

Chapter 25

Indigenous Knowledge Discourses in Africa: At the Intersection of Culture, Politics, and Information Science

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ABSTRACT

Since around the 1980s, the aspect of indigenous knowledge (IK) has attracted the attention of a number of experts, including culturists, politicians and information scientists. This has seen the mushrooming of literature on the subject matter from the afore-mentioned practitioners and specialists, with each discipline witnessing a certain “discourse”. This has also witnessed almost everyone in these disciplines glorifying African IK. Against this background, this chapter discusses the IK discourses in Africa, highlighting some of the significant trends and relationships among practitioners and scholars in the fields of culture, politics and information science that are driven by shared philosophies of IK. This paper is theoretical in nature and draws from the literature on IK to explain and demonstrate what the author calls the “IK discourses and “IK frenzy”, and explains the point of intersection by culturists, politicians and information science practitioners.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores the emerging discourses among the disciplines of culture, politics, particularly the politicisation of education, and information science. It goes on to establish the point of intersection among these disciplines to show how a “common discourse” towards IK emerged in Africa due to what this author considers the “IK frenzy” that has gripped the continent. In this discussion, the author is sensitive to the elusive nature of IK in terms of its definition and conceptualisation, despite this knowledge being acknowledged as a key factor in development. In the words of Ngulube and Onyancha (2011, p. 130) “despite the recognition of the importance the knowledge of traditional and indigenous communi-

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ties, there is limited agreement on its definition and conceptualisation” This chapter will not dwell on the definitions of IK as such definitions abound in the literature and its definitions and conceptualisation may constitute a chapter on its own. In terms of organisation, the chapter starts by giving a brief background which acts a foundation for the discussion. It then unfolds by discussing the crux of the matter, that is, the cultural, political and information science discourses of IK in Africa as reflected in the literature and research. The chapter proceeds by establishing the resultant “common discourse” among these three disciplines by explaining how these three intersect. Some examples from around Africa are used to illustrate these discourses and point of intersection. Noticing that education has been the major instrument that has been considered and used as the main tool for decolonising the African mind, with every writer writing so passionately about the need to challenge the prevailing scientism which is being considered as unAfrican, Western and Eurocentric and therefore, needs to be challenged with the view of substituting it with an Afro-centric education system, the chapter dwells much on aspects of education in the section on some reflections on the on-going frenzy in Africa. It challenges such calls and further questions the need to challenge scientism in lieu of IK. The author then suggests areas of further research that authors and researchers on African IK and their systems need to take into consideration while exploring these aspects, before wrapping up the chapter in the form of a conclusion.

BACKGROUND

Since around the 1980s, the aspect of indigenous knowledge (IK) has attracted the attention of information scientists, cultural experts as well as politicians among others. Indeed, as Mapira and Mazambara (2013, p.90) explained, the post-colonial era has witnessed a growing interest in the restoration of what they call “lost or dying IKS in Africa.” To cite the World Bank (2002, p. 1), “indigenous knowledge now appears to be a hot topic” In fact, IK, because of its ability to cut across disciplines, has been described by Ngulube and Onyancha (2011, p. 130) as being “cross-disciplinary, multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary and trans-disciplinary.” Thus, it depicts some kind of “a holistic way of life that may not be compartmentalised into one or two disciplines.” (Ngulube and Onyancha, 2011, p. 130). This has seen the mushrooming of literature, on the subject matter in Africa, from the afore-mentioned disciplines and others, with each discipline witnessing a specific “discourse”. Thus, there has been an emerging bias towards this IK in Africa, with almost some kind of a consensus on the presumed importance of this knowledge. To cite Viriri (2009):

A number of African countries that view indigenous knowledge as valuable for new biological and ecological insights, natural resource management, conservation education, protected areas, and environment assessment have made tremendous inroads in economic reforms, improving macro-economic management, liberalising markets and trade, and widening the space for private sector activity. (pp. 132-133)

Thus, there is a general agreement that IK is a valuable resource for socio-economic developments that will probably transform the African continent, although this commonly held view is yet to be confirmed. In the ensuing discussion, discourse will be taken to also include a trend or pattern that points to the emergence, definition or construction of a something- in this case IK as tackled and viewed through the lens of culture, politics and information science. Of interest as far as the discourses in IK are concerned is what the author calls the point of intersection amongst culture, politics and information science. The

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