Editorial: African Indigenous Knowledge Systems (AIKS) in Mental Health, African Literature, and Education

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This special edition focuses on African Indigenous Knowledge Systems (AIKS) in Mental Health, African Literature, and Education. Although there is no single definition of IKS, there is a consensus that the term refers to the local knowledge that is used by communities as a basis for making decisions in a range of activities such as education, agriculture, health care, and food preparation (Warren 1991). Flavier *et al.* (1995: 479) define indigenous knowledge as 'the information base for a society, which facilitates communication and decision-making'. They also point out that 'indigenous information systems are dynamic, and are continually influenced by internal creativity and experimentation as well as by contact with external systems' (Flavier *et al*. 1995: 479). We are of the view that IKS is part of international or world knowledge, the exception being that it has been underdeveloped or marginalized, as a result of colonialism.

African indigenous knowledge systems take as their point of departure the experiential and epistemological frameworks of the peoples of the African continent, and those of African descent globally. It is important to note from the beginning that we are aware of the complexity of Africa, as espoused by scholars such as Zeleza, amongst others. Although Zeleza (2006: 14) is of the view that 'Africa is as much a reality as it is a construct whose boundaries … have shifted according to prevailing conceptions and configurations of global

racial identities and power' (Zeleza 2006:14), he concedes that the social invention of Africa does not mean that it is not real.

There has been a resurgence of interest in African indigenous knowledge systems as a resource for development and mental emancipation (e.g. Ramose 1999). Scholars such as Nabudere (2011) and Vilakazi (1991) have argued that the African university, and by extension, the education system in general, was profoundly and negatively affected by the interaction between the colonizer and the colonized, leading to the marginalization of African indigenous ways of knowing and being in the world (indigenous subjectivities). Although direct colonial rule has come to an end, the former colonizers continue to have a major impact on the former colonies, as far as knowledge construction is concerned. South American scholar, Quijano (2007), refers to this process as the coloniality of power. The term refers to the colonization of the imagination of the dominated peoples, the modes by means of which they produce knowledge, as well as their cultural images and artifacts.

The papers in this special edition reject the imposition of colonial forms of knowledge in fields such as mental health, African literature, and education. The papers critique the dominant, Western ways by means of which we relate to each other. Generally, the papers are critical of the Western European idea of individual rationality, the *cogito ergo sum.* This view, which is embedded in dominant Western philosophy, prizes the idea of individualism, what has been referred to as self-contained individualism, or alternatively, an atomistic view of the self, as a container of psychological attributes and emotions (Markus & Kitayama 1991). From this perspective, the self exists 'out there' and is separate from others. The papers, especially those that are devoted to issues of mental health, take as their point of departure, the understanding that individualism is not the dominant mode of relating with others and one's surroundings, in most of the world's cultures. Instead, these papers posit the idea that relationality, or interdependence, is an important component of what it means to be a person, in most indigenous societies. Being, therefore, is not static (see Baloyi & Ramose, this edition). Rather, it is an ongoing process by means of which we engage with other human beings and our surroundings. Many of the authors in this edition refer to the idea of Umuntu/Ubuntu (Nguni) or, Motho/Botho (Sotho/Tswana). Although the direct translation of the word 'Umuntu' means human beings, the authors argue that the word refers to something beyond the mere existent; it is meant to capture the range of social and ethical attributes that are considered to be the

quintessence of being human. Hence the saying, *Umuntu Ngumuntu Ngabantu,* or *Motho ke Motho ka Batho,* roughly translated as, 'a human being is a human being because of other human beings'.

Embedded in the idea of being human, therefore, is the ethical and moral imperative to recognize other human beings, without whom, self-understanding is almost inconceivable, from an African indigenous world view, that is. This is one of the primary pre-suppositions of African indigenous knowledge systems. By extension, this points towards the complementarity of knowledge systems, that no knowledge system can be complete, if it continues to turn a deaf ear to the knowledges and experiential realities of others. Complementarity, the quest for the mutual co-existence of what may seem to be incompatible ideas, is another key feature of AIKS. In Nguni languages, the word *ububini/ububili* (twin-ness), meaning that nothing is complete while it is standing on its own, captures this understanding.

Ramose (1999) and Nabudere (2011) have argued that no knowledge system is, *a priori* superior to other knowledge traditions. Nabudere aptly captures this understanding using a Bantu (Kiganda) saying, *amagesi sigomu* which, roughly, means that no one (culture) owns the exclusive right to produce knowledge. The quest to develop AIKS, therefore, does not amount to a wholesale rejection of other knowledge traditions. Rather, it is a vindication that all forms of knowledge are based on epistemological assumptions concerning the nature of knowledge, what it means to be a knower, as well the relationship between the knower and the subject of his or her knowledge. Holism, the quest to establish affinities, even between contradictory points of view, is the hallmark of African indigenous knowledge systems. Kolawole (1997) refers to a Yoruba proverb, which state that there is no absolute way of knowing, to illustrate this point. In the African worldview, opines Kolawole (1997: 35):

> The world is conceived as a negotiation of values, as a continuum, an intersection between the past, the present, and the future. The world is conceived as a negotiation of diverse convictions and so heteroglosia is more valid to any African thoughts as opposed to monovocality. No wonder the market in most traditional African settings is an open place, a space characterized by active dialogues and negotiation. It is also a place characterized by fluid boundaries as each person's space is not rigidly divided but the borders of one woman's space marks the

beginning of another with hardly any fixed dividing walls. The numerous points of entry and exit make room for everyone to confirm the Yoruba belief that there are diversities of routes into the market place.

From the above discussion, it can be deduced that plurivocality, as opposed to monovocality, is an important aspect of AIKS. De Sousa Santos (2014), in his book, *Ecologies of the South*, refers to the struggle to recognize alternative voices as the quest for global cognitive justice. This is by no means a neutral struggle. In defence of the need to interrogate different epistemologies, De Sousa Santos argues that 'at the core of ecologies of knowledge is the idea that different types of knowledge are incomplete in different ways and that raising the consciousness of such reciprocal incompleteness (rather than looking for completeness) will be a precondition for achieving cognitive justice' (De Sousa Santos 2014: 212). By the same token, the argument advancing AIKS is by no means an indication that it is a complete system of knowledge. Indeed, this would be contrary to one of the key philosophical underpinnings of African indigenous societies, that of motion (becoming). Ramose (1999:51), captures this understanding very well in his book, *African Philosophy through Ubuntu*. He argues that '*umuntu* (human being) is the specific entity which continues to conduct an inquiry into experience, knowledge and truth. This is an activity rather than an act. *It is an ongoing process impossible to stop. On this reasoning, ubu may be regarded as be-ing becoming and this evidently implies the idea of motion*' (emphasis added).

The first group of papers in this edition are concerned with African indigenous healing traditions. The thrust of the authors' arguments is that healing in African indigenous thought is not concerned with the individual *per se*, but the system as a whole. This is in line with the wholistic, African indigenous worldview, which does not draw radical distinctions between the mind and the body, matter and non-matter, and the living (life) and the deceased (death). The authors argue that healing should take into account African indigenous epistemologies and metaphysics (theory about the nature of humans and the world in which we live), axiologies (value systems) and ontology (the nature of being). The papers argue that life does not end with physical death. Rather, being human entails a series of transformations from one state of being to another, leading to ancestorhood and unity with the

Divine, *Umvelinqangi*. Human beings, like other categories of existence, are ultimately One with the Creator, in whose life force they participate. Indigenous diviners have the ability to access this energy or life force, in order to use it for healing purposes. Spirituality is, therefore, an important aspect of healing, as is the need to maintain the balance of life forces. Illness results from the disruption of the equilibrium of life forces. The equilibrium can be restored by means of ritual and other processes, leading to good health (Mkhize 2008). The papers are in agreement that healing should indeed take into account the illness explanatory models of the peoples concerned.

The first paper, by Baloyi and Ramose, conceptualizes psychology from an African experience and worldview. The authors argue that African experiences should be taken into account, in developing knowledge. They urge scholars to move away from the limited Western conceptualizations of psychology by interrogating ideas and concepts of a psychological nature, that are embedded in African indigenous languages. Through an analysis of African indigenous concepts, the authors conclude that the concept of *Moya* (Spirit) is the foundation of an African indigenous approach to psychology. They argue that universities should incorporate this concept in teaching psychology and psychotherapy. The second paper by Nobles *et al*. continues on this theme. They argue that the concept of *Sakhu* (Sah koo) should serve as a basis for the examination of African psychology/African-centred psychology as praxis and application of indigenous knowledge systems. The term *Sakhu* refers to the process of understanding, examining, and explicating the meaning, nature and functioning of being human for African people, by conducting a profound, penetrating process of 'illuminating the human spirit or essence', as well as all human spirit and phenomena. The illumination of the spirit (Skh Dir) requires us to undertake a comprehensive analysis of what it means to be a person, from an indigenous African point of view, and this requires us to interrogate the language and logic of African people. It is only then that we can gain insight into the functioning of contemporary African peoples continentally and in the diaspora. The link between *UbuNtu,* African language and logic, epistemic justice, and indigenous knowledge systems, is central to an understanding of African existence and being, the authors argue.

In his paper, Ramose notes that, from time immemorial, African peoples have associated bodily and spiritual healing to their relationship with the living-dead. Hence communication between the living and the living-dead has always been vital. Ramose's essay examines the epistemological and

cultural tension between the bones (African diviner's diagnostic tools) and the stethoscope (diagnostic tool of western medicine). The tention between the bones and the stethoscope ensues from different and contending paradigms of healing, none of which has prior and unquestionable superiority over the other, argues Ramose. The paper is prensented deliberately in narrative form, to challenge the view that there is only one way of knowing, that represented by 'science'.

While the first three papers lay the theoretical and philosophical foundations of AIKS, the next set of papers as well as the last one, are concerned with interventions and empirical issues.

Chitindingu and Mkhize explored black African qualified and intern psychologists' experiences of academic and social inclusion during their professional training. They also investigated how and if indigenous knowledge systems were part of the curriculum of professional psychological training, as well as the group dynamics during training. They found that the participants were not exposed to African indigenous knowledge systems during their training, and this made it difficult for them to translate their training to their practices with black African communities. The participants experienced social exclusion during training. The authors argue that the incorporation of IKS into the curriculum should proceed from a wholistic approach, which will take into account the historic contribution of the peoples of Africa, to world knowledge. Mutambara *et al*. conducted a qualitative study in order to understand the meanings that patients with cervical cancer give to their illness as well as their perception of non-medical causes of the condition. The women understood cancer as an opportunity to strengthen their relationship with God, and as an opportunity to make things right in the present. The perceived causes of the illness, as explained by the women, revolved around witchcraft and contamination by evil forces. The study concludes by offering recommend-dations for counselling and psychotherapy with cervical cancer patients in Zimbabwe

Bomoyi and Mkhize explored how a tertiary institution in South Africa was responding to the mental health needs of students from traditional African backgrounds. They explored the unique contribution of a traditional healing service that was made available to students who desired to consult with a *sangoma* (diviner). The participants regarded the traditional healer as a useful member of an interdisciplinary, mental health team. Her primary role was to identify the spiritual causes of illness, and to treat identity issues, arising from

being born out of wedlock. The authors provide recommendations to address the logistic and ethical challenges, associated with the practice of traditional healing, in spaces that were meant for western forms of psychotherapy.

Spirit possession is another common feature of and way of knowing in African indigenous knowledge systems. The paper by Vambe, marks the transition between the first set of articles, primarily concerned with African healing systems, to the second group of articles, which are based on the analysis of African indigenous, written and oral texts. Vambe analyzed the spiritual voices of dead guerrillas as published narratives contained in the book, *Ndangariro dzeHondo dzeVachakabvu muZimbabwe* or *Reflections on War by the Dead in Zimbabwe.* The main objective of the article is to explore what happens when oral stories drawn from the context of spirit possession are fixed as written narratives. The author also explored the agency of spirit possession in identifying the remains of dead guerrillas for decent reburials. The article argues that the modernity of spirit possession is that it asserts the presence of the departed in human life and that the possessed speak the language of national reconciliation, attack greed, corruption and bemoan the shrinking democratic spaces of freedom in Zimbabwe. The article asserts that spiritual voices in spirit possession mark the existence of an indigenous knowledge system that can generate political narratives, which can be used to counter and alter officially-sanctioned monolithic narratives of war and peace.

Occult imaginaries have remained a constant feature in numerous publications ever since the nascent period of isiZulu literary tradition. According to Mhlambi, occult imaginaries not only provide us with rare insights into complex entanglements of socio-economic transformations in the African society, but also the political and economic anomies, particularly of post-colonial Africa, and how these anomies derive their articulations from Africa's entanglements with the uncertainties produced by global capitalism. Mhlambi draws from the anthropology of witchcraft to explore the 'modernity of witchcraft' in contemporary South Africa as explored in Zulu fiction.

The use of foreign versus local languages for the purposes of education has been another hotly debated issue regarding African IKS (Mkhize & Ndimande-Hlongwa 2014). Mtyende's paper explores the extent to which the use of transliterated proverbs in African writing contributes to the rekindling of African value systems as well as the affirmation of African indigenous knowledge systems. He confines his analysis to two texts, Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* and Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*.

He argues that the two texts project African worldviews in a manner that can contribute to the current debate on the 'decolonisation of education' in South Africa as they negate the subordination of African values and cultures. The author argues that African literary works contribute significantly to African indigenous knowledge systems. He concludes that writing in European languages led to the transliteration (as opposed to translation) of African speech acts. The main objective of transliteration, in Anglophone African literature, was to leave an African footprint on the English language. This 'imprinting' of Africanity in African literatures, argues the author, is more poignantly manifested in the employment of proverbs.

Zungu explored the relationship between how women are portrayed in selected Zulu proverbs, and gender oppression. She argues that in most African societies language reflects the subordination of women to men, and the respect they must show to men and their elders. She discusses a number of proverbs to show that Zulu society perceives men as intelligent in conflict resolution and skilled in societal disputes. There is a perception, on the other hand, that African women have to behave in a manner which makes them eligible for marriage. They have to show respect to their elders while at home, and respect their in-laws when they are married. The paper argues that, although Zulu culture has not remained static over time, the perception persists that women need to be groomed to be nurturers and protectors of their families. Men, on the other hand, are portrayed as intelligent problem solvers and are further warned against weakness in their dealings with women. The paper contributes to the much-needed debate on understandings of gender relationships in African indigenous thought.

The next two papers are concerned with African indigenous education. Kahyana's paper examines the depiction of African indigenous formal and informal education and instruction in Akiki K. Nyabongo's novel, *Africa Answers Back*, and how his African characters try to protect the norms, customs and beliefs they have learnt from their elders, at a time when they are threatened by the activities of European missionaries. The author examines how Nyabongo portrays the threats, mostly through confrontations between his main character, Mujungu (the Chief's son and heir apparent) and Reverend Jeremiah Randolph Hubert (the missionary who propagates Western notions with the aim of destroying African indigenous ones). The author concludes that, while Nyabongo sees Western education as a threat to the survival of African indigenous education, as well as the norms, customs and beliefs it

passes from one generation to another, at the same time, he presents this hallmark of Western culture as having something positive that African people need to acquire in order to improve their living standards, that is to say, Western medicine.

The paper by Sithole, explores what can be learnt and gleaned from indigenous technologies that add to the theoretical conception of African Indigenous Knowledge in general and indigenous Physics in particular. Using a descriptive research design, the study illustrates how African Physics based knowledge can be incorporated into conventional physics in order to enhance African students' appreciation of physics. The author argues that Physics has always been generated in order to solve societal and natural challenges like weather changes, shelter, communication, food and diseases. He shows that African societies had and still have Physics concepts, which resemble formal school Physics. Therefore, it makes sense to use the existing African physics to develop the conventional concepts. The study suggests that Physics learners can apply their prior African related physics knowledge in order to reduce the seemingly mystifying nature of conceptualization of physics concepts, as experienced by some learners.

The last paper by Jackson reports on a study that used a group intervention, based on Nobles' (1986) seminal work on 'path of life development', to address the violence that impacts on the social fabric of Black society and young African-American men. He proposes an African-centred organization of mixed media, as a component of the intervention, to address the lingering psychological effects of chattel slavery. He is of the view that Black identity and African consciousness has been corrupted and distorted by what he terms 'memetic infection' and its outgrowth, the 'Three-Headed Dragon'—depression, frustration tolerance, and anger. He further argues that the spiritual psyche of Black youth worldwide has been killed by the falsification of their historical reality. Although the results of the mixed media intervention are not statistically significant, perhaps due to the small sample size, the qualitative findings shed some light into the impact of negative media images on the psyche of Black youth.

Conclusion

The papers in this special edition contribute to our understanding of African indigenous knowledge systems in mental health, African literature, and

education. They also point towards an urgent need to engage critically with the knowledge-power matrix (Quijano 2007) and to introduce new epistemologies and worldviews into our curricula. This calls for an inclusive paradigm that not only recognizes the Other, with whom one needs to engage with on an equal basis (Nabudere 2011), but also the understanding that there are diverse ways to the market place, as Olawole (1997) teaches us. We hereby conclude by calling for an interdisciplinary approach towards the study of African indigenous knowledge systems, as it is evident that AIKS cannot be meaningfully pursued while one is located within one discipline. African universities and African communities in general have a major role to play in developing AIKS so that it becomes part and parcel of global world knowledge. Although AIKS is part of the global dialogue on what constitutes international knowledge, in the first instance, it needs to be salvaged from marginalization, so that it can enter the dialogue about universal knowledge, as an equal partner.

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