

Contributions of African Traditional Knowledge to Community Development Theory and Practice

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ABSTRACT

Africa's capacity for developing, testing, and applying traditional knowledge is closely linked to its indigenous knowledge capacity. This paper explores the role of Indigenous knowledge in community development and the challenges associated with its integration into development theories and initiatives. Colonialism, which diminished the relevance of traditional knowledge and promoted Western development techniques, has left a legacy of dependency on Western knowledge systems. As a result, the contribution of Indigenous knowledge to community development and other developmental practices has often been overlooked. This study employs a quantitative research method based on secondary data analysis to investigate these issues. The findings highlight the significant potential of Indigenous knowledge in contributing to development efforts. However, various factors, including restrictive rules, regulations, standards, and limited funding for Indigenous knowledge research, documentation, and application, hinder its full utilisation. To address these limitations, this paper recommends the development of a clear research agenda for Indigenous knowledge, with articulated research objectives and expected outcomes. Additionally, the establishment of frameworks for validating knowledge within the educational system is proposed. These measures aim to enhance the recognition and integration of Indigenous knowledge into development practices, fostering a more holistic and culturally sensitive approach to community development.

Keywords: Indigenous knowledge, traditional knowledge, community development, development participation, Indigenous development

INTRODUCTION

Community development has always played a crucial role in improving economic, political, social, and cultural conditions globally. Prior to colonialism, communities in Africa had a rich history of community development deeply ingrained in their cultures (Reyes-García, 2010). Rural development was synonymous with community development in Africa, significantly influencing communities' ability to organise for development (Owusu-Ansah and Mji, 2013). Given that rural areas accounted for over 80% of Africa's population, rural development and transformation were essential (Reyes-García, 2010).

However, colonial administrators reshaped the concept of community development. British colonial administrators introduced terms like "basic education" and "social welfare" in a bid to enhance community development in the colonies. They emphasised literacy teaching and advocated local self-sufficiency in agriculture and healthcare (Jamal and Dredge, 2014). This

shift underscores the importance of a group-dynamic approach to community development, focusing on public involvement and participatory democracy.

Yet, the value of Africa's traditional knowledge has often been underestimated in favour of Western science (Ford et al., 2016). Indigenous knowledge, although still informally used in some regions, remains underutilised and marginalised due to its informal nature (Jamal and Dredge, 2014).

Statement of Problems

Before colonialism, indigenous African societies thrived, governed by their customs and traditions. They adhered to established norms and values that regulated all aspects of life (Tchamyu, 2017). These principles promoted honesty, bravery, hard work, and the preservation of family reputation (Hall and Tandon, 2017). However, these values eroded with the arrival of Europeans and globalisation, leading to the adoption of foreign ways of life (Tengö et al., 2017).

Today, traditional knowledge is often regarded as outdated, and individuals who uphold it are seen as conservative or illiterate (Tengö et al., 2017). This shift has resulted in moral decay, a loss of respect, and a decline in ethics (Hall and Tandon, 2017). Colonialism, neocolonialism, and globalisation pushed indigenous knowledge and practices to the sidelines. This study aims to reintroduce these indigenous approaches into contemporary community development in Nigeria and highlight their inherent contributions.

Research Aims and Objectives

This study seeks to explore the contributions of African traditional knowledge to community development theory and practice. Specifically, it aims to:

1. Evaluate the effectiveness of African traditional knowledge in community development and economic planning.
2. Assess the relevance of indigenous approaches in healthcare and their potential for community development.
3. Provide recommendations for enhancing the relevance of African traditional knowledge to contemporary community development theories.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Concepts of Indigenous Knowledge

Indigenous knowledge (IK) encompasses a rich body of knowledge acquired by indigenous people through accumulated experiences, informal experimentation, and a deep understanding of their environment within their culture (Sillitoe, 2019). It is unique to each culture and serves as the foundation for decision-making in various fields (Aquino et al., 2018). Indigenous knowledge is ever-changing, based on local culture and environment, and serves as a valuable foundation for various technical and scientific investigations (Briggs, 2013).

Concepts of Community Development

Community development aims to improve living conditions in economically underdeveloped regions, particularly in Africa (Agrawal, 2014). Rural development and community development are often intertwined, with community members playing a crucial role in generating employment and infrastructure (Amosun et al., 2013). It focuses on developing a

community's physical, financial, human, social, and environmental capitals (Obiora and Emeka, 2015).

Contemporary Community Development Theories

Democratic Theory in Community Development:

Democratic structures are seen as critical for community development, with increased reliance on democracy enhancing system planning and decision-making (Dean et al., 2019). While democracy may thrive in small, stable communities, some believe it becomes less suitable as complexity and uncertainty increase. However, democracy can still work effectively when combined with multiple points of contact within the system.

Participation Theory:

Engagement in public life is considered valuable for personal growth and development, but it may not always result in individual benefits (Akonwi Nebasifu and Majory Atong, 2019). Nevertheless, extensive participation can have a net positive effect on the system as a whole.

Human Relations Theory:

Prioritising employee well-being is central to human relations theory, aiming to improve performance by fostering a cooperative work environment (Mayo, 2014). This approach contrasts with the traditional management philosophy, which prioritised company objectives over employee well-being.

Empirical Review: Challenges Faced by Indigenous Knowledge in Africa:

Several internal and external challenges hinder the development and utilisation of indigenous knowledge in Africa. These include a lack of financial support for research, inadequate legal frameworks, and colonial prejudices that marginalise indigenous knowledge (Emeagwali, 2020; Moyo, 2013; Bojuwoye and Moletsane-Kekae, 2018; Cronje et al., 2015).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research design, focusing on secondary sources such as books, articles, journals, magazines, and published works to explore the contributions of African traditional knowledge to community development theory and practice.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Effectiveness of Indigenous Knowledge in Community Development Practice

This section aims to shed light on the role of indigenous knowledge as a form of "cultural capital" in resisting the imposition of development ideals. It highlights the concept of "local ownership" and argues against ethnocentric, top-down development models that rely heavily on external knowledge systems, such as science and technology. The discussion suggests that, to address Africa's development challenges effectively, it is essential to incorporate African perspectives rooted in indigenous cultural traditions and a sense of place embedded in the continent's history. This approach is presented as a means to provide solutions to many of Africa's development shortcomings.

Emeagwali and Shizha (2016) point out the absence of a universal definition of indigenous knowledge systems. In Western contexts, the term "indigenous" often carries connotations of primordial, untamed, and natural aspects. Indigenous knowledge is understood as knowledge

unique to specific cultural groups. Unlike formal institutions like universities, research facilities, and commercial enterprises, indigenous knowledge does not contribute to a global knowledge system. Instead, it informs local decision-making in rural areas, encompassing various aspects of life such as agriculture, healthcare, food preparation, education, and natural resource management (Obiora and Emeka, 2015). It plays a pivotal role in a society's information framework, facilitating communication and decision-making. Importantly, it is essential to recognise that indigenous knowledge systems are dynamic, shaped by both internal innovation and experimentation as well as external influences (Hill et al., 2020).

Ban et al. (2018) define knowledge systems as the means through which people understand and attribute meaning to their surroundings. These diverse cultural perspectives and experiences are passed down through generations, reflecting how individuals organise their knowledge of flora, fauna, cultural beliefs, and history to enhance their daily lives (Ogungbure, 2013).

Ogungbure (2013) asserts that indigenous knowledge represents a crucial component of the social capital of impoverished communities and a valuable asset in their quest for self-determination. It serves as the foundation of a nation's knowledge system, encompassing the skills, knowledge, and perspectives of its people on how to maintain or enhance their quality of life (Kaya and Koitsiwe, 2016). Indigenous knowledge holds the potential to contribute to locally managed, sustainable, and cost-effective survival strategies, underscoring the importance of promoting it throughout the development process. The argument in favour of indigenous knowledge suggests that the Western-dominated scientific approach has failed to deliver on its promise of rescuing non-Western cultures from underdevelopment. Consequently, local-level engagement is deemed essential, as the persistence of an indigenous knowledge system demonstrates its ability to withstand the forces of modernity (Moyo, 2013), contributing significantly to Africa's progress.

According to Bojuwoye and Moletsane-Kekae (2018), indigenous knowledge holds relevance on three levels: within the local community, among development stakeholders including governments, donors, local leaders, and private sector entities, and as a driver of indigenous development. These stakeholders recognise and value indigenous knowledge, incorporating it into their interactions with indigenous communities. To do so effectively, they must acknowledge and critically assess the value of indigenous knowledge in achieving their goals, bridging it with global knowledge systems. This approach ensures that indigenous wisdom is not only preserved but also transferred, adapted, and utilised in new contexts.

Acknowledging and integrating indigenous African knowledge into development practice is a crucial initial step towards finding effective solutions to Africa's long-standing development challenges. Indigenous knowledge asserts its significance within an institutional framework that often seeks to marginalise it. Local knowledge serves as a catalyst for local development, challenging the perceived superiority of Western knowledge in the realm of development. The strength of indigenous knowledge, as a contributor to development, poses a challenge to the historical dominance of Western development practices (Bojuwoye and Moletsane-Kekae, 2018). Its resilience throughout the development process influences the shaping of development initiatives. The ability of indigenous knowledge to continually regenerate itself is recognised as a fundamental aspect of Africa's progress.

In summary, both indigenous and Western epistemologies are perceived as pursuing the common goal of effective development. For instance, 60% of Africans reside in rural areas, where they rely on their indigenous worldviews to address issues significantly impacting their well-being and social development (Bernard et al., 2019). Nevertheless, a fundamental question remains: is African indigenous knowledge transformational, or will modernity, represented by Western knowledge, ultimately overshadow it in the pursuit of development solutions?

Relying on a decision-making process rooted in the imperatives of survival is both context-dependent and self-defeating, as exemplified by the preference for African traditional knowledge. In the context of Africa's development, it becomes a matter of life and death, necessitating policies that consider the preferences and knowledge of Africans. Emeagwali and Shizha (2016) advocate for the establishment of an anti-colonial and anti-racist intellectual approach to recover and restore indigenous knowledge from the Western discursive perspective on African development.

Some scholars argue that African countries should establish endogenous, localised political systems and structures to create strong, centralised governments that promote economic prosperity, improved living conditions, transparent parliamentary systems, and social stability, following Western political ideology (Agrawal, 2014). Therefore, research has focused on the question of whether a robust government capable of effectively directing national resources towards long-term development goals is necessary or whether a weak government prioritising immediate interests results in perpetual, mutually exclusive cutthroat competition.

Indigenous knowledge plays a critical role in Burkina Faso's healthcare system, and this paper examines how this resource can empower the continent's people to take control of their health and well-being. The integration of indigenous knowledge is proposed as a counter-hegemonic stance. Traditionally, development discourse has prioritised economic growth over social advancement, which is why the healthcare sector is chosen as the focus. By integrating indigenous knowledge into social enterprises, it is believed that the potential for these efforts to positively impact Africa's impoverished masses is significantly enhanced, particularly given that the majority of the population in Africa resides in rural areas and relies primarily on traditional knowledge.

Effectiveness of Indigenous Knowledge in Healthcare

Despite significant advancements in medical research, which have led to increased life expectancy, disease eradication, and reduced mortality rates globally, millions of people still lack access to life-saving medicines. In regions where modern medicine is scarce, individuals often turn to traditional medicine, which is more accessible and cost-effective. Many traditional herbs have demonstrated strong biological and therapeutic potential in treating common ailments such as coughs, diarrhoea, and fevers (Mavhura et al., 2013). Therefore, the value of traditional medicine development initiatives should focus on expanding indigenous knowledge and collaborating with traditional healers to enhance the treatment of specific illnesses (Briggs, 2013). However, it is important to note that this information is often exploited by pharmaceutical companies with significant financial resources and patents on their drugs.

In Burkina Faso, the government has taken steps to improve healthcare by incorporating and enhancing traditional medicine (Østergaard, 2015). The Ministry of Health established the

Department of Pharmaceutical Services and Traditional Pharmacopoeia with the goal of developing a national traditional medicine pharmacopoeia. Initially, regional pharmacopoeias were established to facilitate regular information exchange among practitioners. These organisations, along with regulations governing traditional medicine practice, have been established in major cities across Burkina Faso. In another severely affected country battling the AIDS epidemic, a more cost-effective alternative to expensive antiretroviral drugs is being employed with government support for traditional medicine as a necessary complement to modern medical treatment (Østergaard, 2015).

As demonstrated by Burkina Faso, indigenous knowledge is integral to Africa's economic development and should be treated as such (Tibiri et al., 2019). Traditional pharmacopoeia and support networks for traditional healers have enhanced the effectiveness and sustainability of the country's healthcare system. Leveraging indigenous knowledge approaches across various sectors can aid the continent in achieving success without overrelying on proprietary information. Using Burkina Faso as a case study underscores the crucial role of indigenous knowledge in bridging diverse regions and cultures. The vast resources and depth of knowledge held by local experts attest to this reality (Ewane and Ajagbe, 2018). These traditional or indigenous healers possess what Ewane and Ajagbe (2018) refer to as cultural capital, which can manifest in three forms: integrated, objectified, or institutionalised.

However, depending solely on indigenous medical expertise comes with challenges. Conservation of Burkina Faso's indigenous knowledge faces various difficulties, as the country, like the rest of Africa, is still deeply influenced by ancient rituals and practices (Tibiri et al., 2019). This can lead to a situation where academics in certain regions have more access to indigenous knowledge than the local residents, creating an imbalance of knowledge (Tibiri et al., 2019). Furthermore, numerous African countries are losing significant biodiversity, potentially resulting in the extinction of knowledge about local fauna and flora. Thus, African nations must take decisive measures to ensure that indigenous knowledge is preserved in the face of such threats.

Western educational and scientific approaches are rapidly eroding indigenous African knowledge systems, particularly in the healthcare sector (Plockey, 2015). Official healthcare systems in African nations must incorporate African traditional medicine (a form of social capital). Ethnopharmacology can aid in identifying indigenous medicinal plants that are both effective and safe. However, this requires Western benefactors or pharmaceutical companies to respect the intellectual property rights of traditional healers. According to habitus theory, modern medical technology can describe, analyse, verify, and categorise the fundamental beliefs and processes of historical knowledge systems. Plockey (2015) argues that new methods for validating the rigorous process of observation, analysis, and evaluation that underlie each individual's cultural knowledge are essential. Validation can also serve as a framework for integrating modern medicine with traditional African medicine.

CONCLUSION

The endurance of indigenous knowledge in development practice justifies its establishment as an alternative to Western knowledge dominance. Change is possible in the development arena through the renegotiation of power dynamics between donors and recipients. This study has emphasised the critical role of indigenous knowledge in Africa's development struggle, arguing

that it can provide transferable local skills and mobilise efforts to alleviate the continent's current inequalities. Therefore, a paradigm shift in development theory and practice is advocated, starting with indigenous knowledge.

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