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Foli, Jessica

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INGANEKWANE, FOLKTALE, ANANSI STORY: RECOGNISING INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE IN THE PERFORMING ARTS

JESSICA FOLI

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What happens when the source of knowledge is part of a unique oral history passed down from generation to generation? How do we frame such knowledge? How do we nurture the development of knowledge based on African folktale, superstition, or myth?

Heavily embedded within the canon of academia is the need for "proper" references to be included in all academic writing. What defines the parameters of "proper"? What happens when the source of knowledge is part of unique oral history that has been passed down from generation to generation: a folktale, a superstition, or a myth? What if the source is a grandmother, aunt, uncle, or an elder in the community?

Despite living on the African continent, the requirements of academic writing make no allowances for the inclusion of oral history as a recognised source of knowledge. Through a reflection on my teaching, together with an interrogation of applicable writings and discourse, this paper aims to provide an entry point into the subject of recognising indigenous knowledge in the performing arts.

The term performing arts is very broad and can be said to encompass multiple disciplines. For the context of this paper, when using the term performing arts, I'm specifically referring to modes of performance associated with the body; namely Voice, Acting and Movement.

Catherine Odora Hoppers describes indigenous knowledge as "the combination of knowledge systems encompassing technology, social, economic and philosophical learning or educational, legal and governance systems."[1] Edward Shizha notes that African Indigenous Knowledge Systems are embedded in traditions, in customs and transmitted through demonstration and experience.[2] Indigenous knowledge is transferred through what Petros Nhlavu Dhlamini terms the "Master to Apprentice" system from one generation to the next.[3] Woven into this process of knowledge-transfer is the element of storytelling.

As performers, storytelling is at the core of our discipline. We use our lived experience as a starting point to create a story; these stories can be told with our voices, our bodies or both. The African continent is rich with stories, generational knowledge, and tradition.

The *Anansi* story and *Inganekwane* are some of the examples of storytelling traditions on the African continent. The common thread they share is that there is a message or lesson of some kind woven into the story. These stories, together with cultural practices, traditions, spirituality, songs, and dances, are rich sources of knowledge. These sources of indigenous knowledge should be recognised equally in both the practical and theoretical components of performing arts curricula.

Performing arts curricula at the tertiary level often privilege western modes of performance, to which large sections of the curricula are devoted and little to no time spent on African modes of performance. The call to decolonise teaching spaces and curricula is an attempt to remedy this. However, this process requires careful thought, beyond the token insertion of African practitioners into curricula. Abebe Zegeye and Maurice Taonezvi Vambe lament that African indigenous knowledge systems have been dismissed as myth and superstition within western thought and the academy.[4] This, combined with the status afforded to written knowledge, has ensured that African indigenous knowledge systems took a backseat in performing arts curricula.

When I look back at my own studies, African indigenous knowledge systems did not form a significant part of the performing arts curriculum. As such, creating a transformative curriculum has always been at the heart of my teaching philosophy. Teaching full-time has allowed me to implement this even further. Last year, I set about framing one of my first-year practical classes with a strong focus on content influenced by the African continent. The class, titled "Theatre and Production," is a practical class focused on visual storytelling and the practical elements of the

theatre-making process. Supported by theory, students are taken through practical explorations and tasks to raise their awareness of how a narrative or a story consists of more than just spoken text. Colour, sounds, gestures, movements, and props all form an integral part of creating a narrative and the storytelling process. It is important for me to outline the structure of the class, as this gives context to the upcoming discussion.

As an entry point into visual storytelling, we began the practical classes by exploring the theme of colour and cultural significance. I asked the students to sit in a circle in the class, and we went around the circle and one-by-one they shared their experiences of how colour and cultural significance forms part of their lives.

I emphasised that students only share information with which they are comfortable. They could also interpret the theme of colour and cultural significance freely. This is largely because one has to be careful with any discussions that draw on indigenous knowledge and cultural practices. Some indigenous knowledge and practices are bound by secrecy; Shizha describes these aspects of indigenous knowledge as being, "secretive and not for public consumption."[5]

As we went around the circle, students openly shared their experiences related to rites of passage, traditional and religious ceremonies, ceremonial events, and funeral rites. The experiences shared were diverse—ranging from isiZulu traditions, IsiNdebele traditions, isiXhosa, Korean, Serbian, Greek, and Jewish traditions. As each person in the class shared their experience, the rest of the class listened quietly and intently. This sparked further discussion within the class, and students began to ask questions to gain further insight into what was being shared. Students who shared similar experiences began to debate the nuances amongst themselves. Two students even ended up debating stages of a Tshivenda rite of passage, specifically, a coming of age ceremony. Through debate and discussion, they helped one other remember parts of the ceremony and the way in which it unfolded.

In this way, the classroom became a space where students exchanged knowledge based on their respective lived experiences. Through sharing their experiences, students provided insight into indigenous practices with nuances, which, arguably, no written source could provide. While discussing the theme of knowledge production and publication in Africa, Zegeye and Vambe state that, "published knowledge still commands a great deal of 'respect' from both African and non-African intellectuals, especially those who acquired knowledge through written media."[6] This way of thinking still plagues performing arts curricula.

As educators, how do we go about positioning indigenous knowledge within performing arts curricula at a tertiary level?

Recognising indigenous knowledge in the classroom is an intricate process. Working with these forms of knowledge in the classroom requires a degree of sensitivity and care. As a lecturer, one needs to create a classroom environment that allows for such experiences to be shared. As educators, do we actively create spaces that allow for this kind of knowledge to be shared and recognised without being dismissive or patronising?

What became apparent as the students shared their experiences was the multiplicity of identities on the African continent. One could be South African with Greek ancestry; one could be South African with both isiZulu and isiXhosa heritage; one could be Ghanaian with German ancestry; one could be African with Portuguese ancestry—the list is endless. This paper advocates for African indigenous knowledge systems to be incorporated into performing arts curricula while recognising that cross-cultural and cross-continental knowledge also form part of this knowledge.

Once the students had shared their experiences, I asked them to choose gestures and movements associated with the experience they had described in class. Later, I asked them to incorporate sound, on the condition that they didn't use any words or spoken text. The following week, students were put into groups. Collectively they had to choose a narrative that incorporated the sounds and gestures, which they then explored individually.

Over time, the students workshopped their pieces and received a combination of lecturer and peer feedback. During a peer feedback session, something I didn't expect happened: one group had a moment in their performance, where they depicted an animal being slaughtered. After the performance, a student in the class asked the group a question. He said, "Were you stabbing the animal or were you slaughtering it?" The group was quiet.

The student went on to say that the way the group had portrayed the gesture indicated that the animal was being stabbed rather than slaughtered (and he showed the students what he was referring to). He went on to say that if an animal is stabbed in that manner, it indicates that the animal was stolen. The group receiving the feedback seemed surprised and jokingly agreed, yes indeed the animal had been stolen.

The student's lived experience became an unexpected teaching moment where, through his lived cultural experience, he provided insight into a cultural practice and was able to educate his fellow classmates. As the lecturer of the course, there's no way that I would've been able to provide this kind of insight. I've never slaughtered an animal myself, so I'm not familiar with the nuances of the slaughtering process. Yes, I was able to provide insight into the group's theatre-making process, but the slaughtering/stabbing-related insight could only have been provided by the student within the context of that particular class at that particular time.

All the instances I've described refer to experiences within a practical class. This is important to mention because practical classes within the space of the performing arts allow for exploration and incorporation of indigenous knowledge. Cultural nuances can be expressed physically, visually, aurally, and in myriad other ways. However, had I asked the students to write a formal essay critiquing the work of their peers, the outcome would have been very different. They would be required to adhere to one of the academically recognised styles of referencing. In this case, it would be the Harvard style.

This raises the question: How does one reference indigenous knowledge within the framework of the academy?

Particularly at a first-year level, students are taught to write by utilising existing knowledge and theory within the discipline and critically engaging with it. The creation of new knowledge is frowned upon at a first-year level as well as at an undergraduate level. It is only at a postgraduate level that students are viewed as being in the position to create new knowledge and contribute to existing discourse.

The student who referred to the nuances of stabbing versus slaughtering may have expressed this in a written form. However, the requirements of academic writing would've required him to find a reference for what he had described. How would a first-year student, or any student for that matter, go about referencing an experience that is actually indigenous knowledge, acquired through a specific cultural practice.

Would a diluted reference need to be found to corroborate and validate what the student already knows?

These are some of the questions we, as educators, need to ask when we sit at boards and committees that create policies and frameworks. How do we start to rethink and re-frame the parameters of the academy to give equal weighting to indigenous knowledge?

I'll leave you with a quote from Zegeye and Vambe,

> It is worth repeating that the primary carrier of knowledge in African societies where large sections of the population have not had access to written material is not the published book. In these communities, knowledge is generated and expressed through unwritten songs, folktales, proverbs, masks, carvings and other modes of expressing knowledge … it is wrong to assume that those without access to written forms of expression have no knowledge.[7]

Jessica is a lecturer in the Department of Theatre and Performance in the Wits School of Arts; jessica.foli@wits.ac.za

Notes

1 Odora Hoppers, 'Indigenous Knowledge and the Integration of Knowledge Systems', 8–9.

2 Shiza, 'Chapter 12: Indigenous Knowledges and Codification in the Knowledge Economy', 269–70.

3 Dhlamini, 'Chapter 10: Use of Information and Communication Technologies Tools to Capture, Store and Disseminate Indigenous Knowledge', 227.

4 Zegeye and Vambe, 'Chapter 5: African Indigenous Knowledge Systems', 54.

5 Shiza, 'Chapter 12: Indigenous Knowledges and Codification in the Knowledge Economy', 277.

6 Zegeye and Vambe, 'Chapter 6: Knowledge Production and Publishing in Africa', 77.

7 Zegeye and Vambe, 'Chapter Six: Knowledge Production and Publishing in Africa', 80–81.

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