

Endangered Indigenous Languages of Namibia

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we examine the use of indigenous languages for transference of not just knowledge, but also culture and the relation between context and peculiar nature of indigenous, traditional or local Knowledge itself. The paper includes two sections: a performance section and academic section with a view to capturing the authentic voice of the performer and exploring the narrative and linguistic elements in the performance. While the presentation itself will be interactive, the paper will try to encapsulate the concerns of IK systems and the use of technology for preservation of these systems.

Keywords

Language, Language education, Knowledge transfer, Indigenous Knowledge, Traditional Knowledge, Local Knowledge

1. INTRODUCTION

The position of a performer of traditional forms in the knowledge economy society is not only precarious, but also not recognised because of an over emphasis on modern knowledge which is valorised at the expense of traditional knowledge. Further, all past or unexplored knowledge from diverse communities are ignored simply because they do not fit into the paradigm of new knowledge as prescribed by Western societies. However, IK is now being tapped into as an important resource for researchers not just in the fields of traditional healing systems, but also in terms of the gain that a society or community can make by drawing upon this repository [3]. IK as perceived and defined by a local performer is inclusive of the norms and traditions of the native or original inhabitants of a country or an area consisting of cultures and styles of dressing, language, food, modes of communication and more. Since communication is integral to the transfer of knowledge use of languages in the form of poetry and performance of narrative forms takes centre stage. Poetry or narrative performance is necessary for the preservation of local culture and the wisdom embedded in the literature even if this literature is not recorded. It is here that technology will have an important role to play in identification, preservation and promotion of Namibian Languages. Performance will include

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music, dance, percussion, costumes along with poetry to capture the essence of culture as well to embody transference of value system unique to this region.

2. TOPIC

In oral societies all over the world, IK has been passed down from generation to generation by word of mouth. Vedic chants in India have been preserved form more than a thousand years because even today, there are gurukuls(schools] where the teacher transfer his knowledge to his students through the oral mode. Vedic chants follow a strict incantation pattern where a variation could result in a change of meaning. These patterns have been faithfully adhered to from generation to generation. While Vedic chants are in Sanskrit, which is in and of itself a classical language, the folk forms provide an alternative conception of reality. Indigenous knowledge proves to be useful in protecting the environment, because the indigene knows how to exist in communion with nature. It is modernity which is in contravention to its surroundings destroying nature in its desire to assume the world. Colonisation has wrought havoc in every region of the world where it has gained a foot hold as a result of its absolute indifference to local knowledge and its ignorance of the wisdom articulated in its art and culture. The imposition of the coloniser's language has meant a loss of local culture, a decimation of local languages and its attendant cultural forms. The choice of English as an official language was a result of a political decision by the government of the day with a view to enabling Namibia to find its place in the knowledge economy [6]. Two distinct and diametrically opposite views have been articulated by two of the greatest intellectuals produced in Africa. They are Chinua Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiong'O. While the former believes in adopting and adapting the coloniser's tongue for the purposes of "making it my[his] own" [1], Ngugi advocate the use and development of indigenous language protesting strongly that decolonisation of the mind can only happen through discarding the colonial language [7]. There are mixed reactions to the language question on the African continent with the result the focus on development of indigenous languages has shifted into dissemination of the coloniser's language, be it English, French or Portuguese. Many people do not realise that with the loss of the mother tongue comes the destruction of culture and identity.

Thomas Ricento [5:10] states that language policy and planning researchers in several parts of the world ask basic and varied questions such as, "Why are standard languages considered to be better than "dialectal variations"? [5] Why do certain immigrant groups maintain their language over generations, whereas others lose their language over a couple of generations? Does the global spread of English entail the marginalisation and eventual loss of indigenous languages? Is this necessarily a good

thing or a bad thing? He suggests that Language policy is ideologically encumbered and that for many sociolinguists major European languages should be used for formal and specialised domains whereas local languages could serve other functions. However, this resulted in local languages being relegated to domestic use lowering its status, thereby, elevating the status of the European languages. If this had been just restricted only to languages, it would not have impacted too much on society. But instead, it created class division with people with knowledge of European languages forming an elite class and others with indigenous languages, being marginalised perpetuating the stratified and class based society of the colonial era. Dell Hymes [1985, p.vii] points out: "Were there no political domination or social stratification in the world, there would still be linguistic inequality...Allocation and hierarchy are intrinsic. Nor should the investments of many, perhaps including ourselves, in some arrangements be underestimated. Effective change in the direction of greater equality will only partly be change in attitude, or removal of external domination; it will be in many cases from change of social system." [2] In this environment it is incumbent upon us to examine the preservation of indigenous language in order to safeguard the wisdom of ages. One of the ways of doing this is to record social practices such as literature, narratives, customary laws and tradition for future reference through the use of modern technology.

3. AIMS

The performance and the discussion that follows aims to explore the relationship between indigenous art forms and its transfer into modern technology, to investigate the feasibility and success of using modern technology to preserve IK with a view to adopting and adapting different modes of electronic preservation and dissemination; and finally, to sensitise IK researchers towards varied cultural norms found in the Namibian societies at large.

4. PERFORMANCE

David /Nanub productions are performing artists who have joined together for the identification, preservation and promotion of indigenous languages in Namibia such as Damara, Nama, Oshiwambo, Otjiherero, Hoansi, Rukwangali, Silozi, Hai/hom etc. Thirteen young people from the different regions of Namibia were trained in writing poetry and performing it. They have performed to audiences in Windhoek and received positive feedback. The indigenous language poetry are developed along themes that are close to the hearts of the local people reflecting their concerns. For instance, native customary life styles and cultural forms practised in street corners which transfer knowledge creating its value system needs to be protected against the onslaught of modernity. The poet cries out to uphold his language, "My language is my key, my language is my foundation...."(David /Nanub)."

Since the poetry performances will be in the indigenous languages, it will necessitate some form of translation. Transferability of ideas and concepts will form a part of the discussion, which will follow the performance. The poetical form will be examined in order to develop a model for African poetry which will form an integral part of the discussion. While literary

devices such as metaphor and simile form a part of the English literary tradition, attempt will be made to identify indigenous symbols and imagery for purposes of contrast within the Namibian Languages. Further, the impact of the performances and the discussion thereafter will be used as a springboard to articulate a theoretical framework of both the poetical and narrative form. Use of musical props such as drums and cymbals will contextualise the performance.

The main focus of the performance and the discussion thereafter will be on the use of technology for several purposes: technology for social change, technology for the preservation and protection of the cultural heritage of Namibia, technology to promote customary knowledge, traditions and social practices, technology as a means of sharing and archiving information for future generations.

5. PRESENTERS

David /Nanub Productions consists of David /Nanub and his team of 5 performers and percussionists. David started writing poetry in 1984 while working as a Cultural Unity Theatre trainer. His interest in African music, Africa's pre-colonial traditions, such as chants, ululations, sounds, dances, pace and rhythm, inspired his creative writing.

Sarala Krishnamurthy is Dean of the School of Communication, Criminal Justice and Legal Studies. She has over 25 years of teaching experience and has supervised postgraduate research of more than twenty students in areas such as Stylistics, Applied linguistics and Post-colonial literature. Dr Krishnamurthy is currently compiling a corpus of English in Namibia, which is one of five countries in Africa to be included in the International Corpus of English.

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