

Orature as an appropriate communal-based data-collection method in an Indigenous Science context: “*Whose sciences are we talking about?*”

Khauhelo S Mahlatsi¹, Shadreck Nembaware² and Abel J Pienaar

1. University of Venda, South Africa

2. Chinhoyi University of Technology Chinhoyi Zimbabwe

3. Professor & Associate Dean Faculty of Nursing and Midwifery, Shifa Tameer-e-Millat University, Islamabad, Pakistan.

*Corresponding Author: +923011049463, abel.pienaar@gmail.com, abel.scn@stmu.edu.pk,

Abstract

The paper seeks to locate the place of an Africa-centred epistemology from a post-postmodernism view in intellectual enquiry. This innovation emerged through exploring current methodologies used in the National Research foundation and Department of Science and Innovation funded project in South Africa; namely the Seboka research team, as a case study for engagement with the knowledge economy through collaborative work with the indigenous rural communities in Africa. Against the backdrop of Africa's paradigm shift from orality to canonicity in the creation and preservation of indigenous knowledge sciences, the paper taps into the resourcefulness of verbal arts and African heritage passed down orally over the years as an age-old data collection method. The nuanced projectile between 'calabash' and 'cyberspace' notwithstanding, the paper makes a case around the need to honour and recognize African society's old retainers (the hands-on repositories and transmitters of African society's philosophies and applied existential wisdom) into the mainstream of the continent's ever-evolving research work. This ground-breaking submission that 'Western medicine is broken' occasions a platform for Africa to seek recourse to home-grown solutions – tapping into the core of African ontology – in order to provide suitable remedies, therapies, antidotes and immunity boosters best-fitted for the children of mother Africa. By extension, the paper contends that an Africa-centred approach to intellectual enquiry is not limited to health sciences only, but it encompasses all aspects of African culture, lifestyle, heritage, history, arts, dreams and aspirations. Such an acknowledgement is needful if African philosophies are to amicably co-exist with other differently constituted philosophical moorings as necessitated by dynamic imperatives of the global village. The research particularly illuminates the application of orature as a data-collection method in a communal context. This method showcases the merits of community partnership that proves its worth as key custodians and stakeholders in the generation and preservation of a priceless heritage. The latter respectfully speaks to the limitations of conventional research methods ordinarily adopted in the claustrophobic confines of university red-brick walls and ivory towers. This study notably adopts a philosophical acceptance of African culture as a rewarding entry point into the mother continent's self-contained body of knowledge.

Keywords: Orature, communal based, indigenous science

Background and Introduction

This paper is born out of a judicious distillation of the theory and praxis driving the work of the Seboka research team, in particular the three authors. The paper's submissions advance the merits of an Africa-centred consciousness as the ontology that spawns a novel epistemology mediating the gaps occasioned by bracketing out African people and their sacrosanct cultural practices from the quadrant of knowledge creation. It is quite paramount from the onset to make a case around the peculiarities that define the African cultural universe in an endeavor to ascertain the cardinal coordinates for Indigenous Knowledge Systems and their definitive place in Africa's existential dynamics.

For Seboka, the indigenous people of Africa are not mere informants for scholars' community research work, but they are active co-creators of knowledge whose practically-generated experiential wisdom ought to be accordingly acknowledged and integrated into society's mainstream system of knowledge. African communities are endowed with the capacity to create knowledge and to deploy the resourcefulness of adaptive intelligence to utilise their self-generated knowledge sustainably. The avant-garde tenets of globalisation can only make sense if they substantially accord Africa the space to define its 'place' and 'self' in the crucible of knowledge creation.

Post-postmodern scholarship has invariably found fodder in the contentious relationship between the spoken word and script, necessitating a more perceptive consideration of the oral-literate dichotomy. Coherently, on psychosocial health, Mahlatsi (2018:39) appreciated that in a KhoiSan community found in the Northern-Cape Province of South Africa there is more in the spoken word than what is being said. Vehemently, it came out that the said community listens not only with their ears by all senses (eyes, touch and smell). This speaks highly of the findings of Mahlatsi (2018:46) and that of Pienaar and Uys (2013:77) where respect and, respectful waiting thereof is found to be deep-rooted among African communities concerning what is being said, and how it is received. To put it into perspective, Pienaar and Uys (2013:77) found in their work of an African approach on therapeutic interaction in HIV and AIDS care that active and passive expression of feelings forms an integral part of *what* is being said between the counsellor and the counselee.

Hence, the subjectivities that ordinarily attend to the idea of

a teleological progression from an oral to a literate world are debunked by NgugiWaThiongo (2007:4), who submits that the term 'orature' was first coined in the 1970s by the Ugandan linguist PioZirimu to counter the predisposition to see the arts communicated orally and received aurally as an inferior or a lower rung in the linear development of literary material and scholarship. Zirimu's work yields a definition of 'orature' as the use of utterance as an aesthetic means of expression, pointing to an oral system of aesthetics that does not need validity from the literary. In Africa, indigenous knowledge system has seen critical energies reversing the tendency to subordinate orality to canonicity, foregrounding orality as a complete system in its own right. Fiona Moolla (2012:434) notes that the term 'orature' indexes orality as a total system of performance linked to a very specific idea of space and time. An aligned worldview between an oral performer using verbal art and an audience is required to understand an oral form. Care has to be taken, therefore, in the potentially totalizing practice of seeing orature as the oral analogue of literature, especially in view of the fact that orature is part and parcel of the lore media with which a society conducts profound and common cultural affairs among its members, orally.

The Seboka emblem is a testimony to the research team's appropriation of African essence and cultural worth. The insignia, consisting of a clay pot and a pride of lions on a hunt, interweaves Africa's cherished and interconnected values of collective identity, interdependence, mutuality, and brotherly group care. The clay pot summons to mind the nourishment of mother Africa, a domestic metaphor in keeping with the configuration of Africa in feminine terms, valorizing the continent as the brooding mother whose breast is full of the milk of human kindness. The dictum attending to the pride of lions, 'Di tau di senangseboka di siiwake none e tlhotsa' translates to 'A lion that goes on hunt alone and not co-exist in a pack, will always fail to catch even a limping deer.' Noticeably, success and achievement in African terms are always gauged relationally, hence the imperative lifelong philosophy of subsuming one's vulnerable individuality under the secure umbrella of the collective. This thought is succinctly captured in Africa's 'Ubuntu' philosophy, a rich definitive element of African life and essence which Pienaar (2013:1) perceptively discusses in relation to the potent axiom 'I am, because we are,' hence placing community and group care above the focus of the self.

To productively engage indigenous knowledge systems, it is vital to go beyond the dichotomy of indigenous versus scientific in order to appreciate the greater autonomy for indigenous people. MolefiKete Asante (1998) and Pienaar (2017) make out the Afrocentric framework as a revolutionary shift in thinking, a structural adjustment in the wake of black

disorientation, de-centredness and lack of agency. The philosophy of Afrocentricity as expounded by MolefiKete Asante is thus a way of answering some critical cultural, economic, political, and social questions related to African people from a definitively centred position. Establishing the ontological bearings of the African people is therefore a prerequisite to unlocking their epistemologies. Such an exercise requires a phenomenological approach that does not frustratingly make African values an appendage to any other cultural centre. Situating centres is quite vital in any attempt to locate a people's taxonomy of values and their home-grown, culture-inspired and history-specific solutions to their set of existential challenges.

For African peoples generally, the history of colonisation is a common experience, associated with epidemics of infectious diseases, depopulation and disempowerment at local, ethnic and national levels. It was also followed by a common pattern of alienation: loss of culture, loss of land, loss of voice, loss of dignity, loss of health and loss of intellectual traditions. It is thus understandable for indigenous communities to express their united commitment to their socio-economic positions, their rejection of marginality, their legitimate claim for autonomy, as well as their concerted efforts to combat diseases spawned by the material reality of historical encounters. It is, however, important to note that colonisation, socio-economic disadvantage or political ambitions are not the defining elements of indigeneity. Instead, as Kame'eleihiwa Lilikalä (1992:23) and Hoppers (2017) notes, the most significant and primary characteristic of indigeneity is a strong sense of unity with the environment – a healthy environment. This explains the assertions like 'People are the land and the land is the people' and 'we are the river, the river is us' as poignantly captured in the Whanganui River Charter (1993) whose enunciation of the ideals of the indigenous island peoples of New Zealand is comparable to the values enshrined in the cultural practices of the indigenous African people.

Crucially, one need to acknowledge the nature of the context. In defining the context which unfolded with data analysis, the researchers saw it fit that indigenous people live with a belief that people are not separate from the earth and living things, events happen for spiritual reasons (Onwu & Mosimege, 2013:11; Hoppers, 2017:5 & Kovacha, 2010). With that assertion and the principle of ubuntu premised on the adage "I am because you are" (Seboka), this process of orature as a new developing data collection method came to be an eye-opening epiphany.

Africans characteristically express an aversion to individualism.

This is because of the 'Ubuntu' philosophy and its enunciation of the merits of co-existence, collectivism and communitarian solidarity. This brotherly group care extends to man's interdependence with the ecosystem, presupposing that healing in the African perspective is a comprehensive endeavour to restore man's harmony with nature. In light of the ecological base which anchors most indigenous approaches to health, the World Health Organization (in Geneva 1999) yielded a Declaration on the Health and Survival of Indigenous Peoples which was subsequently presented to the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in 2002. Affirming the links between culture, the wider natural environment, human rights and health, the Committee on Indigenous Health (2002) submits this definition of health:

It is futile to try and understand medical practice in the traditional African perspective without examining the socio-cultural, historical, political and economic contexts of health, disease and therapeutic fundamentals in Africa. In an analysis of ethnomedical studies of health, disease and cure in Africa, Feierman and Janzen (1992:xvi) argue that health and healing are part of historically continuous streams of interrelated theory and practice, and this is the departure point in any approaches to the changing contexts in which contemporary health practices are grounded. Though it has come to permeate various approaches to scholarship in the postmodern dispensation, the term 'holism' was interestingly coined by an iconic African scholar, the South African national, Jan Smuts (1926), who defined 'holism' as the tendency in nature to form wholes that are greater than the sum of the parts through creative evolution. It is notable that this understanding locates African indigenous health practice within the framework of primary health care where the term 'holistic' is used to describe approaches that take into account social considerations and other intuitive judgements. Practitioners of African indigenous health care acknowledge that struggles for health are part of society's central struggles, hence from a holistic perspective, perceptions and practices of health and healing are part of broader social, political and economic which allow for continuous reflection and readjustment vis-a-viz sustainable cultural practices in Africa.

Through orature, Seboka research fellows are involved in scholarly participatory engagement with the community, spearheading the crusade to revitalise the indigenous African health system which sustainably fares well in the wake of alternative medical explorations. As indigenous knowledge systems scholars engaging with paradoxes generated by the dominance of the western health system, Seboka researchers were brought alive to the glaring pertinent question: *Why are we undermining the indigenous health system which has stood the*

the test of time under oppression in Africa and is still going strong, whereas the dominant health care system is fraught with distortions and patients are unnecessarily harmed?" It is on this understanding that the Seboka team endeavours to revitalize the existing primal health care system which is utilized by over 80% of the population worldwide. The Seboka team reasonably acknowledges that the Western Health System, since inception, contributed to the health of Africans. However, the impeccable tenets of the original African Health System found on the continent cannot be overlooked or under-played. As such, Seboka champions the revitalization of the indigenous African Health System, proposing a rationale, equal and equitable co-existence with the Western Health System as seen in countries like China and India.

Research Methodology

Understanding Orature as a concept and application of Orature as method of data-collection

If you want people to understand you, speak their language – African proverb.

Africa at large is diverse in culture, language, traditions and customs. Hence, Seboka as a research team has always advanced Africa needs to be treated and appreciated as such. This writing piece came into fruition during data collection by the authors on an indigenous rural community in the Cape Province of South Africa. The realization for the need of a generic approach for data collection did not surface momentary but consequential, to a long lasting relationship with the very community through its affiliation with the Seboka project where the community is the main stake holder. As developing scholars together with our seasoned fellow researchers, we were stunned, at the same time contented by the complexity and the uniqueness of the context. As a result, every after session we had of data collection with the community later that day we would reflect and bounce ideas. It is at this point where we thought this is beyond the art of wording.

However, as born and practicing Africans we at the same time realized the vulnerability and how the context of this nature being abused by scholars, classical western researchers in particular.

Hence, orature as a method of data collection in qualitative research was realized during many of the community partnership

research with Seboka. Particular, a partnership with a KhoiSan community in the Northern Cape, South Africa. The Seboka researchers aim to uphold the importance and respect of the heritage of the communities in partnership. Equally important, it is submitted by Pienaar (2017:88) that evidence is authentic in its original habitat. Consequently, the researchers embarked on a culturally-collaborative process with the community of the KhoiSan, where the community is the author and the researcher is the co-author of the exploration their own resolution.

Orature is when the research is approached as a negotiated partnership, allowing the indigenous community to define for themselves the degree to which they wish to make themselves available as subjects (Mkabela, 2005:183). The indigenous communities have control of the research process which makes it easier for everyone involved to monitor progress (Mkabela, 2005:183). Strength was drawn from Ignatov (2016:1), who delineates orature as agency, authority and collectively. Agency is when one is talking to the ancestors and a way of being at peace with the the energies of the land and nature's power to act in complete cycle with humans. Authority is the powers of the universe, the energies of the land. Lastly, collectively is an expression of the land, the living, and the dead (Ignatov, 2016:1). Orature is thus a collective data collection method is inclusive of conversations, story-telling, poetry and fine arts.

It is the teachings of Kovach (2010) who argues that indigenous knowledge embodies a particular way of knowing based upon oral tradition of sharing knowledge. At the same time. Lee et al., (2015:84) maintain that the notion "storytelling" has a long standing history that is at the same time being used in many ways depending on the context. That is why oral storytelling was utilized for data collection by the researchers' in concern.

In defining the context which unfolded with data collection and analysis, the researchers' deemed it as the main that indigenous people hold a strong belief that people are not separate from the earth and living things, events happen for spiritual reasons (Onwu & Mosimege, 2013:11; Hoppers, 2017:5 & Kovacha, 2010). With that assertion and the principle of ubuntu with a premise "I am because you are" (Seboka), this process of orature as a new developing data collection method came to be an eye-opening epiphany.

Application of Orature as a method of data-collection

The researchers came to a realization of the need for data collection methods that shows the sense of understanding and respect for the African indigenous communities. This is in line with Hoppers (2017) and Mkabela (2005) where respect of indigenous rural communities' knowledge is clear at the centre and how it is collected for interpretation is clearly eminent. This is as put forth by Owusu-Ansah and Mji (2013:3), who argue that sensitivity to African realities must be shown by researchers. Hence, orature, data collection method that is specific to the culture was used because the intention was to be sufficiently detailed and sensitive to actual social contexts and to investigate the character of ordinary social activities (Owusu-Ansah & Mji, 2013:3).

Mahlatsi (2018) made use of story-telling, metaphors and conversations as the rudiments of Orature as a data collection method in a collaborative research project headed by the Principal researcher of Seboka with the community of the KhoiSan playing an equal role as the researchers. In illustration, the procedure followed a process of first understanding the role of the researcher; development of guiding questions; how data was managed; rigour of the research and ethical considerations.

Procedure followed;

It is important to realize that the authors of this article argues that there are no limitations or stringent structure of the process of making use of orature as a data collection method. Considerately, this process might also be influenced by the sampling method of the research as Mahatsi (2018) made use of theoretical sampling as guided by Glaser and Strauss (2006).

1. Role of the Researcher

Most importantly, after identifying an indigenous community to partner with, the researcher has to first build a sustainable shared trust with the said community (Pienaar, 2017:89). Fundamentally, this will be attained by prolonged engagement with the community but also resulting in cultural competence by the researcher (Pienaar, 2017:90).

The process of cultural assessment, awareness and sensitivity is plainly explained by Pienaar and Koen (2014), where the process is referred to as Cultural Congruent Management. Where firstly, there is *cultural ignorance* as a first phase, described as a lack of

interest and knowledge to familiarize with a specific culture, as a consequence to the extent that the researcher is not living with the indigenous community. Accordingly, this is attained by the researcher engaging the indigenous community and notes their ways of knowing.

Furthermore, now that the researcher is aware of the ways of living by the community, then follows a phase referred to as *cultural awareness* where the researcher explores and becomes aware of the day-to-day practices (Pienaar & Koen, 2014). Hence, Pienaar and Koen (2014), argue that at this phase the researcher is engaged in a deeper level with the community to explore their belief systems with the main purpose of appreciating the community as a unique African context.

Successively, *cultural sensitivity* follows, where the researcher shows respect by way of demonstrating empathy and understanding toward complexity of the community's ways of knowing and living (Pienaar & Koen, 2014).

All things considered, the researcher has to identify, observe, assess, explore and analyze the culture of the indigenous community so to interact effectively with the community members and accent positive attitudes toward cultural differences thereof. It is at this phase where Pienaar and Koen agree that the researcher is *culturally competent* (Pienaar & Koen, 2014).

With the above understanding, the researcher built rapport with the community with the prime initiative being to be at the centre that the community is in charge (Pienaar, 2017:90).

2. A Supple Guideline of Questions to be asked

On account to the role of the researcher, this should be developed with no bearing to the process of data collection. The primary guiding is "Ubuntu" principles – I am because you are. Importantly, the questions should be translated to the language of the community.

3. Data management

Notably, more strength in this paper is drawn from Pienaar (2017) who positions African Indigenous Knowledge is a science in its own right. Considering the previous discussion this paper argues that there's a need for the researchers to first acknowledge the context where data collection took place in the process to construct appropriate meaning from the data.

Irrespective of the choice of data analysis method, adjacent to

the role of the researcher and sets of developed questions to be asked, data management in orature should continually be rooted on collecting and appreciating the meaning of reality within its unique context.

4. Rigor of the research

Enumeration of trusting the reality of the community being researched should mainly lie within the community itself. Retrospectively, this is referred to in Mahlasti (2018) as member checking where the researcher revert back (with respect and open minded) the participants to validate if the meaning of reality matches what they indeed intended. Cohesively, the process of member checking should first start at the chief's/ community leader level and then followed by engagement with the participants.

5. Ethical issues

It is of importance that Ethics adherence centre the data collection process in vulnerable communities such as African indigenous communities. Therefore, the ethics should start with the community approval and then be escalated to a Western research platform of approval. A recorded approval (oral) from the community is also acceptable.

Conclusion

Perusing this educational-research paper, grounded in an evidence-based practice within an indigenous context, it recounts the importance of three main issues that endeavor to strengthen research. Initially it advances that the depth of the evidence in an indigenous community, resorts in the community-friendly method used to obtain the data; Secondly, the moral and ethical process followed to nurture a trust relation within a community, guaranty the authentic nature of the evidence obtained and lastly the process of science practice that is confirmed to be part of any community, whether indigenous (local) or western that 'must' be acknowledged and respected to practice appropriate sciences within such a community. An answer to the question: "Whose sciences are we talking about". Therefore, science practice in an indigenous community, should be grounded in their paradigm and judged from the community's context.

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