"*The academic space is not a safe space to be an indigenous person*"; Responding to the Trauma of the Settler-Colonial University Through African Indigenous Knowledge System (AIKS)-Informed Pedagogy

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Abstract

The colonial university has long existed as a site of traumatic incorporation of western knowledge systems into the lives of indigenous populations across the world. Western academic styles of teaching and learning in South Africa reenact indigenous traumas of violent loss of identity and the spiritual relationship to the wider world of self, family, community, ancestors and the environment on which the indigenous South African health model is based. As a result, academia in South Africa becomes a space in which the trauma of violent and unequal incorporation into the colonial social world is reproduced. Like other societies shaped by settler colonial domination, South African education systems have historically excluded indigenous knowledge systems and indigenous identities through both violent and subtle methods, including language and appearance policies aimed at disciplining and subduing the indigenous body.

What has been termed 'intellectual colonization' sees the ongoing dismissal of African Indigenous Knowledge Systems (AIKS) as inferior, or as a resource to exploit. AIKS have been an object of study for anthropologists since the discipline's inception, but the ontological possibilities it offers to transforming teaching practice from within have not been taken up. This has subsequently led to a situation in which academia exists as an unsafe space for indigenous people to engage with knowledge. There has been much discussion about the decolonization of education in South Africa, but very rarely are these decolonial discussion efforts met with actual change in pedagogical approaches.

We reflect here on attempts to integrate indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) into the curriculum and pedagogical approach of an Anthropology Hons course in an English-Medium South African university in the Eastern Cape, Rhodes University. We argue that sharing understanding of content, and incorporating teaching practices, from an AIKS approach can enhance learning, and complement existing academic practices of text-based enquiry to produce a knowledge-transmission experience grounded in indigenous modes of learning which might mitigate the violence and trauma of the colonial university's locking of students into one ontological frame presented as 'normal'.

Keywords: indigenous knowledge systems (IKS), decolonization, indigenous health models, university pedagogy.

Introduction

> *Selwyn Castle was not built for drums and the burning of Mphepho as harmonizing voices call out the patterns of a call and response song about the beauty of being home. Students and the Senior Lecturer facilitating the course responded to the call and beating of the drum brought by the other course facilitator, an Itola, senior practioner of traditional medicine and PhD candidate in the department. She called out the words to a song that the ancestors had gifted to her in a dream, a practice she was meticulously attuned to through her extended training : "Likhon' ikhaya lam. 'Likhon' ikhaya lam" the voices responded in turn "Likhon' ikhaya lam. 'Likhon' ikhaya lam", and a shrill ululation hung in the air above the harmonics as the smoke of Mphepho burning in the saucer taken from the tea and coffee cupboard twirled in the air, carrying the prayers woven into the song to make a home for our course and the teaching and learning that was to take place within it, into the realm of the other world where the ancestors and spirits would receive our request. Taking gifts of biscuits, tea, coffee and water, the everyday substances for consumption in this room, we moved to the Oak tree in front of the building, kneeling to address the spirits of the land and river that ran beneath the building directly, introducing ourselves to them by name and requesting permission to be present, acknowledging the many years of ignorance of their presence, and asking for clemency to proceed with our*

work now. Reconvened in the tea room, we shared out copies of the reading for our session, highlighting passages of significance for our group discussion. Without the need to justify and explain, we had brought elements of the unseen world, and the tool kit of indigenous learning originating in the land we were present on, into the space of Selwyn Castle, home of the Rhodes University Anthropology Department.

Designed to look bigger than it actually is, in a neo-gothic style, Selwyn Castle's construction was completed in the mid 1800's in the frontier town then known as Grahamstown. Named for the British army leader John Graham, notorious for his missive to show terror to the surrounding countryside's largely Xhosa speaking population during the period of colonial expansion and consolidation of the Cape Colony, Graham's bloody victory against Makhanda's Xhosa army at the Battle of Egazini saw the town grow into a welcoming center for waves of British settlers from the 1820's onwards. Selwyn Castle's design exemplified a genteel English country residence, and in 1836 was adopted as the Eastern Cape's Government house by governor Sir Andries Stockenstrom (Lewcock, 1963).

In 1913 Rhodes University was established, named for the infamous British colonialist John Cecil Rhodes. The crowning glory of a town already established as an educational center reproducing the conditions of a proper British Public School through several prestigious single sex boarding schools, Rhodes would grow into a sprawling, tree lined campus, occupying the west side of the town. Selwyn Castle was incorporated into the growing campus grounds. The School of Bantu studies established in 1940 with the purpose of understanding 'the native' in order to better manage what was termed 'the native question' (Maylam 2017:67), led by Jack Krige as a senior lecturer in Anthropology, evolved into a Chair in Anthropology. Monica Wilson was its first professor, succeeded by Hammond-Tooke, with Radcliffe-Brown spending time in the department in the 1950's (Niehaus 2017, Webster 2021). Selwyn Castle became the department's headquarters, its imposing castle-like structure providing a base for generations of Anthropologists to ply their trade as fieldworkers seeking to understand the human condition.

Radcliffe-Brown's articulation of anthropology insisted on seeing African society as part of a wider community rather than separate from it. This was in contrast to the position put forward by Malinowski, whose lecture tours in South Africa gave intellectual credibility to policies emphasizing separate development that would coalesce into apartheid (Niehaus, 2017). Yet, despite the seemingly respectful and inclusive views of the school of social anthropology that would flourish at Rhodes in the wake of Radcliffe-Brown's establishment of the department that would make its home in Selwyn Castle, it was a space of Euro-centric practice and European descended experts in which Africans were either in service, or the subject of academic enquiry. African ethnographers such as Archie Mafeje and Bernard Magubane, isolated and sidelined by increasing racial hostility in South Africa, became early critics of a liberal anthropology whose white gatekeepers professed inclusion, but did not recognize the innate privilege of their position, or the inadequacies of their responses to the exclusion of African anthropologists from building careers in their own country (Webster 2021). It was only in 1997 that the first black anthropologist, Rose Boswell, would receive a tenured appointment at Rhodes, taking up occupation of a ground floor office in what had been the drawing room of Selwyn Castle. While transformation at the level of which bodies were now in the building may have begun, the pedagogical regime remained firmly rooted in a western academic paradigm.

This article grapples with what a trauma informed pedagogy might look like in an Anthropology Department emerging from within the former colonial territory, in which those purposefully excluded from initial staff and student cohorts, fit only as objects of study as 'natives' or native assistants, are now the main demographic of the tenured staff, post graduate research and general student population. The South African university is a product of its colonial and apartheid past, continuing to grapple with the aftermath of the trauma of violent incorporation into these systems of rule, and their aftermaths. Additionally, it is located within globalized trends of changes in higher education more broadly, where a neo-liberal context has seen higher education increasingly framed as a commodity (Boughey, 2022).With an increasingly diverse student body, reflecting a plethora of African identities, there has been a radical demographic shift for English-medium universities like Rhodes being spaces inhabited largely by white-identifying students to the majority of students being of African descent. Despite this shift, apartheid ideologies of inferiority – that African languages, cultural systems and ways of knowing are inherently inferior have been internalised by many students of African descent (Mji, et al., 2017).

Recent student movements in 2016 and 2017 such as #feesmustfall and #rhodesmustfall made powerful strides to address these complexes (Bhambra, et al., 2018). However, the pressure to succeed in higher education by many first-generation students is high as a university degree is seen as a gateway to social mobility and financial

stability. These expectations are often accompanied by the idea that conformity to a Western mode of learning, knowledge and beingness is required for success (Bhambra, et al., 2018). This results in the idea that African knowledge systems which value orality, movement, spirituality and rhythm are not suited for higher learning spaces. The exception is when such knowledge systems can be leveraged for extraction and economic development via the exploitation of traditional knowledge of medicinal plants etc. The growth and championing of Indigenous Knowledge Systems within South African universities is frequently justified on these grounds (Bhambra, et al., 2018). Du Bois'(1903) notion of double consciousness is helpful for understanding how students will occupy a dual identity to manage the tension between indigenous and being educated in a Western knowledge system (Du Bois, 1903). This occurs in multiple domains of social life in South Africa, for example, when seeking biomedical treatment, indigenous patients will conceal their use of traditional remedies out of fear of being shamed and scolded for what is seen as superstition by some professionals in the biomedical space (May 2019).

De Sousa Santos' notion of 'abysmal thinking' (2007) is a cornerstone of the development of the South African university, whereby some forms of knowledge are privileged, and others made invisible. Boughey & Mckenna ask in their overview of the global challenges facing university teaching and learning globally, and the particularities of the South African case, how a plurality of worldviews can be reconciled within the curriculum (2021:97). Their call does not seek to displace or reject what they term 'powerful knowledge', rather they advocate for the kind of thinking and knowing that can open doors of participation in global society for students. that simultaneously includes other knowledge systems,

> …how do we avoid…falling into a romanticism where knowledges fromparticular sources are, simply by virtue of that source, deemed valid? Or into a relativism where any form of knowledge is deemed equally legitimate in the academy? Our argument is that the academy has a social justice responsibility to give access to powerful,specialised knowledge that *differs* from the everyday knowledge available outside of it. But we have to acknowledge that our colonial histories have meant that there is a wealth of knowledge that has never been scrutinised for potential specialisation, or, to put it in other words, the academy's powerful knowledges have by and large been built only from the knowledge of the powerful. (Boughey & Mckenna 2021:97)

Following this, how might South African anthropology teachers incorporate multiple ways of knowing in our teaching and learning strategies, without falling into the trappings of romanticization of alternative knowledge systems? We argue in this paper that our attempts to answer this call in our teaching of an Anthropology postgraduate course inspired by AIKS pedagogy expands and extends the possibilities for acknowledging powerful knowledge as located in multiple ontological frames. While superficially there may appear to have been transformation of South African educational contexts to be more welcoming of African ways of being, research demonstrates that at the deeper level, there remains profound hostility and rejection of African modes of learning and existence in educational spaces at all levels (Mji, et al., 2017).

While not based on formal research, anecdotal reflections from our classroom space indicate that the students we work with continue to feel that their Africaness is not something which is appropriate or welcomed in the western university. Our inclusion of indigenous pedagogies such as dance, drumming, song and ancestral acknowledgement permits a direct addressing of issues of lowered self-esteem and exclusion of the indigenous self from the classroom. Rather than replacing a conventional curriculum of scholarly texts, writing and critical reflection, we incorporated AIKS pedagogical techniques into learning strategies which supported the acquisition of powerful knowledge. In doing so we hoped to ease the trauma of suppressing the whole-self experienced by many in the university space. In acknowledging the wholeness of the student, and the knowledge systems and techniques of embodiment we deploy, a more grounded graduate might emerge. In the case study we discuss here, based on reflection of the teaching of an Honours Anthropology Course at the Rhodes University Anthropology Department, we drew on Shlovsky's notion of 'making strange'(in Kumagai & Were 2014: 973) to destabilise the learning approaches students were familiar with, augmenting them with embodied practices drawn from local idioms of wellness and wellbeing, and other course material, alongside more conventional and familiar forms of reading, writing and discussion.

While not a formal research study, the reflections ask us to consider how dedicated research in this area may reveal tangible benefits for such an approach in student success, measured not only in academic outcomes, but on registers of wellness and good mental health. We approach the academically familiar – reading, writing, discussion – through the lens of drawing, dance, meditation, dream reflections and song. They are thus able to be looked at with fresh eyes. Empowering students to receive and critically engage with 'powerful knowledge',

while foregrounding indigenous techniques of being provides an alternative way to engage with such knowledge, aimed to defuse what Bertolt Brecht termed 'estrangement' in the university space (Martin and Bial 2020).

1. Applying African Ancestral Knowledge as 'Pedagogy' in The Classroom: Learning From AIKS

In our postgraduate course titled 'Transcultural Approaches to Wellness and Wellbeing' (TAWB), taught at the Anthropology Department at Rhodes University, we aimed to engage critically with terms such as 'happiness', 'healing' and 'wellbeing' to better understand how these ideas frame conceptions of what constitutes 'wellbeing' in a range of historical and social contexts. Our approach to teaching the course was inspired by the Xhosa indigenous health model. We were working with an understanding that in order for healing to occur, reconciliation needs to happen first. Western academic systems in South Africa have historically violated the authenticity and validity of indigenous knowledge through the elimination of crucial identity markers like language and general oppression of indigenous human expression. Hence then, through our trauma-informed pedagogy we argued that academia has a lot of room for growth and learning from the strategies of AIKS before it can transform itself into a safe space for indigenous people to participate in. However, we acknowledged that the process will first require an acknowledgement from the academic sphere of the violence Western academia has enacted on indigenous people through the systematic and structural oppression of indigenous knowledge.

In our course, as part of acknowledging the discrimination of African ways of knowing within South African universities, we aimed to place the ancestors at the centre of the learning process as encouraged by the pedagogy of AIKS. One of the ways in which we strived to achieve this was by placing importance of ritual and ceremony inside and outside of the classroom. As part of our class field trips, we took our students to an indigenous village where they could visit the homestead of an indigenous healer and get to interact with the knowledge systems that govern indigenous medicine. During the visit, the students had an opportunity to participate in ancestral divination, reverence and respectability under the guidance and protection of a trained and qualified indigenous health practitioner, who was also a co-facilitator on the course. Following the trip, students were granted space to reflect on the experience and how it had either broadened or challenged their perceptions of AIKS. This reflection formed part of the course grade. When asked to share on the usefulness of this approach, one student responded by saying that;

> I enjoyed the field trip to Nonibe village, it was a once in a lifetime opportunity to learn more about traditional healing. It was a great starting point and related to many other topics in the course, which are related to healing.

By allowing the students to participate in AIKS through first-hand experience, we were thereby broadening their understanding of what constitutes 'academic pedagogy' in a safe manner. It is our argument that education should not traumatize students but should rather allow students space to unpack and to heal their trauma.

What Does It Mean to Be an Indigenous Person (Umuntu) in South Africa?

The World Health Organization defines 'indigenous people' as people who:
- identify themselves and are recognized/accepted by their community as indigenous,
- demonstrate historical continuity with pre-colonial and/or pre-settler societies,
- have strong links to territories and surrounding natural resources,
- have distinct social, economic or political systems,
- resolve to maintain and reproduce their ancestral environments and systems as distinctive peoples and communities.

This definition also includes people who are described using other terms such as 'tribes', 'first peoples', 'aboriginals', or 'ethnic group' as the use of these terms varies from county to country (WHO, 2007). Many South African scholars also prescribe to this definition although terminology such as 'tribe' or 'ethnic group' is commonly used, as are racial monikers. The term 'indigenous' in South Africa has multiple meanings and claims on it.

Despite increased academic interest in Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) in the country, few studies have focused on investigating the indigenous understandings of identity amongst black African communities in South Africa. By 'indigenous understandings of identity' the researchers refer to the conceptual understandings of human identity within an indigenous interpretation, including issues of ancestry, genealogy, tribal or community

knowledge, language, skillsets, sacred sites, problem-solving approaches, cultural values and technologies that encompass cultural understandings of human identity. African historians such as Mbiti (1969) argue that African people across the continent have their own distinct ways of identifying human beings.

While we acknowledge that the descriptor 'tribe' and 'tribal' has been subject to debate and deconstruction in Anthropology, and been misused as an identifier, we note it's continuing salience as an identifier for many people, first nations and otherwise, for identifying themselves. First and foremost, the tribe from which one comes from is of major importance because it is the group that makes the individual. That is, it is within one's tribal group that one learns the fundamentals of existing in a society as a human being, hence the phrase "umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu" (a person is a person through other people). This is the African concept of 'Ubuntu' that aims to define humanity and its place in the universe, where it is understood that one's humanity is deeply yoked in the humanity of others.

2. Ubuntu as pedagogy in African Indigenous Knowledge Systems (AIKS)

The term *Ubuntu* stems from the Nguni word 'umuntu' which means a 'person'. Hence then, we can argue that *Ubuntu* is the indigenous African philosophy of humanity and a pedagogy of embodiment. Embodiment has emerged as a concept that broadens the focus on the body beyond the dualistic natural scientific point of view. Research into embodied learning and embodiment has had various focuses, including the sociological aspects of embodiment and the embodied experiences of students (Aartun, et al., 2020). Hence then, by 'pedagogy of embodiment' we are referring to the focus we placed on the importance of utilising the South African indigenous understandings of human embodiment by operating within the indigenous interpretation of what defines umuntu (person) and abantu (people). In doing this, we were guided by the South African indigenous health model and understandings of human wellbeing.

South African Indigenous Health Models and Understandings of Human Wellbeing

The African indigenous health models on which cultural values and systems are based are not studied in much detail in many academic institutions across Africa, if any at all. In South Africa in particular, few scholars have researched the indigenous health models of the various cultural groups that comprise the country's diverse population. The model that we worked with when designing the pedagogical approaches for our course originates with isiXhosa-speaking people of the Eastern Cape, who are part of the Bantu population group of Africa (Winkel, 2010). The isiXhosa-speakers are further divided into smaller ethnic sub-groups with related but divergent heritages and customs. These sub-groups found include the Gcaleka, Rharhabe, Gqunukhwebe, Bhaca, Bomvana, Mfengu, Mpondo, Mpondomise, Thembu, and Xesibe peoples (Foster, 1967).

Mji (2013) and May (2019) have described this indigenous health model as originating in the amaBomvana ethnic group, an isiXhosa-speaking tribe that resides in the Dwesa/Cwebe area on the Wild Coast of the Eastern Cape. In this indigenous health model, health *(impilo)* is understood to be dependent on the state of healthy relationships, which integrates the physical, psycho-social, and spiritual dimensions and their imbalances in a holistic way. That is, in order for one to be regarded as having *impilo*, one must have a healthy relationship with themselves, their family, their community, their ancestors and their environment. If any of these relationships are compromised, illness results. Hence then, this health model defines health as a complete state of equilibrium between all the factors that make a human being *umuntu*.

African Indigenous Knowledge System (AIKS)-Informed Pedagogy: a Lesson From AIKS on Human Embodiment

Much violence has happened in indigenous communities around the world that have subsequently resulted in a shift in understanding of identity and belonging, and hence has affected the manner in which people relate to each other, and some of this violence stems from colonialization and the introduction of foreign knowledge systems (Durey & Thompson, 2012). In their study of the amaBomvana indigenous health model, Mji (2013) and May (2019) found that the shift of cultural identity amongst this native South African population was instigated by the introduction of Christianity, which was subsequently followed by Western formal education and then by Western biomedicine.

This means that in native spaces in South Africa where Western systems have been introduced, indigenous systems have been undermined and eradicated. This eradication has had negative implications on indigenous

identity, cultural values and health seeking strategies. In South Africa, Western knowledge systems still exist as an unsafe and violent space for indigenous people to exist in. In this paper, we further argue that as trauma-informed anthropologists, we need to broaden our understandings of what constitutes 'violence' and how as an action violence can be enacted. By doing this, we are asserting the importance of the many ways in which acts of violence can be experienced as pain.

Helman (2000) argues that pain behaviour especially its voluntary aspects, is influenced by social, cultural and psychological factors and part of the decision about whether to translate private pain into public pain depends on the person's interpretation of the significance of the pain. That is, for example, if that pain is seen as 'normal' or 'abnormal', with the latter being much more likely to be brought to the attention of others (Helman, 2000). When we as anthropologists fail to dissect the inherent power dynamics that are embedded in what constitutes 'normal', then we continue to ignore the pain experienced by indigenous people in the spaces that we regard as 'normal' spaces. Academia is considered to be a 'normal' space of higher learning, yet violence still exists within the institution through racism, exclusion and eurocentrism.

In our course we explored the ways in which members of the African diaspora have mitigated suffering through the development of their own specialized techniques and traditions. We particularly found that it was of utter importance to open space for our students to experience 'full embodiment' as a means of existing as a whole human being (umuntu). We achieved this through integrating indigenous South African health cosmologies of embodiment such as music, dance and alterative states of consciousness into the classroom. We would begin each session with the burning of indigenous incense known locally as *imphepho*. This plant is traditionally used by South African indigenous people to invoke the spirits of the ancestors and to bring the person closer to his/her ancestral spiritual guides. We would follow this with the rhythmic beating of the indigenous drum accompanied by chanting of indigenous songs and clapping of hands to the rhythm of the drum. All of this combined assisted us in reaching a state of physical, spiritual and psychological calm where the human beings (abantu) participating were allowed to fully experience their humanity (Ubuntu) in all the forms it showed up as.

When asked to reflect on the usefulness of this approach, one student responded by saying that;

> I enjoyed movement as ritual within the African Diaspora and so this is appropriate for Anthropology because it taught me a lot about how different cultures within the African Diaspora use movement as ritual to find a sense of healing or wellbeing.

Another student expressed the benefits they received from the use of embodiment pedagogy in the classroom by stating that;

> The check-ins and grounding ourselves made me actually enjoy the class. Firstly, I enjoy the meditation before a session I think it's perfect for us that struggle with anxiety and overthinking.

In this experimental process, we were embodying the African concept of Ubuntu as a pedagogy that can be practiced in real-time within the classroom. This was our version of practising showing up as your full human self in the classroom, a space that is rarely ever granted in academia but is very much encouraged in AIKS.

3. The Importance of Human Identity in AIKS Embodiment Pedagogy: 'Belonging' as Medicine

As previously mentioned, across many indigenous African societies, identity forms an important part of being a human being. That is, people see themselves as related to each other because they share a common substance and share less of that substance with those whom they are less related. That 'substance' can be wide-ranging, from clan lineage to landscape, language, skin colour or religious background. In Western societies, people usually regard themselves as related because they share blood, but in many non-Western societies, people can consider themselves to be related because they have eaten the same food, suckled on the same milk or grew up in the same landscape regardless of whether or not they share the same blood line (Holy, 1996).

As part of our trauma-informed pedagogy, we placed particular attention to the significance of belonging as a form of embodiment. Hence then, we would start each class session by introducing ourselves and our ancestry to the group. Each person in the group would be granted time to express their feelings and their connection to their

ancestry, and therefore their humanity. We did this repeatedly at the beginning of each session throughout the duration of the course. We were being guided in our approach by the Xhosa indigenous health model that defines health as a state of equilibrium between the self, the family unit one comes from, their community, ancestry and their environment. This health model allows for a holistic experience of human embodiment that stretches beyond the physical realm but also takes into account the spiritual elements that make a person umuntu.

The Role of The Ancestors in Encouraging Embodiment as a Way of Healing Trauma

Indigenous South Africans have their own organized indigenous religious belief systems. This religious belief system places the Creator at the centre of creation. It is believed that Creator created both the physical and the spiritual worlds (Mtuze, 2004). When one dies, their spirit passes on to the spirit world and that person becomes an ancestor. The ancestors look after the living kin, and can either be forces of healing or destruction depending on the circumstance in which they are exerting their influence (Dold & Cocks, 2012). The 'ancestors' are minor deities, and are forces for blessing or devastation, depending on the circumstance in which they are exerting their influence (Broster, 1981). They punish social transgressions and those who overstep their freedoms (Dold & Cocks, 2012). The ancestors can greatly influence one's health as well as the health of whole families and communities because the knowledge and use of indigenous plants is believed to be received from the ancestral spiritual world (Mji, 2013).

Furthermore, in indigenous African societies, tribes are made up of various clans which are in themselves made up of various families. In this type of kinship system, everyone is someone to someone, be it a daughter, a son, mother, father, sister, brother, aunt, uncle, grandparent, etc. Everyone belongs to a lineage and has ancestors. Hence then, by acknowledging their ancestors, the human being (umuntu) is acknowledging their own humanity. In the Southern African Nguni languages this system of tracing ancestral lineage is known as 'ukuzalana', which loosely translates to 'birthing one another'. Just like the branches of a tree, the *ukuzalana* system stretches out in all directions to accommodate all who are 'birthed' within the lineage group, thus creating belonging and therefore identity. Amongst the indigenous people of South Africa, the clan system of identity exists as its own sophisticated structure with refined rules and regulations that encompass it. In the native language of isiXhosa, this clan system is referred to as *iziduko*. Hence then, one's *isiduko* places them within a familial group of a particular tribe and of a particular landscape, and therefore grants them identity and belonging.

In our course, we integrated the *ukuzalana* system by beginning each lesson with each student taking time to acknowledge their ancestry by tracing their lineage. This was achieved by giving the students space to name their ancestors, clan names and the lands they came from if known. This is ancestral reverence. It should be noted that the classroom was a heterogeneous one with multiple ancestral lineages claimed by various students and facilitators from throughout Southern Africa, Northern and Southern Europe and North Africa. The application of an indigenous knowledge tool of connection did not require that participants share a common ancestry, but rather that a diverse range of ancestral origins could be acknowledged and shared as a form of welcome and inclusion.

The Suppression of AIKS In South Africa; Policies of Witchcraft and the Impact of Christianity on Indigenous Knowledge Systems

While synchronicities between AIKS and Christianity have been a feature of South African religious life since missionisation began, we note that tensions between Christian belief systems and AIKS remain a potent and polarising social force in South Africa with clear historical antecedents. In apartheid South Africa, Christianity was used to legislate against AIKS, with discriminatory and oppressive laws such as the Witchcraft Suppression Act 3 of 1957 which was based on the Witchcraft Suppression Act 1895 of the Cape Colony, which was in turn based on the Witchcraft Act 1735 of Great Britain. Section 1 *(f)* of the Witchcraft Suppression Act 3 of 1957 made it an offence to use indigenous knowledge systems, with punishment being set "to a fine not exceeding two hundred rand or to imprisonment for a period not exceeding two years" (SAGov, 1957). Unfortunately, the Act did not provide a conclusive description of what constituted witchcraft per se, yet its primary purpose was aimed at subduing practices of witchcraft, with the subsequent result being the suppression of indigenous spiritual practices. Furthermore, the Witchcraft Suppression Amendment 50 of 1970 made it "an offence for a person who pretends to exercise supernatural powers, to impute the cause of certain occurrences to another person; and to provide for incidental matters" (SAGov, 1970). This essentially criminalized the use of AIKS by

individuals, with the subsequent result being the criminalization of indigenous medicine itself by tagging it under witchcraft practices.

It is crucial to note that at the time of the enactment of both the Witchcraft Suppression Act in 1957 and the Witchcraft Suppression Amendment 50 of 1970, South Africa was still a Christian state as opposed to the current secular post-democratic one which embraces all religious denominations and cultural heritage (Raligilia, 2022). Both of the Acts of 1957 and 1970 exposed a reality that apartheid laws failed to divide matters of African indigenous spirituality and witchcraft, thereby creating a vacuum which often resulted in the judicial system resorting to criminalizing those who were perceived as witches based on Christian standards of religious acceptability and norms (Raligilia, 2022). Unfortunately, these Christian standards have had a negative impact on the perception of indigenous spirituality with many community members of post-apartheid South Africa still associating AIKS with witchcraft.

In our course at the Anthropology department at Rhodes University, some students who identified as Christian expressed discomfort and fear around discussions of indigenous spirituality, while also expressing a sense of curiosity at this aspect of their pre-Christian ancestral heritage. When asked to reflect on factors that influenced their level of participation and preparedness for the course, some students responded;

> My participation in the course has been good because I attended my classes, did the readings and engaged in discussions regardless of being afraid of the unknown.

> These (AIKS techniques) were quite helpful in understanding myself better as a spirit person, more especially my dream states, and the usefulness of dream incubation. I, however, did not engage in most of the activities because of my religious orientation.

It is worthy to note that this course was offered as an elective and therefore students voluntarily chose to enrol in the course and were made aware that the course would incorporate experiential aspects such as meditation and AIKS approaches to coming to know such as engaging with dreams, dance and the burning of mphepho. This did not however completely eradicate some degree of apprehension around incorporating practices associated with African spirituality, and some students expressed this sense of conflict and tension with their Christian religious backgrounds in their feedback.

Moving Beyond the Binary; Bridging the Gap Between Western Knowledge and African Spirituality

Although the students enrolled in the course aware of the topics of discussion, the binary of Christianity and AIKS in South Africa which is historical in its nature, posed some challenges in their experience with the course material. The fear expressed by some students was a real experience for them, and one which could not be ignored. To account for this fear, we as the instructors of the course included reflection spaces where these discomforts could be discussed openly without judgment. This approach proved to be useful in creating a safe space for diverse opinions about the impact of Christianity on perceptions of AIKS. When asked to reflect on the use of this experiential method, one student responded that;

> In the beginning, I knew that I didn't know much about traditional healing, so I was sure to put aside my own subjective biases and be open to learning. As a result, I learned a lot and have also told others about what I have learned. I feel lucky to have been a part of this.

When asked to share what they liked most about the course, one student responded that;

> All the themes were interesting, and the experimental part of the course was what made it more enjoyable. As well as the space to express and engage with the content reflecting on your own personal experiences made it enjoyable.

Another student expressed their appreciation for the fact that the course presented a platform for mutual understanding and said that;

> What I most enjoyed about the course was the engaging and interactive learning experience. I also valued the opportunities for feedback and collaboration with fellow students. The course fostered a sense of community, allowing us to learn from each other's perspectives and experiences.

What these responses from our students show us is that there is value in the adoption and application of AIKS-informed pedagogy in the academic institutions of South Africa. As the country moves forward in its commitment of having a decolonized approach to teaching and education, we see great potential in the inclusion of indigenous pedagogy in that process.

Conclusion

The experimental nature of utilizing AIKS in teaching an Anthropology course in South Africa, where universities are products of a colonial and apartheid past still in the process of transformation, allowed for consideration of what a trauma informed pedagogy might look like as part of a wider process of re-imagining teaching and learning. As students, researchers and staff continue to grapple with the aftermath of the trauma of violent incorporation into these systems of rule, and their aftermaths, the incorporation of AIKS pedagogies into the learning space may offer the potential for new approaches to experiencing education that ease legacies of exclusion.

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