

Reporting indigenous knowledge

The choices they deserve



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BY PRISCILLA BOSHOFF

A few days ago, an interesting article dealing with community development and education came close to being published in a national newspaper. But the editor tossed it back at the surprised journalist, and told him to write it again. Here are some excerpts:

Researchers here have recently been facilitating local people to rediscover traditional practices that have been lost through the processes of colonisation and changes in lifestyles. "We are very excited about the ways in which things are being discovered," said Samuel Mann, research facilitator at the project. "People are beginning to reclaim some of the ways of knowing that still have meaning and relevance to modern every day life. People are rediscovering the importance of Indigenous Knowledge."

Mba Ngcobo, one of the participants in the project, showed how he and other members of his community had built a grain pit using old traditional knowledge. "It works really well," he said, "it is amazing how these old ways really work. Our ancestors had marvellous ways of doing things. We can really appreciate the skills that are slowly being lost to us."

Mann explained how the traditional pit storage method produced carbon dioxide that keeps the grain fresh and insect-free for months. "Carbon dioxide storage is now the preferred way of many milling and storage companies to keep grain. It keeps grain fresh without having to resort to insecticides."

WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

What could be wrong with this? It uses voices from both participants and facilitator. The local community has a chance to explain to the wider public an important aspect of culture that has been given new life. The public is informed and everyone has learned something from the exercise. The facilitator does not claim to speak for the community. The participants in the project seem pleased. And we can say some wise things about how old practices really do have some scientific methods behind them. What

could the editor possibly be on about?

Perhaps it is necessary to take a few steps back and start again. Researchers have been working for several years now on formulating processes through which indigenous knowledge can be re-appropriated by local communities in a way that informs and enriches the everyday life of all South Africans.

"We must be careful when we define indigenous knowledge," says Rob O'Donoghue, lecturer in environmental education at Rhodes University in Grahamstown, South Africa. "It is what we could call 'cultural capital', the knowledge that we use to respond to and mobilise our society and environment as it changes around us. In a very meaningful way, it is a lifestyle choice."

It is easy for 'indigenous knowledge' to become stereotyped and marked as something quaint, and "out there", a curiosity, a thing that we might talk about in abstract terms, as having any practical validity, as lending quality and meaning to the choices we make everyday within our own particular context.

How else would we be able to describe the traditional grainpit? It is certainly curious, in the old-fashioned sense of marvellous and deserving of attention. Its mechanism is impressive, and beyond a doubt people must have known what they were doing when they built them; but where are we going to have the chance to use one, let alone build one?

What about the community? Why should they have to build a pit lined with grass and dung for grain storage? Wouldn't they prefer to have a more convenient and hygienic way of storing corn? Maybe they don't have electricity to control a large storage site – hey, that's terrible. Someone ought to do something about providing this community with the basics. This is a development issue!

THE IMPACT OF COLONISATION

It certainly is a development issue. Generations have undergone the painful and humiliating process of physical and mental colonisation.

Along with the appropriation of land and natural resources has come eradication of the ways of thought and meaning-making that went into constructing a world that worked for the communities that generated them.

The scientific rationalism of the coloniser, with no knowledge or care for how the local people understood and interacted with their social and environmental "habitus", was the need to destroy what they perceived to be "undeveloped", "barbaric" and "superstitious" behaviours so they could garner political control.

When they found a useful practice, it was explained away using empirical, positivist terms of scientific ideology, robbing the practice of its groundedness and meaning in the culture from which it came, effectively appropriating it for the scientific and technological use of the coloniser.

Take for example the problem of tsetse flies, carriers of the ancient enemy of cattle herders: sleeping sickness. Wild game are effectively immune. The flies stay with the game, hiding on their dark underbellies and in the shade of trees. When game and cattle come into contact, the flies infect the cattle.

In the days before restrictions on movement, land clearing and game hunting, Nguni cattle herders would drive away the big game from an area before moving their cattle in. This kept their animals out of the immediate range of the flies. But when the colonial government introduced laws that regulated how they thought the people "ought" to behave, protecting game, living in harmony with nature, there was a huge increase in the number of cases of the disease as the parasite-infested game returned to areas previously claimed by the herders.

The colonial government was not interested in the locals' explanation of what they did or had done to control the disease. They wanted to know why. Science and technology provided the answer – microscopic parasites. Scientists and institutions came to know more and better

ILLUSTRATIONS:
Di Martin

than those who were affected by the problem. Ways of knowing why superseded ways of knowing what to do. Moreover, communities were excluded from knowledge creation processes, and had to begin looking to outsiders to inform them how to deal with problems that affected them.

The challenge facing indigenous knowledge (IK) researchers now is how to work together with communities to try to bring out the hidden capital of cultural practice and reintroduce it as one of many ways in which people can choose to mobilise their world.

The government is also concerned about how to define and contain the "problem" of indigenous knowledge. In many parts of the world, it is felt that science and technology have failed to bring about poverty relief, to alleviate environmental degradation or to facilitate sustainable development. Now the trend is to consider local rural communities as having some understanding and communion with nature that the West has simply failed to grasp. Much of the hype centred around IK internationally is the idea that local peoples are repositories of ancient, valuable knowledge and skills that only need to be "discovered".

While it is true that many traditional farming techniques, soil conservation practices and ethno-veterinarian medicine have millennia of use to support the argument of sustainable coexistence with nature, it is perhaps more true that the utopian green stereotyping of indigenous communities only contributes to the burden of stereotypical impositions that continuously weigh down their fight to integrate daily life within wider society.

Lynette Masuku, a researcher in IK working for the National Parks Board in the KwaZulu Natal Province, South Africa, has some hard-hitting criticisms about the ways in which media have exploited stereotypical depictions of the San peoples.

"I think there needs to be a shift in mindset and less glorifying of the San as children of nature who need to be 'agh, shamed!'. They

should be treated as people who can chart their own destiny. Media need to be less romanticist and more direct about issues that are detrimental to the livelihoods of the San," said Masuku.

Other development researchers point to the way that poverty and the lure of foreign currency lead rural peoples to plunder their environment on behalf of local and overseas bioprospectors.

A recent case in the Grahamstown area of South Africa, reported in the *Daily Dispatch*, involved a local man removing thousands of indigenous plants, traditionally used as a natural remedy for various ailments, at the instigation of what is believed to be a French company. The trend is not confined to the hotly debated area of indigenous science and medicine. Foreign agents also "buy up" the performance rights of local musicians, effectively removing them from their local audiences.

THE STATE AND IK

The government is well aware of what is at stake in the indigenous knowledge arena. In today's global environment, protecting indigenous knowledge is as much a political act as an economic and ethical act. Encouraged by Unesco's efforts to bridge the gaps between mainstream society and smaller, local communities, government appointed a working group to come up with a policy to guide and direct the preservation and appreciation of South Africa's indigenous heritage.

The document, known as African Knowledge Systems (AKS) or Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), was unveiled by the Department of Arts, Science, Culture and Technology's recent Draft Policy Framework in March 2002. Entitled "Vision and goals for an IKS/AKS policy for South Africa", the draft concentrates on positioning IK policy as a proactive response to historical and social injustices and as an effort to protect the property rights of local communities.

The ideal outcome of the policy is to deepen public awareness about the value of IK. It

also seeks to establish a "cadre" of information documenters and retrievers, information users and information technology experts to retrieve, curate and facilitate the reappropriation of IK by and for African people.

AND THEN THERE'S THE MEDIA

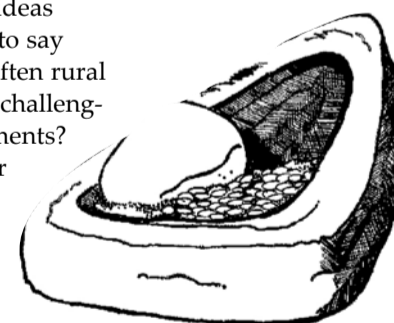
Even though the ideal outcome of the policy is to deepen public awareness of IK, the role of the media within this framework is seen as potentially negative. While it is taken for granted that historically the media has contributed to the erosion, stereotyping and mystification of African cultures, nowhere is it implied that they have a potential part to play in its revitalisation and meaningful integration within mainstream society.

The nub of the question comes down to, "Who are we (the media) to say what it is to be indigenous, what represents the indigenous?"

The constellation of notions and ideas involves such questions as: Who gets to say what about the ways in which local, often rural communities, choose to deal with the challenges of their social and natural environments? Whose voices do we hear? Do we hear the officials, the "experts" and educators, the locals themselves?

Moreover, how do we hear them? The "problem" with media coverage of indigenous knowledge developments is that they do not lend themselves to the news-capsule approach of most broadcasting and print media.

"Events", such as the building of the grain pit in the opening story, while lending themselves to the news formula, serve instead to entrench, rather than challenge, our view of local knowledge and practices as quaint or marvellous; they reinforce the insidious temptation to congratulate ourselves as "understanding" and somehow thereby contributing to the "survival"



of endangered ways of life. Most journalists deny that they, in any way, contribute to the propagation of stereotypes. They rightly desire being seen as just and fair and objective, and we would be churlish to doubt personal ideals and professional standards. A brief survey conducted by way of telephone interviews with journalists, editors and broadcast producers around the country, showed that respondents were adamant that they were guided by their own sensitivity and balanced judgement when investigating stories involving traditional culture, way of life or thought.

In the newsroom, however, they say it is a different story; how to compress what they know into three or four hundred words, and to sell the article to editors, and moreover, advertisers. As for the impact of media routines, some said they did not have an impact on the final report, while others mentioned routine as having a negative influence on quality. "Traditional knowledge has been overlooked in the past," said Sam Ngwenya, a reporter from the *Daily Dispatch*. "But there is a big market for it. People are hungry to hear about how things are changing."

Many African journalists who responded felt they had a special role to play in bringing out the "truth" from geographical and social areas that they understood by virtue of their own language and cultural background, but at the same time felt constrained by editorial policies and the marketability of the work they produce.

Respondents who work with stories arising from "traditional" culture or rural lifestyles felt that they had to be aware of public interest when they wrote their stories, and mentioned the need to come up with "relevant" and stimulating articles.

"At the moment stories about circumcision are very important," said Ngwenya. "I came from that tradition, from that kind of community. I have a particular interest in how the situation is resolved."

He added: "But at the same time I have to make sure that it fits in

with the paper's needs – when I do an article on circumcision, I know that it makes it easier for us to say to blanket manufacturers, "Come on, buy some advertising space here, it's good publicity'."

Staff trainers emphasised the need to get novice journalists to see through their backgrounds so they will be able to comment adequately on life in local cultures. A few editors said it is necessary to be aware of the demands that language and cultural understanding place on journalists, and the desirability of an empathetic understanding of the cultural context in which the story is embedded.

In-house training on race sensitivity is considered sufficient to overcome personal bias in reporting. However, some trainers felt that more needs to be done to help trainee journalists define newsworthiness of local culture. "I would treat a story about local cultural practices no differently than I would any other kind of story," said a journalist from an Eastern Cape newspaper. "The stories I do always get good space. I try to be culturally sensitive and I separate reports from my comments and opinions. But this is just what a good journalist should do – it should be a universal quality."

If we can take these statements at face value, it would seem then that the reporting on indigenous knowledge would receive as fair and comprehensive coverage as any other "typical" story about local development and community projects. But there are subtleties involved here that go beyond the gross distortions of racist or stereotypical reporting.

O'Donoghue explains: "The media cannot help but misrepresent indigenous knowledge. In a desire to give both sides of the story, they interview local people who will give their version of what they think, what they are doing. But all social beings have habits of mind in which the everyday and the taken-for-granted exist. Such schema unconsciously edit what is said, creating stumbling blocks for the listener who does not understand the deeper cultural meanings behind the words."

To avoid misunderstanding, local people are forced by media conventions to "explain" themselves; as bell hooks would say, the previously marginalised person is forced to come to the centre, to talk the coloniser's talk and show how this way of doing and thinking has a legitimate part to play in modern life, demanding the same respect and carrying an equal weight of meaning as any other choice of lifestyle.

For those people who choose to live in ways informed and mobilised by meanings other than purely materialistic western values, life becomes a continuous struggle to ward off attempts to reify and classify their cultural choices as somehow "other".

In the same way that government policy makes IK into a thing that can be protected, curated and legislated about, media style and audience expectations conspire to shape elements of IK into something that can be re-discovered, resurrected, rescued.

Yet O'Donoghue steers clear of labelling this process as a shameful and ironic attempt to breathe life once again into institutions that were knowingly and callously destroyed by whites and subsequently abandoned by blacks. Indigenous knowledge is not just something out there waiting to be retrieved and acted upon. It is impossible to recapture indigenous knowledge in its pristine form; rather, acknowledging that it is impossible to "put it back and make it whole", educationalists and community development researchers are using the process of re-discovering lost fragments of old wisdom and their affirming power, to inform and sustain collaborative community efforts to find balance and direction within a world seen to be increasingly at risk.

So, thinking back to that fictitious newspaper story that opened this discussion, where can the media find the answer to the double bind of voice and representation? Does it lie in making available public money to establish an effective and truly representative journalism that comes from the communities themselves?

Are the community radio stations and provisions for diversity in print and broadcasting enough? Do communities need to train representatives to speak for them through the media? Or, do media need to train journalists to be more expert in seeing and understanding the complexities of investigating and reporting on issues of indigenous knowledge?

And, how do we get to the point where IK advocates can reasonably expect members of all communities to believe that the benefits of making full use of the whole of the evolving cultural capital available to us will allow us to make better informed, and more realistic, choices in an increasingly challenging and changing world.

Illustrations by Di Martin of KZN Wildlife for the indigenous knowledge series, a project of the Wildlife and Environment Society of South Africa, published by Share-Net.

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