

Braiding African Indigenous Education and Western Knowledge: A Case Study In Strengthening Cultural Identity

By Alyna Johnson

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Alyna Johnson is a student at The Winsor School in Massachusetts interested in sociocultural anthropology and how distinguishing adaptive cultural resilience from catastrophic cultural loss, advancing culturally responsive education, and examining bias in artificial intelligence can inform more equitable and effective education. Her interest in culturally responsive education, particularly for immigrant and Indigenous populations, was inspired in part by her mother's experience moving from India to Kenya as a child, where studying Swahili alongside Kenyan and African history fostered cultural fluency and a sense of belonging.

ABSTRACT

This article investigates why braiding African Indigenous Education (AIE) and Western education is critical to the preservation of African cultural identity. It first defines AIE and then traces its historical disruption through missionary, colonial, apartheid, and post-independence educational models. Drawing on case studies from Namibia's educational system, the analysis illustrates the marginalization of Indigenous knowledge alongside efforts to braid it with formal schooling. Together, these cases demonstrate the need for a shift away from privileging Western knowledge as universally applicable and superior toward embracing a broader set of epistemologies, ontologies, and educational values. Incorporating AIE—particularly through experiential learning, Indigenous-language instruction, and the cultivation of culturally competent faculties—can, in turn, foster more effective community participation, critical consciousness, and cultural pride. It also explores the compatibility of modernization and globalization with Indigenous education, as evidenced by youth-led reinterpretations of tradition, and the necessity of such contemporary adaptation to AIE's survival. This study is significant because it offers pathways for addressing systemic inequities in African education, especially those produced by colonial legacies of stigma and cultural alienation, while remaining applicable to wider global debates about curriculum and pedagogical reform and educational equity.

Keywords: *African Indigenous Education, Decolonization, Namibia, Cultural Identity, Indigenous Knowledge Systems, Curriculum Reform, Postcolonial Education, Educational Equity*

BRAIDING AFRICAN INDIGENOUS EDUCATION AND WESTERN KNOWLEDGE: A CASE STUDY IN STRENGTHENING CULTURAL IDENTITY

Historically, African Indigenous Education (AIE), a traditional learning system that predates Western schooling and focuses on holistic development to prepare students for their future roles within their environments, has been marginalized within formal education. Reasons include its perceived inability to be universally applicable and thus to be taken out of the cultural context in which it evolved. This capacity has been ascribed almost exclusively to Western scientific knowledge, which is often framed as producing universal principles applicable across cultures. For this reason, Stephen Brush and Doreen Stabinsky characterize Western science as “de-cultured.” In contrast, they believe Indigenous knowledge to be culture-specific (Stabinsky & Brush, 1996, as cited in Ezeanya-Esiobu, 2019, p. 7). Within academia as well as other research-focused and scholarly circles, Indigenous knowledge systems have also been considered outdated and “backward.” Likewise, Indigenous peoples’ lifestyles have been frequently portrayed as simple, naïve, or even primitive. They are described as “reflective of an earlier, and therefore, inferior stage in human cultural progress” and, in turn, perceived as irrelevant to the needs of modern, technologically advanced societies (Suzuki & Knudtson, 1993, p. 1). As a result, scholarly emphasis has been placed on Western knowledge at the expense of local knowledge (Ezeanya-Esiobu, 2019, p. 7).

Nevertheless, scholars have begun to recognize that Western science is just one form of knowledge that should not serve as a benchmark for understanding Indigenous knowledge systems. Chidi Oguamanam (2006), for instance, advocates for a more pluralistic understanding of reason by arguing that all traditions share a baseline of logic, driven by fundamental human needs and supported by common human cognitive structures, but they are “activated and expressed in different cultural contexts” (p. 17). Due to this shared baseline, no traditions can claim inherent superiority or a more fundamental status of being; rather, they can assert their suitability for specific cultural contexts only.

Since education cannot be separated from cultural contexts without misaligning curricula with learners’ lived experiences, colonizers’ replacement of AIE with Western education constituted what Stewart Lee Kugara and Tsetselelane Decide Mdhuli (2023) describe as a “paralysis of analysis.” Indigenous peoples trained through Western curricula designed for different cultural contexts were left unable to contribute meaningfully to their own communities (p. 133). The harms of colonial education extended beyond culturally misaligned curricular content to its pedagogical methods. Critiquing the enduring effects of colonial educational models, Paulo Freire

(2000) contends that education in formerly colonized regions stifles creativity by “maintain[ing] the submersion of consciousness” and thus preserving colonial power dynamics. In this “banking concept of education,” teachers, who “consider themselves knowledgeable,” make deposits of information into students, passive consumers whom “they consider to know nothing” (p. 58). However, John Dewey (1916) argues that learners must navigate “experiences, enterprises, and exercises” through “maximal self-direction, assumption of responsibility, [and] exercise of choice in terms of life values,” a recommendation that challenges educational models that position students as passive recipients of knowledge (p. 13). Freire suggests that teachers and students should instead act as co-learners in a mutual, dialogical process. Rather than merely receiving material presented as abstract, universal, and independent of their surroundings and realities, they should collaborate to comprehend reality through curricula centered on real-world situations pertinent to their lives. This awakened consciousness extends beyond intellectual understanding to *praxis*: the application of one’s critical awareness to confront injustice and transform oppressive conditions into a more humane and just reality (Freire, 2000, pp. 15, 68). By enabling students to examine their own world experiences, schools can empower students to feel like masters of their own thinking (Ezeanya-Esiobu, 2019, p. 16).

Such critiques of Western knowledge’s claimed universality and the repercussions of the colonial displacement of AIE motivate the critical question this article examines: Why is implementing AIE within a modern Western framework important to the Namibian educational system, and how can this harmony be achieved? As is already evident, revitalizing AIE is crucial for assisting the formerly colonized in developing critical consciousness, or learning to perceive and counter the oppressive forces acting against them (Trifonas, 2000, p. 19). International actors must recognize the need for Indigenous communities to reinvent their education such that it deviates from the colonial model; in doing so, they can transition from a state of mental dependence on colonizers to one of true liberation and locally grounded innovation (Ezeanya-Esiobu, 2019, p. 15). However, since Western education is inescapable in a modern context, formal schooling must be braided with AIE, a balance that can be achieved through a collaborative approach that fosters intercultural and intergenerational dialogue among primary stakeholders. As Sonya Atalay (n.d.) explains in the description of her research on MIT’s faculty webpage, “braiding” Indigenous knowledge frameworks and scientific practices with Western ones is distinct from blending or integrating; it permits the plural coexistence of many knowledges by bringing together strands of each to achieve common objectives while preserving their individual integrity (para. 2).

A CLOSER LOOK AT THE NATURE OF AIE

As scholars reexamine AIE amid recent efforts at revitalization, achieving consensus on its definition has proven difficult due to the lasting influence of Western education on thought patterns (Kugara & Mdhluli, 2023, p. 134). However, key attributes of Indigenous knowledge can be agreed on that also reveal the dissimilar

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philosophical underpinnings of Indigenous and Western knowledge (Ezeanya-Esiobu, 2019, pp. 7-8). For example, Indigenous knowledge is primarily passed down orally via folklore and legend or imitation and demonstration while Western science imparts knowledge via written communication (Oguamanam, 2006, pp. 15-16). Furthermore, the transmission of the former is a collective effort: in *Education in Africa*, Abdou Moumouni (1968) explains that while nuclear and extended family members are primarily responsible for socializing their children, traditional education in Africa depends heavily on the broader community. Although from a Western perspective these community-based efforts may appear to entrust education to unpredictable individual impulses, Moumouni argues that the system is in fact well structured. It is intentionally designed to instill values, discipline, and knowledge from birth to adulthood to ensure individuals contribute to overall societal development (Moumouni, 1968, p. 16). More specifically, AIE promotes the social cohesion and solidarity of communal living societies by transmitting cultural values and norms that reflect *Ubuntu*, the Nguni philosophy emphasizing communal responsibility (Josua et al., 2022, p. 1155). AIE also emphasizes experiential learning relevant to survival and livelihood, as Indigenous communities regard learning as deeply interwoven with life itself (Kugara & Mdhluli, 2023, p. 135). Conversely, Western knowledge is often taught and absorbed through abstract concepts (Moumouni, 1968, p. 16).

Overall, this form of education provides essential skills for individual, communal, and environmental survival and is aligned with Dewey (1916) and Freire's (2000) emphasis on experiential, contextually relevant learning. In light of these principles, this paper defines AIE as the body of relevant skills, experiences, values, and knowledge that African communities utilize to interpret their realities within their environment and that emphasizes practical teachings that foster prosperity by leveraging locally available resources.

THE DISPLACEMENT OF AIE

Missionary Influence

Despite the demonstrated importance of AIE, colonialism continues to influence perceptions of contemporary revitalization efforts. Namibia's educational landscape was shaped by successive layers of colonial governance rather than a single colonial power. Each imposed its own educational structures, cultural norms, and political agendas, and communities repeatedly witnessed Indigenous learning being reshaped or displaced by external authorities. As a result, some older Africans and Indigenous knowledge holders fear that efforts to braid AIE with Western education may reproduce historical patterns of cultural suppression and exploitation.

This pattern began with the 1805 arrival of the first missionary society in Namibia, the London Missionary Society, which not only established churches but also founded schools to teach Christian catechism. Both it and subsequent missionary societies believed catechism would elevate Indigenous populations from a

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perceived state of “uncivilization” and “paganism,” and this pursuit of Christianization supplanted Indigenous cultural practices with European ways of life and thought (Josua et al., 2022, p. 1158). The resulting “cultural schizophrenia” significantly weakened African culture and values. Many newly Christianized natives emerged from colonial schooling committed to eradicating practices deemed even minimally anti-Christian or anti-Western (Mazrui, 1979, p. 35).

In addition to Europeanized Africans, missionaries sought to produce compliant laborers. Therefore, missionary education focused only on basic literacy and numeracy deemed sufficient for such work, and it trained girls in domestic skills and boys in vocational trades like brickmaking, carpentry, and gardening. This approach appears to have induced a culture of servanthood and royalism (Josua et al., 2022, pp. 1158-1159). While AIE had aimed to foster holistic development and to train the blacksmiths, weavers, shoemakers, and other craftsmen essential for local economies, missionary curricula served European economic ambitions. Former missionary David Livingstone confirms that these missionaries’ chief responsibility was to incorporate Africans into European economic systems. Industrialization in Africa, he asserts, was to be prohibited; rather, the continent was to function as a plantation for the metropole by producing the crops required by industrial Europe (Ezeanya-Esiobu, 2019, pp. 25-26). Ultimately, missionary intervention did more than alter educational practices; it reshaped cultural orientations, economic structures, and social identities and thereby fundamentally uprooted a cohesive way of life that AIE had long sustained. Education served as a tool for colonizers to effect wholesale cultural change.

German Colonial Rule

Despite fervent efforts to replace AIE, traditional education remained blended with missionary instruction until the establishment of German colonial rule, which lasted from 1884 to 1915. The Germans exhibited little interest in offering liberating education to Indigenous Namibians. Instead, while dictating a curriculum that served German settlers’ interests, they allowed missionaries to continue providing instruction. As under early missionary influence, the objective was not to foster freedom, critical thinking, or innovation but rather to create a docile workforce of livestock herders and domestic servants (Josua et al., 2022, pp. 1159-1160).

The South African Apartheid Regime

Once Germany’s rule over Namibia ended during World War I, South African forces governed it under martial law until 1921. Under the terms of a League of Nations Mandate, South Africa, acting on behalf of Britain, assumed official responsibility for administering Namibia. The South African colonial regime was not committed to establishing education that would emancipate Africans and largely entrusted missionary societies, subject to government oversight, with educational matters just as the Germans had. However, in contrast to this

earlier administration, the South African government intervened with reforms designed to enforce policies of white supremacy and racial segregation, or apartheid. The new curriculum reinforced a culture of separate economic and social development based on race and ethnicity. This segregated education consisted of eleven discrete and unequal systems serving particular ethnic groups and tribes whereas white students were not similarly separated by ethnic identity. While Black individuals received the worst education, with the least state assistance, white students benefitted from the best, and “coloreds”—of mixed race—received an intermediate quality. Since white inhabitants were granted superior funding and resources, they held socioeconomic and cultural competitive advantages over their Black and colored peers. By the time Namibia achieved independence in 1990, its educational system was deeply entrenched in legally enforced racial segregation and reserved quality schooling as a privilege for a select few (Josua et al., 2022, pp. 1160-1162).

Post-Independence Education

Post-independence Namibia saw improvements to its educational system but few substantial efforts to revive AIE. Shortly after the country gained independence, African leaders began making significant investments to increase educational access, and, keen to deliver the promised benefits of freedom to the people, they sought and accepted help from all who offered. They were driven, in particular, by extremely low literacy rates. This aspiration to fund education attracted support from donors, including the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, which provided considerable funding to nations lacking sufficient financial resources to educate their populations. Likewise, Britain and France served as donor nations to assist their former colonies in developing educational systems. These agencies and bilateral connections primarily supplied teachers and volunteers, transported textbooks and learning materials, and awarded scholarships to brilliant African youth (Ezeanya-Esiobu, 2019, pp. 43-44).

While beneficial, this reliance on external aid hindered African autonomy. Hussein Abdilahi Bulhan (1985/2004) provides deeper insight into why, beyond the aforementioned resource constraints, African leadership may have felt incapacitated without foreign support: violent experiences can distort a victim’s development and hamper productivity. The resulting “death” is more psychological than physical; it refers to the erosion of creativity and innovation within the minds of the violently controlled (Bulhan, 1985/2004, p. 53). In this case, colonialism resulted in internalized inferiority and, in turn, reliance on colonial powers to meet daily needs. Unsurprisingly, this dependency syndrome persisted with minimal change even after political authority shifted with the formal end of colonial rule.

By encouraging a high proportion of foreign staff, dependence on foreign assistance has shaped curricular content in addition to the financing of education. In 1978, nearly 50% of the teaching workforce in several English- and French-speaking countries in sub-Saharan Africa was non-African. However, not only

foreigners but also African educators perpetuated the Eurocentric curricula of pre-independence Africa, as many were either trained in the West or products of colonial education. The persistence of such barriers to curriculum and pedagogical reform lies at the heart of postcolonial nations' struggle to decolonize education (Ezeanya-Esiobu, 2019, pp. 40, 44).

The efforts of South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO), which won Namibia's first democratic elections and formed a government in 1990, highlight the challenges of reforming a colonially bequeathed educational system although some progress has been made under its leadership. For instance, the enshrinement of the right to education for all citizens in Article 20(1) of Namibia's constitution, coupled with the 2013 declaration of free primary-to-secondary education in governmental schools, significantly widened access to education, so there was a large increase in student enrollment. This expanded accessibility fostered a sense of national unity among populations formerly divided by social and economic segregation. As part of further efforts to establish a desegregated educational system, the Namibian government introduced "Towards Education for All" in 1993, and previously separate racial systems were "merged into one unified, democratic, national department of education" (Josua et al., 2022, pp. 1161-1163; Shanyanana-Amaambo, 2011, p. 5).

THE MEANS OF EDUCATIONAL REFORM

An Intercultural Dialogue

Despite reforms expanding educational access and desegregating the school system, as Chika Ezeanya-Esiobu (2019) observes, Namibia focused not on "what was being taught, but [on] how many were being taught" (p. 44). Consequently, the curriculum continues to lack cultural relevance. To embrace interculturalism in education genuinely—by ensuring that the unique and valuable components of AIE are understood, respected, and braided into the curriculum—active participation from all stakeholders is essential (Kugara & Mdhluli, 2023, pp. 134, 137).

This collaborative approach proves challenging because AIE and Western education are based on different worldviews and intricate knowledge systems rooted in distinct social, cultural, historical, and political contexts. Since many aspects of African Indigenous knowledge conflict with Western science, it is sometimes met with skepticism when evaluated through a Western lens (Kugara & Mdhluli, 2023, p. 137). Emphasizing intuition, emotional engagement, and subjective certainty, Indigenous knowledge emerges from sustained, intimate interaction with the natural environment. Western science, in contrast, relies heavily on quantitative measurement and mathematical abstraction and prioritizes analytical distance between the observer and the observed (Oguamanam, 2006, pp. 15-16).

The cultural disjuncture between traditional AIE and Western-oriented education can generate tension and resentment when elements of Indigenous knowledge deemed insignificant by Western standards are discarded or altered to conform to them (Kugara & Mdhuli, 2023, p. 140). However, participants can engage more productively in a cross-cultural dialogue by moving beyond the perception of Indigenous and Western knowledge as dichotomous and instead recognizing the potential for interpersonal connection, understanding of each other's subjective viewpoints, and contextual grounding. Vanessa Wijngaarden and Grace Ese-osa Idahosa (2020) challenge the binary opposition between these knowledge systems by rejecting the assumption that one is strictly traditional and cultural while the other strictly modern. They argue that while "Indigenous" is often used to misrepresent peoples as static cultural outgroups lacking modernity, Indigenous identity is actively asserted and lived by contemporary individuals. Moreover, modernity itself is cultural, as it exists in multiple forms as opposed to a single universal model. Just as modernity is not confined to Western societies, Indigeneity is not exclusive to non-Western ones; all humans are Indigenous to specific places that serve as reference points shaping how they perceive and engage with the world. Given this overlap, the conventional division between Western and non-Western societies is a flawed product of modernist ideology, and the Indigenous and Western should instead be understood as intertwined and mutually influential (Wijngaarden & Idahosa, 2020, pp. 1-3).

Challenging this alleged dichotomy may also prevent unequal processes of replacement or subsumption by illuminating the capacity of the two knowledge systems to be braided. The Western knowledge system should not supplant the Indigenous one. At the same time, a wholesale return to precolonial education is unrealistic in a modern state system. Decolonization, therefore, entails creating spaces for collaborative dialogue between knowledge systems stemming from diverse contexts rather than simply returning to a precolonial past untouched by Western domination (Wijngaarden & Idahosa, 2020, p. 7).

As part of the discussion on how to facilitate collaborative dialogue, it is important to clarify that, in efforts to avoid discord arising from the differences between Western and Indigenous knowledges, they should not be misconceived as comparable. In fact, Wijngaarden and Idahosa (2020) explain that attempts to compare knowledge systems often fail because they, guided by distinct standards of validity, lack a common criterion by which they can be evaluated. Acknowledging this incommensurability may help challenge the assumption that all academics operate within a single epistemological and ontological framework or should do so. Overall, encouraging a dialogical approach rather than organizing knowledges hierarchically requires recognition of not only common ground but also fundamental differences preventing direct comparison. When these conditions are met, collaborative dialogue has the potential to reconcile universalism, the belief in intercultural commonalities, with cultural relativism, which holds that one's practices, values, and beliefs should be understood within the context of one's culture rather than assessed using different cultural standards (Wijngaarden & Idahosa, 2020, pp. 13, 15).

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AN INTERGENERATIONAL DIALOGUE

Executing this complex and sensitive braiding process also requires *intergenerational* dialogue, which presents additional collaborative challenges. For older African generations that endured apartheid divide-and-rule policies and the nationalist liberation struggle, intercultural efforts to revitalize AIE risk evoking historical trauma, for colonialism sought to destroy this very knowledge system. Specifically, due to past experiences with the unethical commercialization of Indigenous knowledge, some in this demographic fear that welcoming foreign methods may enable continued financial exploitation of Africans through resource extraction or appropriation of intellectual property. Furthermore, African Indigenous knowledge holders regard certain Indigenous knowledge as sacred and confidential and thus oppose sharing it with outsiders, especially developers of Western educational systems, viewed as threatening the final vestiges of African Indigenous cultural pride. This historical baggage fuels the sentiment that “African issues must be addressed by African people”—who are perceived as possessing contextual understanding, minimal judgment, and genuine concern for the continent’s well-being—as well as the pursuit of a goal that is unattainable in the contemporary era: fully salvaging AIE without braiding in Western elements (Kugara & Mdhuli, 2023, pp. 136-137, 139-140). Interviews conducted by Ian Fairweather (2006) with older African adults, who lamented the younger generation’s lack of knowledge about their history, reiterate these concerns about encroaching Western influence. For example, in 1999, a cultural officer for Ondangwa East from the Ministry of Basic Education, Sport and Culture expressed a sense of responsibility to “protect the traditions and culture of the region because people nowadays are forgetting many things,” a reflection of the fear that Indigenous knowledge is becoming increasingly vulnerable to erosion. Such anxieties limit the possibility of collaboration by casting efforts to braid African Indigenous and Western knowledge systems as threats rather than opportunities (Fairweather, 2006, p. 723).

Youth’s Braiding of Tradition and Modernity

Although efforts to salvage Namibia’s “authentic” traditional culture often target young people, they do not always receive the message of cultural preservation as intended. For instance, all secondary schools in the four areas comprising the former apartheid “homeland” of Owamboland now feature cultural groups, which execute heritage performances for cultural tourists. Young Owambo view heritage as a crucial component of modernity and thus seek out traditions as such “heritage”; however, they reinterpret or reenact them to develop styles distinct from those of the established adult groups. Their depoliticized, decontextualized reconstructions of “tradition” as “heritage” have led to a reconception of local tradition, which now serves not only to authenticate modern identities by grounding them in history but also to actualize postcolonial subjectivities by facilitating reciprocal exchanges with cultural tourists. This interaction between members of local cultures and

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broadier global networks enables the former to be recognized on an international scale (Fairweather, 2006, pp. 723-724, 731, 734).

Youth's reenactment of the past constitutes a partial, indirect identification with it that is open to creative interpretation and thus blurs the conventional divide between tradition and modernity. Many carefully replicate traditional costumes, especially those of females, which involve aprons adorned with beads made from ostrich eggshells and white snail shells called *ombi*. Some dancers even wear intricate traditional hairstyles. However, historically, Owambo women were topless, and although some groups especially concerned with authenticity maintain this practice, most young women view it as unchristian and demeaning. As a result, numerous groups, mimicking the fashions brought by missionaries in the early 1900s, dress in Western attire; even so, they tend to opt for shirts and dresses that are red, a color linked to pre-Christian tradition. Others incorporate modern novelties such as red bikini tops while continuing to wear traditional aprons. Likewise, the groups acquire a collection of songs and dances from elders but frequently write their own lyrics and add new elements to the dances. Song lyrics increasingly feature slogans of SWAPO, English words, and even soccer chants while still addressing traditional themes, like love and marriage, childbirth, and laboring in the fields. Overall, north-central Namibian youth's performances of "traditional music" occupy a hybrid space between local traditions and global modernity and, in doing so, have given rise to what John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff (1999) describe as "*new* forms of consciousness," or of collective cultural and political self-understanding (Fairweather, 2006, pp. 727-729; p. 284).

Despite negative reactions from some elders, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998) asserts that, rather than merely reversing the de-culturation produced by colonial histories of missionization and forced assimilation, the heritage industry *should* function as a platform for new cultural creation. Although the older generation fears that the younger one has been or will be led astray by modern popular culture, the former often disregards the fact that youth's engagement is not passive. In the nation's evolving post-apartheid cultural landscape, young people should be regarded not as merely a social problem but rather as independent agents who actively shape their distinctive postcolonial identities by selecting which elements of global culture to consume, a perception that can be cultivated through respectful intergenerational conversation (Fairweather, 2006, p. 727; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998, p. 149).

Moreover, dialogue can help elders recognize that their attempts to recreate the past not only overlook the importance of historical change but also dampen youth's newfound enthusiasm about their heritage, which often relies on modernizing tradition. In interviews with Fairweather (2006), members of the Tupandaleni youth cultural group explained that although they first learned traditional songs through church-organized workshops, incorporating modern elements, specifically gospel songs, into their collection of traditional music sparked greater interest among their local peers. Believing that adapting traditional songs enhances their

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relevance, one member stated, “The thing that makes tradition weak is that it stays the same, if it modernizes it can attract people.” Whereas older Namibians desire salvage and preservation, the appeal of tradition to youth lies not in its maintenance of a fixed local identity but rather in its capacity to create opportunities for interaction with tourists, whom they perceive as embodying global modernity (Fairweather, 2006, pp. 735-736). The resulting relationships are mutually beneficial not because Namibians derive economic gain from performative displays for outsiders’ consumption but because culture is exchanged on local terms; Namibians emerge as active curators and educators of their evolving ethnic identities rather than passive, static museum exhibits to be observed. Allowing cultural pride to be expressed through such global connections as opposed to insisting on an educational system devoid of Western influences, an unrealistic objective, is essential for sustaining youth engagement with Namibian culture. Evidently, helping the older generation comprehend the younger one’s beneficial capacity to balance the preservation of tradition with participation in modernization and globalization is crucial for encouraging both age groups to braid AIE with Western education.

RECOMMENDED PATHWAYS OF EDUCATIONAL REFORM

Translating insights gained through intercultural and intergenerational dialogue into lasting educational transformation requires concrete changes to pedagogical approaches and legal frameworks.

Using Indigenous Languages

Indigenous knowledge can be braided into existing Western educational systems through the incorporation of not only Indigenous practices and values but also Indigenous languages, integral components of their broader cultures (Kugara & Mdhluli, 2023, pp. 137-138). Once imperial languages became the official languages of education and communication in African colonies, they functioned as tools of acculturation (Ezeanya-Esiobu, 2019, p. 32). Ngugi Wa Thiong’o (1986) argues that this linguistic influence allowed former colonizers to retain control over Africans’ minds after colonial rule by diminishing cultural pride and encouraging identification with languages other than their own. Growing up in rural Kenya, Wa Thiong’o communicated in his mother tongue, Gikuyu, at home and in the fields; however, at school, children were punished for speaking their native languages and praised as intelligent for using English. English, he observed, “became the main determinant of a child’s progress up the ladder of the formal education” (p. 12). Therefore, teaching students in their Indigenous languages alongside globally recognized ones is critical to decolonizing their mentalities.

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Cultivating Culturally Sensitive Teachers

As evidenced by the importance of conveying material in Indigenous languages, the effective implementation of AIE depends in part on the delivery of educational content, which is influenced by teaching styles as well. Western-trained educators teaching Indigenous knowledge systems often think from the Western perspective while struggling to adopt the African one. To feature Indigenous viewpoints effectively, teachers must be equipped with relevant knowledge and skills via cultural sensitivity workshops that foster appreciation for Indigenous groups' diverse backgrounds (Kugara & Mdhluli, 2023, p. 138).

Instituting a Supportive Legal Framework

Statutes and policies must support the acceptance and protection of Indigenous knowledge within the Namibian educational system and receive adequate funding. Colonial and apartheid regimes used legal frameworks to suppress AIE; contemporary legislation should instead empower Africans by aligning education with local ideologies and environmental realities (Kugara & Mdhluli, 2023, pp. 138-139). While Africa's educational framework will continue to include Western knowledge, skills, methodologies, and research tools, policies should ensure that these influences do not serve as its foundation.

THE SAN'S EDUCATIONAL BARRIERS

Key stakeholders in this endeavor include groups historically subjected to acute oppression, such as the Indigenous San people. The San traditionally lived as seminomadic hunter-gatherers, but the loss of secure access to land and resources has led to significant shifts in their lifestyles. Their educational obstacles date back to pre-independence times, when the colonial governments made few attempts to grant San children educational opportunities due to geographic dispersion and discriminatory attitudes. Following independence, progressive policies recognizing linguistic and cultural diversity expanded educational access, yet San participation remains limited (Ninkova, 2020, pp. 159-160).

San children continue to exhibit lower attendance and completion rates and higher dropout rates than other Namibian groups; although enrollment has increased, fewer than 1% of San learners had reached upper secondary school according to the latest statistics cited by Velina Ninkova (2020) (pp. 163-164). The challenges San students face that may contribute to these outcomes can be grouped into three broad categories: 1) socioeconomic barriers, 2) stigma, and 3) linguistic and cultural alienation. Although policies exempt marginalized learners from hostel fees and guarantee free basic education, costs associated with transportation, uniforms, shoes, supplies, and food continue to impede attendance (Ninkova, 2020, p. 164).

Policy interventions have been still less successful in addressing stigma and linguistic and cultural alienation. The *Language Policy for Schools in Namibia* acknowledges the value of mother-tongue instruction and permits its use during the first three years of schooling. Yet, only Ju|'hoan, one of seven San languages spoken in Namibia, has been adopted as a language of instruction. Implementation is hindered by the diversity of San languages within classrooms and a shortage of teachers proficient in Ju|'hoan and skilled in multilingual education (Ninkova, 2020, p. 163). Other policies similarly articulate inclusive goals but falter in practice. The *National Policy Options for Educationally Marginalized Children* mandates education that enables San children to “keep and be proud of their culture” and encourages teaching that “include[s] multicultural issues” (Ministry of Basic Education, Sport and Culture, 2000, pp. 12, 28). Likewise, the Ministry of Education’s *Sector Policy on Inclusive Education* calls for flexible approaches responsive to marginalized students’ cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Nevertheless, as demonstrated by Ninkova’s (2020) ethnographic study of eight primary schools serving the Omaheke Ju|'hoansi, educators’ cultural incompetence and culturally irrelevant curricula continue to alienate San students. Teachers often overemphasize difference and thereby essentialize cultures and disregard intragroup diversity. They also tend to caricature groups, particularly the San, according to assumed normative standards (Ninkova, 2020, pp. 163-164, 174-175).

SCHOOLS’ REINFORCEMENT OF PREJUDICES AGAINST THE SAN

In mainstream Namibian society, the San are often perceived as occupying a liminal space between nature and society, a perception that sustains their historical dehumanization, exoticization, and “othering.” During German colonial rule, the administration distinguished between *Eingeborenen*, or Bantu natives, and *Buschleute*, or Bushmen, a classification that informed colonial and apartheid-era policies concerning land distribution and coercive governance (Ninkova, 2020, p. 175).

Educational practices in contemporary Namibia reinforce long-standing prejudices against the San through dehumanizing metaphors and stereotypes rooted in the aforementioned emphasis on superficial cultural differences. Specifically, in the Omaheke, teachers describe Ju|'hoan students as “difficult,” “lazy,” “shy,” or “stubborn” and reduce San culture to wearing skins and storing water in ostrich eggshells, a tendency that promotes a narrow, outdated view of Ju|'hoan identity. Statements such as “this is how they are” or “this is how they were created” deny the Ju|'hoansi’s agency by characterizing their differences as fixed and biologically determined while legitimizing entrenched power imbalances (Ninkova, 2020, p. 175). Addressing this marginalization through meaningful engagement with San stakeholders is essential for braiding Indigenous and Western knowledges while dismantling colonial hierarchies.

BUILDING CULTURALLY COMPETENT FACULTIES

Educators' tendency to reduce culture to a superficial set of observable practices, as documented in the Omahaeke, reiterates the inadequate preparation they receive to navigate diversity within their classrooms. However, Ninkova's (2020) work illuminates that even the improved training models proposed above cannot address the scarcity of Indigenous and minority educators. Six of the seven principals interviewed by Ninkova reported insufficient resources or support to implement inclusive policies and identified Ju|'hoan teachers as among their most urgent needs. As one principal emphasized, "Where are the San teachers? They are not on the market. The policy is one thing, but when it comes to implementation, our hands are tied." Such educators would enhance the visibility of Ju|'hoan culture in addition to facilitating mother-tongue instruction in Ju|'hoan (Ninkova, 2020, pp. 168, 176).

ADDITIONAL CHALLENGES TO SAN EDUCATION

Resource constraints also limit initiatives such as "cultural days," during which elders from various ethnic groups, including the Ju|'hoansi, visit to share stories with students. Despite positive feedback, such events remain irregular, as do bush trips intended to engage Ju|'hoan traditional knowledge, and both remain poorly braided into the broader curriculum. That these initiatives continue to exoticize the Ju|'hoansi rather than position AIE on equal footing with the Western educational model suggests, moreover, that the genuine inclusion of Ju|'hoan learners in mainstream education requires broader efforts to dismantle the San's systemic "othering"; education alone cannot produce profound sociopolitical change without a foundation of national inclusion (Ninkova, 2020, pp. 174, 176).

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Although the end of colonial rule marked the withdrawal of the "sword and bullet," former colonizers replaced overt violence with the "chalk and blackboard." Educational systems thus became tools for maintaining control over African societies (Wa Thiong'o, 1986, p. 12). Encouraging dialogue between stakeholders is essential for the decentralization of curriculum and pedagogical design, which holds the potential to decolonize education so that it is more responsive to local realities. Such dialogue can bridge Namibia's significant generational gap, widening as some adults fear their children's cultural estrangement, as well as the gap in understanding between traditional Indigenous and Westernized individuals.

However, beyond the lack of cultural inclusivity, factors such as the mobility of seminomadic groups, including the Ju|'hoansi, have long alienated them from formal educational systems. In response, the Namibian government developed the Ondao Mobile School Project after consulting seminomadic communities to ensure

that the proposed model aligned with local priorities and did not disrupt income-generating activities (Hailombe, 2011, pp. 140-141).

Further research should evaluate whether mobile schooling achieves its objectives of improving living standards and educational outcomes among seminomadic and nomadic communities. Equally important is ensuring that such models genuinely braid formal schooling with AIE. While mobile schooling seeks to accommodate mobility and students' continued contribution to their family economies, it may fall short of these aspirations and/or delivering culturally relevant material (Hailombe, 2011, p. 143). This risk highlights education's dual capacity for profound harm and benefit. Namibia's colonial legacy demonstrates that it can function as an instrument of external domination that severs learners from Indigenous knowledge, yet education can also foster its revitalization. Only by meaningfully braiding AIE with formal schooling can Namibia move beyond symbolic reform and prioritize local knowledge while dismantling colonial hierarchies that continue to privilege Western knowledge as universal and superior.

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