

# To integrate or not: Exploring the prospects and challenges of integrating indigenous knowledge at the University of Namibia

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## INTRODUCTION

Namibia has a population of about 2.1 million people of which 87.5% belong to one of nine main indigenous ethnic groups: Aawambo (50.0%), vaKavango (9.0%), Ovaherero (7.0%), Damara (7.0%), Nama (5.0%), Lozi (4.0%), San (3.0%), Baster (2.0%) and Tswana (0.5%) (UNDP, 2000). In Namibia, ethnic identity is stronger than national identity, with 75% of Namibians feeling much stronger ties to people of their own ethnic group than to fellow compatriots of other ethnic groups (Shaw-Taylor, 2008). Undoubtedly, a lot of indigenous knowledge is embedded within these strong ethnic and cultural precincts.

Over the past two decades, many Namibian policy makers and knowledge workers have begun to realize the importance of indigenous knowledge in the country's development process. In 2011, the Polytechnic of Namibia hosted a three-day conference on the technology of indigenous knowledge under the theme, 'Embracing indigenous knowledge systems into a new technology design paradigm'. During this conference, Namibians were urged to nurture the knowledge of their ancestors and ensure that it is protected and preserved. At the University of Namibia (UNAM), the Multidisciplinary Research Centre (MRC) conducts annual indigenous knowledge symposia. The MRC also has a research programme on indigenous knowledge systems (IKS), which is funded by the Ministry of Education (ME).

Nowadays, more plans are being devoted to the documentation of indigenous knowledge before it disappears. However, it remains largely tacit, wordless, unstated and undocumented, even as it increasingly disappears with the death of older people

– the bearers and libraries of this important resource. Here, our thesis is that the integration of indigenous knowledge into formal educational curricula can become one of the avenues to capture and document it for future generations. Be that as it may, integration of indigenous knowledge is still a contentious matter and should be approached cautiously, and the question of whether an institution of higher learning should integrate it or not into its pedagogy needs to be answered within the prism of empirical evidence.

In this chapter, we revisit the definitions of indigenous knowledge; interrogate the significance of it in traditional Africa and the African Renaissance; discuss its links to formal education; and present findings that shed light on the prospects and challenges of teaching indigenous knowledge at the University of Namibia (UNAM). The chapter closes with a recommendation for UNAM to introduce a new degree programme in indigenous knowledge.

## CONCEPTS OF INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE

The scope of indigenous knowledge remains a debatable issue in many circles, but the canonical definitions, characteristics and meanings of it remain the same, namely:

1. Indigenous knowledge is a set of perceptions, information and behaviours that guide a local community's use of land and natural resources. It is therefore created and sustained by local community members as a means to meet their needs for food, shelter, health and spirituality (Burger, 1990).
2. Indigenous knowledge is often referred to as indigenous wisdom, as it is the result of human observation of patterns in nature and society. This knowledge is transmitted through narratives that are told from the heart and in the voices of the indigenous people themselves (Burger, 1990).
3. Indigenous knowledge is part of agriculture, health care, food preparation, education, environmental conservation and a host of other activities (Warren, 1987). Much of this knowledge is unique to a given culture or society and is passed down from generation to generation, usually by word of mouth, because it is mostly tacit and not documented (Rajasekaran, 1993).
4. Indigenous knowledge is synonymous to the local knowledge that is unique to a given culture or society. It is a basis for local-level decision-making in agriculture, healthcare, food preparation, education, conflict resolution, natural resource management, environmental problems and other activities in local communities (Warren, 1991).
5. Indigenous knowledge is a systematic body of knowledge acquired by local people in a given culture through accumulation of informal experiences and intimate understanding of the environment (Rajasekaran, Warren, & Babu, 1990).