

Chapter 14

Critical Reflections on Selected Local Narratives of Contextual South African Indigenous Knowledge

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ABSTRACT

Every humanity has some form of indigeneity – whether conscious or unconscious. It behooves all humanity to redefine and reflect on its indigenous roots. Indigenous Knowledge (IK) has been termed in different ways. These include traditional, cultural, local, community knowledge, etc. All these are interlinked and imply that IK is a body of “knowledge” owned by local people in their specific communities and passed on from generation to generation. Therefore, IK is that knowledge which is known to a group of people or is embedded in a community. It could be rural or urban. The chapter aims to present and reflect on selected local narratives to construct a context. This chapter argues for the ‘contextual’ dimension when looking at IK. For the past eighteen years the researcher has worked with a number of practitioners and knowledge holders whose experience has shaped his understanding of the South African IK dialogues, debates, research and studies. The approach adopted for this study is a reflexive one.

BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

In 2004 the Indigenous Knowledge Systems of South Africa (IKSSA) Trust adopted the following definition for indigenous knowledge systems (IKS): *Indigenous Knowledge Systems emanating from the human spirit are life experiences organized and ordered into accumulated knowledge with the objective to utilize it to the quality of life and to create a liveable environment for both human and other forms of life*, making a strong case that the IKS are located in the context of utilitarian and creative force for the sake, or rather with the objective to ensure comprehensive well-being for both humans and other forms of life. Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) has been termed in different ways. These include

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-0833-5.ch014

traditional, cultural, local, community knowledge, etc. All these are interlinked and imply that IKS is a body of “knowledge” owned by local people in their specific communities and passed on from generation to generation. Indigenous knowledge systems are, therefore, that knowledge which is known to a group of people or is embedded in a community. It could be rural or urban. A considerable part of IKS is related to the survival of communities, in general or specific fields, such as protection and use of the local environment, enhancing food security, especially during periods of stress. Some of this knowledge brings pleasure, reinforces tradition and belief systems and gives a sense of belonging and relatedness.

The beginning of the IKS research and activism in South Africa started around 1994 initiated by the former Chairperson of the then Portfolio Committee for Arts, Culture, Language, Science and Technology, Mongane Wally Serote. The Committee then prioritised and drew debates and discussions on the importance of Indigenous Knowledge Systems. Part of this important history covers the following critical activities:

- Auditing of Indigenous Knowledge Systems then referred to as Indigenous Technologies that exist in communities. Targeted university and college students were tasked to perform this exciting task. These universities included the then University of the North, University of Venda for Technology and the University of Zululand. Arising from this was a repository of knowledge (data) that was produced.
- The first National Indigenous Knowledge Systems Workshop was held in South Africa at the then University of Mafikeng. The Workshop was attended by all key IKS stakeholders including: key IKS holders, practitioners and experts even students. This then resulted into a strong IKS knowledge-base and movement.
- Various research initiatives were introduced that included funding for specific IKS research initiatives. That then led to the founding of the National Research Foundation (NRF) IK Research Focus area with ring-fenced money.
- Later the focus was centred on initiating policy discussions and debates on the promotion and protection of the IKS in South Africa. The move paved a way for the Government’s institutionalisation of the IKS research and policy work by ‘housing’ this within the newly formed Department of Science and Technology under the National Indigenous Knowledge System Office (NIKSO).
- Various standardisation efforts were also embarked on and this included developing curricula for IKS training and development at tertiary levels. Also the models for recognising knowledge holders were thoroughly explored.

Indigenous knowledge work became the government business and many government departments started to embrace this notion in their work operations. This made the IKS movement and effort in South Africa central recognising the role IKS played in the democratisation processes leading to the founding of the modern democratic South African state. One cannot deny the role that the IKS played in normalising and consolidating democratic culture and character of the current South African democratic state. This does not eschew how IKS also played a role during the pre-imperial and during the revolutionary period in South Africa. Perhaps as a way of drawing some of these anecdotes to a close one can share interactions with Mme Grace Masuku, one of the IKS knowledge-holders, expert and practitioner, emphasized the fact that Indigenous Knowledge Systems live and sustain life in various communities. Also Mongane Wally Serote, once mentioned a very important Setswana proverb that could resonate in other (South) African communities: *Phokoje go tshela yo o dithetsenyana*, meaning ‘a jackal that survives is the one

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