OTISILE NTSOANE

COMMUNITY-BASED KNOWLEDGE AND ITS UTILIZATION FOR SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS AMONG THE BAKGATLA PEOPLE, NORTH-WEST PROVINCE (SOUTH AFRICA)

The Bakgatla are an Indigenous African ethnic group in South Africa located in the North-West Province near the Pilanesberg area. An ethnographic study conducted among this ethnic group showed that before the impact of colonialism and apartheid these people had rich knowledge about the cultural and bio-diversity of their environment and managed to utilize these cultural and natural resources for their sustainable livelihoods. Sustainable livelihood is often defined as "the capacity of people to make a living and improve their quality of life without jeopardizing the livelihood options of others either now or in the future". Livelihood refers to the means, activities, entitlements and assets by which people make a living. These assets that people utilize in their efforts to secure their livelihoods range from natural (land and water), physical (roads, buildings), human (knowledge, creativity) and social assets (community, family and social networks). The study found that in spite of the negligence and decline in the utilization of these local knowledge systems among the Bakgatla due to the impact of colonialism and apartheid, these knowledge systems are still popular among the elderly in the 28 villages of the Bakgatla people. These local knowledge systems can be discussed under the following aspects:

Indigenous Food Security Systems

Food Security, defined as access to food needed for healthy life by people at all times, was a pivotal part of sustainable livelihoods among the Bakgatla people. Knowledge about food security is too often not found in systematic records or documentation and therefore the appropriateness of its utilization is based on the knowledge of previous generations. Indigenous Knowledge as a systematic body of knowledge acquired by local people through the accumulation of experience include informal experiments and intimate understanding of the environment. This intimate understanding was used in areas of agricultural productivities including husbandry, poultry, plant, etc.

Community members worked individually and collectively as a labor force (Letsema), to ensure that the community had enough food for survival under different natural and human-made adverse conditions such as drought, flood, famine, war, etc.

The local people had different knowledge and technological skills of preserving and storing food stuff, water supply and soil fertility. For instance, different types of silos were constructed using clay, cow dung, wood and other local materials. Grains were stored in these silos for future use. Some of these grains were refined while others were stored in their natural form. In order to protect the grains against decay and destruction by various types of insects, the grains were either smoked or mixed with ashes. Other forms of preserving food stuffs such as meat or vegetables included boiling, sun drying, smoking and salting. Thereafter, the vegetable or meat was stored in clay pots or sacks.
The Indigenous method of preserving water among the Bakgatla was known as 'go dirisa Ditsaga'. This method ensured that there was adequate clean water supply in the household. This involved preserving the water in large and small clay pots. The small clay pots were used for immediate utilization within and outside the household. In order to keep the water cool, a hole was dug in the ground where there was always shade.

**Indigenous Healing Systems**

Bakgatla had various forms of healing knowledge systems including medicinal plants and animals. The custodians of these knowledge systems and technologies were the traditional healers and herbalists. The diviners used various methods of healing which included animal, plants, water and spiritual. In spite of the introduction of western healing systems among the Bakgatla, the study found that most of the respondents expressed high regard for the Indigenous healing systems. An example is *mogaga*, a plant used by local people for cleansing after attending a funeral. This practice is performed by both Christian and non-Christian Bakgatla. This reflects the strong adherence to local belief systems among the Bakgatla.

Furthermore, the respondents indicated the tendency for most community members (both Christian and non-Christians) to consult traditional healers before and after consulting western medical practitioners.

**Medicinal Plants and Veldt Food**

The region of Bakgatla is rich with biodiversity where community-based knowledge plays a pivotal role in the utilization and conservation of natural resources. As stated above, many people consult traditional healers who use these plants for healing various diseases. In addition to medicinal plants, Indigenous veldt fruit and vegetables form part of the natural resource providing food stuff. The study found that there is need for further development of the resource base and utilization of modern storage systems since demand for medicinal plants has tremendously increased. Also that the knowledge rich Bakgatla community can increase their economic growth if they can be assisted with seed funding to develop natural resources for socio-economic sustenance.

**Handicraft Technology**

Bakgatla depends heavily on their natural environment for life sustainability. Both men and women possess special skills and technical knowledge used for producing items such as clay pots, sculptures, musical instruments etc.

Tanning hide remains a specialized skills only possessed by a few men. Hide is used for making shoes, twines, cloths etc. These products are sold to both outside markets and to members of the community.

Clay pots are symbolic and technical in that they are traditionally used for burying the dead (in *Tsaga*); for storing water (*nkgo*); for distribution (*nkgoana*). *Tsaga* (the big clay pot) was used for storing water as indicated by the Indigenous Food Security Systems. The skill for making these clay pots was exclusively feminine; it was a woman’s task to symbolically give birth to life. They are the ones who carry life from the womb to the cradle to the grave. So the making of the clay pots was a special responsibility to which taboo is attached. For example, from the time the clay is mixed until the clay pots are burned in the underground oven; women who are menstruating...
may not come near to where the clay pots are made. If they do so. It is said that the clay pots will crack.

Like clay pots, iron smelting remain a specialized skill; with only few male elders remaining as masters of this skill.

**Bio-Diversity and the Environment**

Biological Diversity is generally explained as the total of all living organisms (plants, animals, micro-organisms and the ecosystem in which these organisms live. Bakgatla demonstrate and possess great knowledge about bio-diversity of their area. This demands that the use of these plants for medicinal and nutritional purposes is transmitted to younger generations both orally and through observation. Also common among traditional leaders is ecological knowledge and utilization of animal tissues. With the advent of colonial western education system and its popular culture, youth have lost interest in the Indigenous Knowledge.

Knowledge of bio-diversity largely depended on the African philosophic and orientation approach. It was this orientation that was used for environmental management systems. Among the members of the community there were those who had specialized knowledge about utilization of animal remains and tissues for healing. They also learnt to deal with the animals for the purposes of conservation.

Through socio-ecological programs the Parks Board has began to use the Living Heritage Knowledge of the elders within the community to explain those things that are unknown about the bio-diversity to both tourists and other community members.

Knowledge about the cosmology, the stars, and the relatedness of human beings, their existence and the universe was a collected memory that was found in prose, story telling, dance, song and art.

Bakgatla hold a belief that if you happen to kill, for example, a python (*Tlhware*) a great storm will come and destroy the village. The killing of this snake should not only be avoided but it is known that this snake can also cause draught if killed in September.

In studying a plant, one must at the same time study the soil in which it grows, the water it absorbs, the air it breathes and the light it absorbs. Nothing in this world is an entirely independent entity. According to Credo Mutwa, no zoologist can claim that he understands a particular animal unless he understands it ecologically.

Management of the environment was largely maintained by practicing taboo. Members of the community had a collective responsibility over the sustainable utilization of veldt products as components of bio-diversity.

**Social Institutions**

Community-based knowledge is vital in all areas of productivity, politics, and belief systems. The local people build their plans on the basis of what they already know and understand as a result of centuries of trial and error. Hence the establishment of social institutions. Among the Bakgatla community-based knowledge used to be generated, engineered and transmitted at different institutions the main being the initiation (*Bogwera*, for boys and *Bojale*, for girls). Other institutions Indigenous Knowledge *Bongaka* (traditional healing), *kgotla* (traditional courts), *lenyalo* (marriage) etc., are still in place although they are corrupt to some extent by the colonial influence, they still maintain certain core-aspects of traditions.
Indigenous Knowledge that is relevant to the role of Bogwera, for example, is disappearing due to the fact that the early Christianization made the chief disregard Bogwera. However, those who happened to have undergone the passage to manhood have great respect for the institution. In explaining the significance of the Bogwera/Bojale institution Bakgatla maintained that it:

- It prepared boys and girls in their youth for community involvement in all areas of service provisioning.
- It assist in empowering youth on matters of living heritage, culture, biological diversity and related knowledge that strengthen youth with the necessary knowledge to deal with challenges of life.
- It ensures that sacredness and secrecy about the institution are kept.
- It puts in place the roles of men and women in society and community.
- It brings awareness about matters of sexuality and reproduction.
- It produces human capacity for knowledge productivity.
- Defines dignity and identity of the clan or community.

The Kgotla is an important institution where all the issues concerning the tribe and its members are handled. It is at this place that consultation takes place, where consensus is reached, fines are imposed and discipline is maintained. The knowledge about governance, administration and conflict resolution are expressed here. Norms and values that are entrenched in the customs are openly respected, with sanctions administered to offenders.

Bongaka as an institution is frequently utilized for leadership issues, for family consultation, to assist in finding a missing object, to get luck, and general utilization of medicine other than curing diseases. Bongaka is close to Bogosi (Chiefstainship) since all the functions of the tribe undergo a ritual of check-up before and thanksgiving after it had taken place. Unlike other institutions, Bongaka is highly specialized.

Community-based knowledge played a crucial role in informing the development both in the Western and Third World Countries. Knowledge generated from the above mentioned institutions was broadly used for the development of technology, problems solving, child rearing, agriculture,

Conclusion

Indigenous Knowledge has the potential for industrialization, job creation, living heritage protection and the general emergence of new enterprises in food, conservation, tourism, environment industries, medicinal etc. According to Serote the manner in which we apply and utilize Indigenous Knowledge Systems as a means of organized knowledge and how we use it for quality of life and how we involved Indigenous intellectual in the processes, also has the potential for our ‘suicide’ as a social group. Indigenous Knowledge has the potential also to transformation and shift within institutions the orientation that human beings come first and that our resources, both natural and human, must be conserved and preserved.

From these Community-based knowledges one realizes the bases for development is locked in the local resources, the peoples own understanding of their environment, living heritage and natural heritage. The potential that lies in the natural resource base of
the Indigenous community in the North-West Province can be utilized in many projects to alleviate poverty and include the rural peoples’ knowledge in planning for the 21st. The African Century and the renaissance of the cultures, arts, and the transformation of society posses questions of what were the African people, and what was our continent, before our enslavement, colonization and neo-colonization? The answer to these questions including that of human origin can be found in the expression that say, *SeSetho, Motho ke motho ka batho ba bangwe.* -A person is a person because of other persons

It is from this the Bakgatla community that I learnt the need to realize that ‘local knowledge will come to occupy an increasingly important place in accredited learning course, and as a resource in research, as academic and the public alike come to disregard the distinction between academic and local knowledge’ (Kraak, 2000). That community-based knowledge can be linked to ‘this complex of thought and feeling that is referred to as the ‘African system of thought’ because scholars attempt to understand both the practical and the theoretical images through which they interpret their lives (Martin & O’Meara195).

The healing systems as reflected within the Indigenous community like ‘medical practice, like the priesthood, was hereditary: just as the priest passed on his knowledge (sacred words rites, etc) to the one among his children chosen to succeed him after his death, so did the physician pass his knowledge on to the son who was to succeed him. Is it necessary to say that situation is the same in Black Africa today? (Diop 188).

I hope that you found the insight from the community-based knowledge useful as a vehicle to bring to the world knowledge of the significance of the Indigenous people in matters of biodiversity, culture and sustainable livelihoods. It is also my pleasure to note that this community-based knowledge assisted me and many other in finding ourselves as people, as possessing own world view and paradigm for the benefit of mankind.
REFERENCE

Diop Cheika, 1986, Civilization or Barbarism: An Authentic Anthropology, Lawrence Hill Books


Serote M.W. 2000, Hyena, Vivlia Publishers, Johannesburg