people must get a rightful place on the South African cultural calendar. Why other cultural groups can claim their rights, why not us? We are a democracy! Lets us do the rieldans for the sake of humanity.

The respondents (FG1 to FG3) felt strongly that to advance and [re]vitalize Khoisan art and culture initiatives through the following ways:

- To provide financial support by the Ministry of Art and Culture to advance the *rieldans* as an art, drama and other cultural forms, especially in rural towns and villages;
- To establish partnerships with corporate business to invest in several *rieldans* seminars and workshops for school teachers and community-based interest groups and organizations;

- To provide bursaries to the youth to study for a degree in art and drama; in particular indigenous knowledge systems and
- To establish a trust fund to support other Khoisan projects in the near future.

CONCLUSION

Arising from the literature review, the Afrocentric approach is based on the principles of inclusivity, cultural specificity, critical awareness, committedness and political awareness. The purpose of this paper was achieved whereby participants echoed to [re]vitalize the *rieldans* and other art forms as Khoisan indigenous cultural knowledge. Most of respondents said that the *rieldans* as a community engagement initiative is a huge success story which has grown remarkably amongst the youth in the rural villages and towns. They argue for the advancement of the *rieldans* as an art form of the Khoisan cultural identity. This African-Khoisan cultural identity could be strengthened in future partnerships and collaborative efforts of government, private and corporate business and the community at large.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that more must be done to “support and safeguard” the *rieldans* as an indigenous artistic form which aimed at ensuring the viability of the intangible cultural heritage, including the identification, documentation, research, preservation, protection, promotion, enhancement, transmission, particularly through formal and non-formal education, as well as the revitalisation of the various aspects of such heritage. More lobby groups to advance Khoisan culture to preserve for future generations. Furthermore, it is recommended several ways to [re]vitalize Khoisan culture amongst communities in a democratic country radio talks, advocacy of the dance, more competitions for youth groups and develop a curriculum on the riel dance as an art and cultural form.

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