

## INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE “VITALIZING INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE IN AFRICA”

Akira TAKADA

*Graduate School of Asian and African Area Studies, Kyoto University*

Increasing numbers of scholars in the fields of anthropology and area studies, staff of local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), governments, international organizations, and local people are conducting research on indigenous knowledge (IK) in the contemporary world. They largely agree on the importance of IK. Most readers of this volume have probably been persuaded that IK can hardly be ignored in the context of the study and development of local societies. At the same time, IK is an advocative construct and is often associated with various difficulties.

From the outset of scholarly expeditions, academics have been plagued by ambiguities in defining IK (Ellen & Harris, 2003). In numerous examples, what seemed to be authentic, traditional IK later turned out to have been recently borrowed from outside the community or presented to an IK-hungry researcher as a stopgap. Accordingly, researchers have confronted practical difficulties in the systematic collection, classification, and analysis of IK.

It has always been claimed that IK is in danger of being lost. It is not easy for any person or institute to force people to use declining IK, and the revival of defunct IK is even more difficult. Although such attempts can be found throughout the contemporary world in the form of various development projects, most have had consequences that are far removed from the original intention. It is safe to say that we have not found universal conditions under which IK can be maintained, used, or revived.

Today, IK is inseparable from power struggles. To be recognized as an indigenous group, people are obliged to demonstrate IK in a well-organized modernist form (cf. Ingold, 2000). In other words, compiling IK into a modernist concept opens a window for a group of indigenous individuals to navigate through other actors in the globalized society. Negotiating the indigeneness of knowledge also opens up new markets and consumption regimes. Given these circumstances, numerous cultural brokers, including quite a few researchers, have been working actively behind the scenes to help indigenous people commodify their cultures (cf. Comaroff & Comaroff, 2009).

This special issue collects three papers written by scholars seeking to find solutions to the difficulties presented above. It grew from an international workshop held at Kyoto University on 15 February 2013 under the same title as this issue, “Vitalizing indigenous knowledge in Africa.” The workshop was organized as part of the “Triangulation Project for the Understanding of Asian and African Areas,” which was conducted from October 2010 to March 2013 by the Graduate School of Asian and African Area Studies, Kyoto University. I express my heartfelt thanks to the authors, who devoted considerable effort to carry-

ing out the workshop successfully, and to the many people who supported the program. Although all three papers contribute significantly to deepening our understanding of IK, each paper focuses on a different facet.

Kimura's paper, titled "Constructing AFlora," concisely demonstrates the historical background, features of content, usages, and operational problems of "AFlora," a database of the vernacular uses of plants in Africa. The author is currently the director of the Center for African Area Studies of Kyoto University, which is the institutional body that has promoted the AFlora project since the late 1980s and helped many researchers in African ethnobotany. The research outcomes have been open to the public as an online database since 1997. Given its uniqueness and high quality, the database has made important contributions to the spread of IK in Africa. In 2012, the system was renewed through the adoption of the most recent web technology. Nevertheless, the circumstances surrounding ethnobotanical knowledge have changed dramatically in the project's 15 years. The renewed database is not yet open to the public because it may trespass on the intellectual property rights of the local people whose IK it contains. The dilemma of reconciling the increased accessibility of information due to advances in web technology with growing concerns about the intellectual property rights of local people brings the *raison d'être* of field research on IK into question.

Batibo's paper, "Preserving and transmitting indigenous knowledge in a diminishing bio-cultural environment," further illuminates the current state and a possible future of IK in Africa. In the first part of this article, the author provides a summary of the difficult situations that African indigenous societies currently face. Increasing socioeconomic demands, technological advancement, urbanization, and globalization have resulted in rapid biodiversity losses and the depletion of ecosystems in many parts of Africa. Using cases in Tanzania and Botswana, the author asserts that IK acquisition is becoming increasingly difficult for younger generations compared with former generations. The situation appears pretty bleak, but there is still a glimmer of hope. In the latter part of this article, the author introduces the Bokamoso project in Botswana as a successful attempt to vitalize IK. The project provides San (clusters of indigenous people in Southern Africa) children with a preschool curriculum in their mother tongue that is built around familiar themes and uses locally available resources. Consequently, the children and their parents have changed their attitudes toward school life and now see it as a friendly, accommodating, and homely environment. However, the author is none too optimistic about the chances of success. Because the project is limited to preschool children and is run by missionaries and NGOs, it does not have a direct impact on the formal school system, which undervalues education about/in indigenous languages. The Bokamoso project demonstrates that the transmission of IK involves many social actors and that the resuscitation of the cultural identity of indigenous people requires a grueling struggle in the political arena through interactions among those actors.

As Botibo's paper exemplifies, the vitalization of IK never occurs with-

out the use of indigenous language. Nevertheless, issues surrounding language use are very complex in Africa. Kaji's concise paper, titled "Multi-language use and lingua franca use," aims to develop a structural understanding of this complexity. In Africa, the population speaking a given language is usually small, and multiple languages are often spoken side by side in small geographical areas. People have developed many strategies to cope with this multi-language situation, the best known of which is the formation of lingua francas, such as Swahili and Lingala. On the other hand, many African people's engagement in multi-language use, characterized by the use of various spoken languages without resorting to a lingua franca, is less well known. According to Kaji, multiple languages are often employed when many individuals move from one area to another, each of which is dominated by a different monolingual group. Note that multi-language use is defined from the perspective of individual speakers: each multilingual speaker uses a given language that is understood in the area in which s/he is located. From the perspective of geographical area, however, multi-language use is similar to lingua franca use in that both establish a monolingual situation in a given area. The author asserts that people with different linguistic backgrounds can maintain successful communication only when a monolingual situation prevails in a given area. The findings suggest that policy makers should respect regional indigenous speech communities while supporting multi-language use across areas to facilitate the vitalization of IK.

Changes in policy makers' attitudes toward IK have been observed in many parts of Africa. For example, rock art and paintings, contemporary art, handicrafts, dance, and music have recently enjoyed considerable attention as the cultural heritage of the San, transcending the borders of nation states. According to Maitseo Bolaane (forthcoming), public discourse on the San has shifted focus from the "marginalised and suffering" status of their livelihood to the appreciation of their rich cultural heritage. Moreover, cultural heritage is becoming a medium through which San women and men narrate their experiences to a broader audience, thereby contributing considerably to the establishment of their indigenous cultural identity across the political boundaries of Botswana, Namibia, and South Africa.

The appreciation of cultural heritage and establishment of cultural identity are crucial driving forces in the vitalization of IK; in this respect, the case of the San represents an interesting trajectory among indigenous people throughout the world (Takada, 2008). It should be remarked that appreciation of a certain people's cultural heritage does not necessarily equate to recognition of their political rights. Do the San's narrations of their experiences through art pave the way for better guiding the civilization of modern African societies? Or, by appreciating their cultural heritage, does the government take the teeth out of the struggle for the recognition of their political rights? To answer these questions, as Batibo's paper indicates, other policies, such as San resettlement policies and the language policies in the formal school system, must be taken into consideration.

The vitalization of IK goes hand in hand with the explication of intriguing relationships between cultural identity and political rights in the globalized world. We dedicate this special issue to the indigenous people who are seeking these ends in Africa, with our thanks and our hope for further dialogue.

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Author's Name and Address: Akira TAKADA, *Graduate School of Asian and African Area Studies, Kyoto University, 46, Shimoadachi-cho, Yoshida, Sakyo-ku, Kyoto 606-8501, JAPAN.*

E-mail: takada [at] jambo.africa.kyoto-u.ac.jp