

# 14

## **Reclaiming indigenous knowledge in Namibia's post-colonial curriculum: The case of the Mafwe people**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

In Namibia, as is the case in the rest of Africa, different versions of an indigenous-knowledge-based education, mainly through the formal setting of traditional initiation schools, was an integral part of community life (Amukugo, 1993; Ray, 1999). The initiation school, of which attendance was compulsory, was a system of formal education with parallels to Western forms of education. For example, initiation schools had a standardized curriculum, set times of instruction, specified age of children for instruction, assessment strategies, use of 'qualified' instructors (experienced village elders) and formal arrangements to recognize and celebrate those who successfully completed the education (Matemba, 2010).

The curriculum offered included teaching the neophytes on 'proper' use of language, survival skills, customs, values, marriage, parenting, religion, respect for others, etc. (Mbiti, 1999; Amanze, 2002). As numerous studies have shown, the arrival of missionaries and colonial political powers in Africa from the mid-1800s onwards and their attitudes towards African cultural institutions impacted negatively on the viability of the African indigenous system of education, which was condemned as barbaric, heathen and an impediment to the consolidation of Christianity and Western culture on the continent (Abernethy, 1969; McCracken, 1977; Nduka, 1980; Ball, 1983; Comaroff & Comaroff, 1986).

Despite these historical challenges facing African education under the various guises of colonial domination, it is a cruel irony that the post-colonial state in Namibia under African political leadership has not made fundamental changes in indigenous

education. The result has been that, despite the rhetoric of reform, African indigenous cultural education remains marginalized in preference of Western ideals and models that continue to dominate. For example, the national curriculum is conceptualized, designed and delivered throughout the key stages of the educational sector (primary, secondary and further education) following Western ideals and models. We are not suggesting that Western education in its entirety is bad for Namibia, because in a globalized marketplace dominated by Western economic, political and ideological systems, we fully acknowledge that there is a need for Namibia to offer learners a relevant curriculum that gives them the requisite tools to compete effectively in the global arena (Altbach, 2004; Nguyen, Elliott, Terlouw, & Pilot, 2009). Thabo Mbeki, a former South African president, put it better when he said: 'We must embrace the culture of the globe, while ensuring that we do not discard our own' (Mbeki, 1998, p. 38).

However, having said this, our argument is that in order to reverse the apparent ideological loss and address the fundamental issue of cultural identity and autonomy in education, contemporary Namibia needs seriously to consider placing indigenous knowledge as the context in which the curriculum should be conceptualized, constructed and delivered. Such an approach is needed if the country is to (re)capture for its younger generation the essence of being African, mainly lost during the past century or so of colonial domination. Furthermore, this approach might also rescue indigenous knowledge from other threats in contemporary society, such as the lure of global popular culture and political compromises that have to be made towards the contested idea of 'nation' in a post-colonial and democratic state.

Here, we use the Mafwe ethnic group as a test case to demonstrate the need and relevance of an indigenous-knowledge-based curriculum for children in Namibia's post-colonial dispensation. The Mafwe are of particular interest for two main reasons: Firstly and more generally, to help understand the dynamics of culture and how cultural knowledge can be nurtured and transmitted in a post-colonial context in which political power is now in the hands of indigenous Africans themselves; and secondly, more importantly, to document cultural aspects of the Mafwe, which have not previously received any serious appraisal despite the contested political significance of the group in Namibia's post-colonial dispensation.

## **BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT**

Located in the south-west of the African continent, Namibia is a large, mostly arid country (825,418 km<sup>2</sup>) with a small population of 2.1 million (World Fact Book, 2012). It is a unitary state comprising 14 regions, each under a governor appointed by the state president. Politically, it is the last country in Africa to break the bonds