Keynote Addresses

The Role of African Intellectuals in the
Reconstruction of the African Social Fabric
(The Quest for Nation Building)[1]

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I want to begin this presentation by telling a story.

A farmer in the northern part of South Africa, the Limpopo Province had five baboons (*die Pavians*). He trained these baboons to do daily routine activities on the farm. Part of this routine included bringing their plates for breakfast at 08h00 in the morning and jars for morula drink at 17h00 in the afternoon. These routine activities were mastered by the baboons (*die Pavians*). One day, the farmer was called for a meeting of the district council, which meant that he had to leave the farm for a number of days. At that stage, his wife was invited for a women's conference in Tshwane. She was responsible for self help projects done by women in the area of Blaauwberg. The farmer's meeting was so important that he could not afford to miss it. It had much to do with future developments on his farm and his farming relationship with the government. He thought to himself, 'Who will help me with the daily running of the farm?' It became apparent that there was no one to look after his farm in his absence. Then he thought, 'Juju, my dear and intelligent baboon, is my last

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resort. Why did I not think about this before? I will put my instruction on paper, clear instructions that can easily be followed. Then progress on my farm would not be hampered. Life will continue as usual'.

Subsequently, the farmer summoned Juju the baboon and put forward his proposition. Juju was happy that his master took him so seriously. The farmer left the next day, satisfied that the farm was left in the capable hands of Juju—*der Pavian*. Juju was indeed capable. He ran the farm as if it were his own. The only snag was with the feeding process—four of the five baboons respected their feeding times and that made Juju to praise his leadership abilities. However, he wanted to know the whereabouts of the fifth baboon.

Juju questioned the other baboons but could not find an answer. This unsettled Juju as he was expected to report to his master about the whereabouts of the fifth (missing) baboon. Days passed without the appearance of the supposed missing baboon. Finally the farmer returned from his journey.

The farmer was happy that the farm was well looked after. The report back from Juju to the farmer was impressive. In the end the farmer asked why Juju did not look happy at all. Juju explained, 'I do not know how to tell you what happened to the fifth baboon. All four baboons respected the times for feeding and co-operated but I have not seen the fifth baboon. I am worried as this is the one negative thing about my task. I do not want to see it tarnishing my good work', Juju sighed, followed by a deep breath. The farmer realised Juju's predicament. He brought a mirror and said, 'Juju, come and see'. Juju looked at the mirror and began to realise who he truly was—*der Pavian*. His absence was found (*Anwesenheit von Abwesenheit*). Here ends *die Fabel*.

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Foreign Knowledge
Ki-Zerbo (1994:36) is right to warn that:

> It serves no purpose to have African academics living like home-grown clones of foreign technical aid personnel, the kind of a person ordinary people cannot identify with. Of course we must beware of unthinking conformity and self-serving populist poses. The goal is to get together with those groups most likely to act for the benefit of the majority, since the aim of social integration is the reduction of exploitation.

The discourse on African intellectuals raises a number of challenges. It becomes cumbersome when the topic is perceived from the point of view of nation building—to be precise, African nation building or reconstruction. A number of issues immediately stem from this.

Firstly, the language used by these intellectuals usually belongs to the coloniser. In other words, it belongs to 'a universalistic framework that threaten[s] dominant local interest, [and makes] the hostility of the local authorities even sharper' (Ki-Zerbo 1994:30).

Secondly, it relates to the diverse nature of their category. The challenge is to locate African intellectuals in terms of their practice in African communities.

Lastly, the *lack of intellectual identity* in various African communities needs to be explored as to its conditions of (im)possibility.

This presentation attempts to look at the possible role African intellectuals could play in 'nation building' or, rather, the 'reconstruction' of Africa. The presentation refers to the two discourses, namely *Abwesenheit von Anwesenheit* versus *Anwesenheit von Abwesenheit*. It argues for the reclamation of the African intellectuality for African social responsibility (Ki-Zerbo 1994:36; Mamdani 1999:131). The non reclamation of the African intellectuality could further establish and legitimise the neo-colonial knowledge power. The presentation acknowledges the fact that some African intellectuals even 'function as powerful officials in charge of technical areas related to their qualifications, while others take on highly ideological posts' (Ki-Zerbo 1994:32). The author draws references from his South African experience in terms of research capacity development in Higher Education institutions and some national South African research institutions like the National Research Foundation (NRF).

The above *Fabel* on five *Pavians* was used as an entrée into this important discussion on African intellectuals. It shows how often African intellectuals ignore their social responsibility based on the form and content of their training. Ki-Zerbo (1994:36) describes them as 'home-grown clones of foreign technical aid personnel, the kind of person ordinary people cannot identify with'. In support, Mamdani (1999:129) asks:

> I wonder if we should not consider the postcolonial intelligentsia, with one foot in colonial culture and another in that of their ancestors, as culturally creole?

Reflecting on the ideology of colonial education, Mamdani further says, 'So it set out to "'civilise" natives through creating a westernised intelligentsia, clones who would lead the assimilationist enterprise'. This is the category of intellectual which will not do justice to African reconstruction, because there would not be a committed social responsibility attending to African realities. This is not to belittle academic freedom. Africa cannot afford to tolerate a politics characterised by,

> ... a siege mentality which [makes] it increasingly nervous, intolerant, authoritarian and repressive .... [having] a political environment which is singularly hostile to academic freedom (Ake 1994:19).

The Discourses of *Absence of Presence* and *Presence of Absence*

As indicated above, the two discourses which this presentation addresses are: the discourse of the *absence of presence* and that of the *presence of absence*. The two discourses attempt to confront the challenge of fostering active and constructive roles for African intellectuals[2]—roles infused and characterised by social responsibility. Mamdani (1999:130), addresses this important question when he engaged the theme of the absence of an 'Africa-focused intelligentsia' in (South) Africa. For South Africa, the first question is: To what extent were apartheid-enforced identities voluntarily reproduced through a knowledge industry that included schools, technikons and universities, newspapers and magazines, radio and television?—and to what extent does this state of affairs still continue?

Mamdani (1999:130) responds to this question addressed to 'intelligentsia', or what he calls the 'intellectual apparatus' at three levels, that of the 1) the individual; 2) the institutional; and 3) the processual. The last refers to the intellectual content of knowledge.

Absence refers to the conspicuous absence of these intellectuals in their intellectual engagement of African issues (Mamdani 1999:130). This simply means that their absence is felt while communities acknowledge their presence,

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[2] Mamdani (1999:130) prefers the terminology 'intelligentsia' used in "its broad sense, in the sense of the original Russian word, not in the narrow sense of the English word 'intellectual'. In that broad Russian sense, the intelligentsia includes all those who drive forward creative thought and frame debate, whether in the arts or culture, whether in philosophical or social thought.

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given the establishments of learning we have. For example, Mamdani (1999:131) rightly observes that:

> Institutionally, South Africa had a two-tiered structure. There were white universities with a tradition of institutional autonomy—particularly in the English-speaking ones—alongside state-controlled black universities. Here again we have a moral dilemma as we do with civil society and racialised democracy ... and were islands of privilege ... black universities coming out of apartheid were the intellectual counterparts of Bantustans. They were designed to function more as detention centres for black intellectuals than as centres that would nourish intellectual thought. As such, they had little tradition of intellectual freedom or institutional autonomy ....

African intellectuals were trained within a context that does not take their cultural background into account. This then lead to a clash between 'the perceived to be an intellectual thought' for Africa and 'the ought to be an intellectual thought' for the continent. This clash affected the three levels referred to above by Mamdani (the individual, the institutional and the processual or the intellectual content of knowledge). The result of the clash is as follows.

a. Intellectuals at our universities find it difficult to relate to problems African communities face. These individuals will always refer to their training masters and mistresses as points of reference for any contribution that has to be made for Africa. They rely on and live their masters' and mistresses' lives—they use them as their intellectual models. Their intellectual lives aim at the protection and support of the position, institutional function and discourse of their masters.

b. These same intellectuals further find the African symbolic universe and cosmology limited to pre-scientific thinking. There is no significant recognition of the fact that all science needs to depart from and infuse local culture and that these perspectives on the scientific enterprise are indissoluble. For instance, they fail to recognise that their usage of western concepts and instruments of learning and research derive from and implicate western culture. They do not see any relevance in pursuing 'African things'. Another example of this is the South African

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compartmentalisation of 'science and technology' and 'arts and culture' respectively. In this divide, 'things African' are clustered under 'arts and culture' while 'science and technology' is reserved for those who engage the 'high science of critical thinking'. This marginalisation of African 'arts and culture' and its reduction to a 'non science' or the 'void of science' have been largely a power affair, and remains so to this day. Research skills are monopolised and the definition of African science is raped. Africa is deprived of its science and prevented from having her knowledge(s) recognised in the public scientific domain. As Professor Sipho Seepe (*Tribute Magazine* 2001:52) argues, the exclusion of African knowledge from,

> research can be linked to issues of epistemology, and the political and cultural location in which the research takes place. We err if we consider the research debate within the social sciences and humanities as simply an issue of skills, techniques and procedure.

c. The African context mainly functions as reservoir for case study research while one uses theories and methods developed somewhere else for different purposes and aims. Unfortunately, theories and methods developed from within the African context and for the purposes of serving African aspirations and goals, are either scarce or even marginalised or suppressed if there are any. Even African intellectuals engage in such practices and are vanguards of such philosophies. African universities graduates brought up in positions of genuflection and obedience to such knowledge are not prepared for their task in society. They will continue to represent an alienating 'science'.

d. There are African professors who do not engage the learning and research enterprise to full capacity with their students. They either are unable to empower their graduates, or unwilling. One example of such professors comprises of the group who was trained in Western academia and paradigms. They use Africa for case study material, but, on their return from their masters' land, they prefer to remain exclusive and ultimately die as antiques who did not contribute anything to the African child and communities. They are not the role models the African scientists and leaders of tomorrow need. Another example of

this is found in the group of African professors who retire, having not promoted a single PhD student in his or her life. Preferring to remain a power unto him- or herself, this group does not think of grooming other young, well-trained and critical African scholars. In some instances one finds this type of professors giving African graduates a raw deal during the promotion processes too—continuously finding them inadequate while not empowering them in research training and publishing. Some of the common expressions I have heard are the following:

> It is better to be promoted by a European professor than by an African professor. They (European professors) take time to guide you through to the finalisation of the process, whereas African professors do not even give themselves time to guide you. The latter simply want to acquire a knowledge powerbase; they are power hungry and are jealous.

e. There are intellectuals who are bedfellows with their respective governments—it is unfortunate that so many intellectuals are used by their governments to support policies and practices that are against the 'people's issues' rights. These are co-opted hangers-on who cannot or do not want to critically assess their role in their respective communities. They are only concerned about their personal well-fare, and this at the expense of the majority of people who suffer as a result of the callous and inhumane practices of some of their African masters. They are used as rubber stamps and their knowledge (and power) is undermined by their masters' states. The co-option of African intellectuals is a recurring activity. It is in this sphere more than any other, that African intellectuals need to redefine their role and critical positioning—their relationships to power and the African state. The counter-relationship is the one with the people. Here too, the question can be raised as to their hermeneutics—whether they engage African 'people's issues', or whether these issues are so de-contextualised, that it borders on a blatant lack of respect for the African context. Ultimately, there is a clash between these intellectuals and the communities 'they are supposed to be serving' with critical intellectual capital. The result of this clash is mistrust without constructive engagement. For meaningful dialogue such intellectuals need to re-connect to their respective communities. This process is necessary to

ensure that *none* of the parties feel excluded. If one feels excluded, the result is that communities feel marginalised and not regarded as centrally engaged in the development and reconstruction of African communities—economically, politically, socially, and religiously.

f.   Apart from African intellectuals who do not contribute constructively to our continent, there are those who, through much toil and often fierce opposition, made significant forward strides in the interests of the developing of an autochthonous African intelligentsia and intellectual tradition. One has to acknowledge the constructive roles which have been played by some African intellectuals in the continent's reconstruction. The following figures come to mind: Chinua Achebe, Okot p'Bitek, Ali Mazrui, Cheik Anta Diop, Mahmood Mamdani, E'skia Mphahlele, and Jake Mapanje to mention but a few. Among many others, these scholars have all shown their intellectual presence (and not absence) in various ways.

Challenges
Intellectual Relevance
The challenges facing African intellectuals could be summarised in terms of location or context (relevance) and content (relevance). There is a need to have organic intellectuals. As Gramsci (1995:98) strongly argues, every community,

> ... coming into existence on the original terrain of an essential function in the world of economic production, creates together with itself, organically, one or more strata of intellectuals which give it homogeneity and awareness of its function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields.

These are intellectuals who are accountable to their communities in terms of their *locus operandi* and not to the ivory towers considered to be centres of excellence while they remain irrelevant as to the context-content relationship. This challenges African intellectuals to begin to grapple with the concept of the *local critical mind space* in order to make their contribution to African societies a social obligation and thereby translating it into social intellectuality, monitored, interpreted, challenged, engaged, and located with the people. This

route of practicing intellectuality can be characterised by an *open, present, honest critique* and *for, with and in community*—it is all about 'people's lives' and their 'quality of life'.

Firstly, openness—it is diverse and addresses and impacts on countless life issues. In the process, issues raised are *problematisations* which undergird the lives of the common people and are absent from institutionalised published institutions. Instead of capitalising on systems from which only a few can benefit, it is open to the populace.

Secondly, presence it—this is about life and opens one up to the reality of face-to-face presence and contact. Engaged voices present one with a mirror of life and presence. In this discourse, there is no place for a multiplicity of absences, or its empty promises and elusiveness. The discourse offers one an opportunity to be immersed in the intellectual conversation of presence and contact: real presence and real contact and not the dubious absences of intellectuals out of touch with African social and cultural realities.

Thirdly, honest critique—this is in the place of the absence of constructive critical scholarship. Intellectuals' critical awareness and the fostering of critical dialogue, are fundamental (in the sense of creating a foundation) for reconstruction. This critique must be diverse—especially as it must allow for African intellectuals to be criticised (or even 'monitored) by their communities. Such engagement will lead to intellectuals becoming more relevant and communities, to learn from scholarly endeavours.

Lastly, in essence, it is all about communal life and co-operativeness. Intellectuality connects the disconnected, and opens up stifled channels of communication. It deconstructs existing boundaries, and re-orders these channels and boundaries, linking and connecting them for the purposes of advancing the dignity and integrity of the local people. African intellectuality is *about life, is for the continuous improvement of the quality of life, is relevant in the midst of life, and continuously need to engage issues on life.*

An Africa-focused Intelligentsia

The key to the realisation of a relevant academia, is only one: a reawakening of the mind (Mamdani 1999:129). On this, Mamdani (1999:130) said:

> This, surely, is why every renaissance is first and foremost a reawakening of thought. It is why the driving force of every renaissance is inevitably the intelligentsia.

Mamdani further (1999:134) argues for an African-focused intelligentsia:

> [T]here can be no renaissance without an intelligentsia to drive it .... an African renaissance requires an Africa-focused intelligentsia to drive it ... South Africa lacks an Africa-focused intelligentsia in critical numbers. It lacks it because the institutional apparatus of learning in this country continues to be hostile to Africa-focused thought. There is need by the state, but not only the state, to create enabling conditions for the nurture of an African-focused intelligentsia. These conditions will need to create an institutional context receptive to such thought. In turn, such a context cannot be created without strong conditionalities that are centred on the deracialisation and are attached to state support for educational institutions.

Knowledge Systems Research

African intellectuals need to understand the past systems located in different regions of Africa. The challenge is to critically look at these systems and see how they had transformed the past into different forms and how they could currently be used for addressing the 'now' of African problems and challenges, or how they could be criticised because they have failed to assist African aspirations in the face of colonial and neo-colonial hegemonies.

This is where one should recognise the work done by the National Research Foundation (NRF), having established the Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) Focus Area as part of their research brief, the National Research Foundation Act of 1998. The objectives behind this Focus Area are to:

- promote, encourage and support research within IKS to established and empower potential researchers and institutions in all fields of science;
- innovate and develop knowledge by acknowledging the importance of the existing knowledges and technologies around populations and communities. The NRF seeks to create opportunities for IK to be developed locally while recognising the national as well as the global trends and challenges.

In acknowledging indigenous knowledge (IK), the NRF seeks to champion its protection and use for the benefit of its owners and the communities where it is

practiced. This requires the stimulation of critically-based research initiatives that are carried out with the participation of the communities in which they originate and are held. This makes IKS dynamic, based on accumulated traditional-indigenous-cultural knowledge practices, holistic and situated within a cultural element. In this regard, research support, innovation and development of IKS are designed to contribute to the reclamation of 'people's pride and dignity' as well as the retention of essential elements of the diverse cultures of South Africa.

The NRF identified three research themes for funding: a) the production, transmission and use of IK, which covers amongst other issues, the nature of IK, IKS and indigenous technology; b) the role of IK in nation building, which attempts to cover issues like traditional medicine and health, indigenous food systems, socio-cultural systems, and arts, crafts and materials; and c) IK at the interface with other systems of knowledge, which explores the intersections of knowledge systems and the kinds of synergies and new knowledge they can generate.

As a focus area, IKS seeks to grow this knowledge system by encouraging researchers and those associated with them to initiate original research driven by curiosity, experience and the quest to find solutions to unanswered questions in IKS. For example, the IKS Focus Area at the NRF started to engage traditional healers in the fight against HIV/Aids in terms of the 'new HIV drug initiative and dialogue' recently. The Focus Area has observed with interest, outputs (funded proposals on IKS and the HIV epidemic) made in this regard, and that, so far, no new drug initiative has been developed, nor, novel pharmacologically active molecules discovered. From traditional medicine perspective, some efficacy of traditional medicines has been reported. This gave rise to a new approach to the study of traditional medicines beyond the often superficial screening methods until now. (The current extraction and *in vitro* assay methods seem to be inappropriate for evaluating the efficacy and safety of traditional medicines.) The Medical Research Council (MRC) within the Technology and Business Development Directorate—unit for Indigenous Knowledge Systems (Health) —proposed a partnership based on their recently developed system for assessing the traditional claims of cure made for traditional remedies. They have further developed functional protocols for evaluating the safety and efficacy of traditional medicines in a clinical trial environment. The MRC letter sent to the IKS Focus Area dated 3 March 2003 informs:

We are very excited to inform you that we have started evaluating traditional medicines for safety and efficacy based on these protocols. Of particular interest is the observational studies carried out at Philisa Healthcare Centre where at least forty (40) very ill HIV positive patients have claimed benefits from using traditional remedies. All forty patients, who were very ill and left to die, have been given a new lease on life. The majority of the patients who we had followed up, have recovered, their opportunistic infections cleared, they have gone back to work and are productive and very healthy.

There is a need to create systems that will benefit people of Africa. The challenge is to revisit African roots and culture. Pointing to the commonality factor—that all cultures sprout from traditional views and practices—Dr. Mongane Wally Serote says in his second draft submission on the Freedom Park entitled: *Combining the Philosophy and Practice: An IKS Movement Forward*:

> This knowledge, which has its own paradigm and logic, is historically the basis of all knowledge. It lost its value as its bearers lost their humanity due to slavery, oppression and exploitation. There really is no difference between the definition of science and technology and IKS, as there is no difference in definition about who is a human being between the slave and the slave owner. The difference is who and which has power and which and who does not, and why. And also, since one has power and the other not, what has the one with power achieved and what the one without? .... Because the politics of western civilisation have operated on the basis of mono-knowledge and the suppression of all other knowledge, must we not ask the question: what value would other knowledge add to this most impoverished life and world of knowledge [and how could they] complement each other?

Beyond the 'Exploitation' and 'Victim' Mentalities

African intellectuals need to deal with the problem of the *victim mentality* from which they often suffer. The point that I made above, that, if they want to be relevant and effective, and, that existing knowledges need to engage IKS, then, we need to move beyond blaming others for our own failures. It is the opportune moment for these intellectuals to spearhead this campaign—in

education and learning, research, academic *fora*, and outreach. As Mamdani (1999:130) argues:

> It is a sad fact that the racialised notion of Africa is pervasive throughout this continent. It is an indicator of how colonised we have become mentally. This is, of course, why an intellectual rebirth, a reawakening of the mind, is an urgent need. It is this new sense of self, born of a different sense of history and one's place in it, that we call African renaissance. Let us recall that every major development of historical significance must rethink and rewrite history, and thereby redefine its place in history so as to give itself a sense of self-worth and a renewed sense of agency. Only those who have little to hope for from historical change can refer to great movements for changes in consciousness as a 'brain-washing' exercise.

A new definition of intellectuality is therefore necessary. It is as part of this redefinition that Mamdani (1999:129-130) opts for the term 'intelligentsia' instead of 'intellectual', because it is

> ... used in its broad sense, in the sense of the original Russian word, not in the narrow sense of the English word 'intellectual'. In that broad Russian sense, the intelligentsia includes all those who drive forward creative thought and frame debate, whether in the arts or culture, whether in philosophical or social thought.

This challenges intellectuals who operate within their silos and not in reference to communities they come from or represent. This also paints a picture of intellectuals which are not victims of a class (Gramsci 1995:97f), but instead creates space for the intellectual development of skills and knowledge production in a broader sense. From this perspective, the principle of the collective learner-model—which includes the so-called excellent researchers and professors—is applicable. *We are all learners. Our intellectual development becomes a communal journey and destiny, and if these eminent 'scholars' want to exclude themselves, they do so at their own expense.* If one remains stuck in race, class or gender analyses and categorisations, it will limit the potentials of our common journey. Worse than the forces of an alienating knowledge production, it will continue to derive from 'bad faith' and not free intellectual energies for the creative and constructive engagement of our own challenges.

The Question of Language

The issue of language has to be addressed in this debate. The subject of language has generated passionate responses from African writers such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Ama Ata Aidoo, Chinua Achebe, Gabriel Okara, Es'kia Mphahlele, and Wole Soyinka, among others. The issue has been one of the most contested challenges in postcolonial discourse. As Owomoyela (1996:3) asks:

> What is the connection between language and cultural identity? What danger does the continued ascendancy of European languages pose for the vitality of African languages?

It is a fact that language is a technology of power—language becomes an instrument of power tied to class. Since every language has words full of ideological connotation and are value laden those who learn the language absorb and interiorise the ideology of the ruling class. In turn, this class determines the usage and potential of that language (More 1999:341; Fanon 1967). Unfortunately, one finds that in most cases, Europe

> has infiltrated Africa's secret corners: homes, meetings, social gatherings, literature, family and interpersonal relations. Europe becomes the mediator in the lives of Africans who use English—whether domesticated or not—as a medium of communication. The ubiquity of English arrests Africa's effort to overcome European power and tutelage (More 1999:343).

There is need to have African intellectuals taking seriously the question of language in their 'intellectual' engagements to make a contribution to the 'conscious reaffirmation of the dignity of African languages and also a liberation or decolonisation of the African mind'.

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There is a need for intellectuals to engage, theorise, analyse, systematise, develop, support, market, and innovate, local realities. This challenges intellectuals, for a moment, to freeze foreign ideas and be relevant to their local realities. Alternatively, they need to change the direction of their thinking—to start their thinking from within local realities.

The danger of freezing out local realities for long, may result in the following: 1) the compromising of the reclamation of African dignity and pride; 2) the loosing of valuable knowledge(s) which are vital to the quality of African life and culture, *now* and in the *future*; and, 3) even worse, the posing of a threat to the activities of community development and the alleviation of poverty. If this happens—which to a large extent is still the case in Higher Education—academia's absence of presence will bear the consequences of a revolting polity—i.e. idealistically speaking.

In conclusion, the presentation attempted to identify the problem posed by the foreign and alienating nature of the educational industry's knowledge production in South Africa. It further tried to articulate this in terms of the discourses of an *Absence of Presence* and a *Presence of Absence*, and the various challenges intellectuals currently face. In the interests of nationbuilding beyond the exclusionary boundaries of race, gender and especially class, this is the right time to ask these questions and not remain a Juju—the baboon alienated from its real self, its true, engaged vocation, and the challenges this pose. For our continent, South Africa's intellectuals have not delivered.

An Africa-focused intelligentsia should form a 'rapport' of 'mutual trust' with local communities—as Ngugi wa Thiong'o points out in *Moving the Centre* (xvii-xviii), '*All in all [it is about] creating space for a hundred flowers to blossom*'.

Indigenous Knowledge Systems
National Research Foundation

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