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Through My Body and in My Heart: A Primer

Bryan McKinley Jones Brayboy

How do we think about Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS)? I want to offer here my own thinking about what IKS are. There will certainly be debate about this. These are my views only; they serve as an invitation to others to share their own ways of outlining these crucial ideas.

IKS are—for me—fundamentally about the intersections between philosophical ideas and the daily realities of tribal nations, communities, and other entities that comprise the peoples who belong to them and their lands and waters. Before I discuss this further, let me be clear about what I am NOT engaging here. These are not sacred or limited knowledges. They are not specific knowledges or sets of knowledges; rather, they are principles and connectors. They are sites of convenings. They are systems. IKS unite Indigenous peoples across the globe. Indigenous peoples are simultaneously tethered to place and migratory. We have always moved. Often the movement was tied to food or water. Sustenance. Or to mates. Another form of sustenance, I suppose. The movement allowed Indigenous peoples to trade ideas, peoples. Stuff. Migration enabled relationships between peoples and ideas. Sparked by connection and curiosity, movement spurred innovation. The movement was a particular life force. Those who fail to adapt and adjust perish. Those who do not innovate, perish. Early Indigenous peoples in what is now Alaska created kayaks for transportation in and through waterways. Kayaks were effective in narrow spaces. And fast ones. Kayaks helped move us. They provided fun. Trips toward sustenance.

We are located in place. In the movement was the return. To our place. Our origins. Place, as I understand it, is not the same as land. Place is land that has been imbued by and with meaning. Many of us introduce ourselves by situating ourselves in our current location and the places that birthed and nurtured us. And our relations. Our kin. We do so not by offering geographical coordinates, but by naming the land that has been given meaning by others. Place grounds us. Literally. And metaphorically. Indigenous peoples and our systems understand that movement and stability and ties to a specific place (or set of places) are not incommensurate. They are necessary.

Place, lands, and waters collide, intersect, cohere, and diverge. Place is not simply about terra firma, or the lands on which we walk or from which we emerge. It must include water. Water births us. It feeds us; sustains and cares for us. We emerge from it in some of our origin stories. Water has a convening function as well. It brings peoples together. Water is kinship. Love happens in and through water. So does life. *Mní wíchóni* (or Water is Life!) is not simply a slogan; it embodies the deep, rich histories, presents, and futures of how IKS connect peoples and places. Peoples and waters. Water is life. It gives. Provides. Sustains. Nourishes. It is place. And life.

IKS are philosophical and concrete. My intent here is to offer a brief overview of the ways systems—and their concomitant components—overlap and intersect. These are my ideas; they are how I think about IKS. Others will disagree. Philosophers will want to argue about how I have taken up their terms. Indigenous peoples will say, “Why are you using these words, dude?!” I’m offering you what I have.

Writing—and mine, in particular—is an imperfect medium to try to explain these systems. Writing isn’t always capable of explicating the interwoven parts of these systems. While I present these ideas in chunks, please understand that they are part of a whole. My intent here is to try to offer a primer; behind it is a mountain of research and millennia of experiences, processes, embodiments. Those cannot be broken down into lists or pieces of paper; they reside in bodies, places, waters. They are located in stories. Masked in trauma and unleashed through self-determination. They are as complex

as the daily existences of peoples. This disclaimer does not prevent my wanting to begin making lists so that I can be clearer about how I think about IKS. The clarification is a pebble in the river bed, surrounded by other pebbles as water flows across them.

There are at least five philosophical ideas that comprise IKS. They overlap and intersect. Epistemology is about our ways of knowing. We might ask: How do we come to know what we know? What is knowledge? Knowledge resides in our brains; we see it in nature. It is in books. And in other places. It is everywhere, really. Knowing is ubiquitous.

Ontology is how I think about our ways of being. We might ask: What is our reality? What are our realities? Or we might ask: How do we be? Or we might ask: What are the ways we are? Our realities, like our knowledges, are framed by the context; they shift. Move. Migrate. And they are located in place. For many Indigenous peoples, our realities are shaped by the ways that we come to know. Knowing and being are interconnected. Removing one from the others feels unbalanced; the removal creates silos that amputate the wholeness of knowing and being.

Third is pedagogy. Pedagogy is often thought of as how we teach or the process of teaching. But it is really about the processes and intersections between both teaching and learning. Teaching and learning are how we move knowledges between and amongst those who will continue traditions. We might ask: How do we think about the process of teaching and learning? And to what end? I understand that over the life course, individuals will learn and teach differently. Stories teach. So do places. And we learn in and through stories. And place. And by doing things. Teaching and learning, like the other terms used here, are ubiquitous. They are always in motion. They migrate over peoples' lifetimes. But also between peoples. And places. This issue is primarily about pedagogies, but it should be clear that teaching and learning are intimately connected to the other philosophical ideas and realities of Indigenous peoples. Richness resides in the intersections.

Axiology is rooted in aesthetics and larger questions of beauty. I have taken it up to articulate our ways of valuing and our value systems. I, and others, have written about this as concerning how we come to think of what is good, true, right, and beautiful. We might ask: What do we value? What is good, true, right, and beautiful? Values undergird everything within knowledge systems. They guide decisions and actions. Values influence our sensual experiences.

And, finally, there is the concept of cosmology. Traditionally rooted in astrophysics to define the origins of the universe, cosmology can be mysterious. And theoretical. Through an IKS lens, we focus on origins and, more specifically, on our origin stories. Origin stories inherently carry genealogical components in them. Genealogy locates peoples in relation to one another and to place. And waters. We might ask: What is the origin? Many Indigenous peoples may ask: Who are your people? Where are you from and to whom are you related? This is relational; it locates us and our origins. Kinship and genealogies. For Indigenous peoples, we emerge from the earth. Or the waters. The sky. Our ties to place are long and deep. Literally. And metaphorically. The temporal components of cosmology are important for the ways that we think about teaching and learning. What we value, teach, learn, and know travel across time. These philosophical ideas overlap, and they are shared amongst Indigenous peoples across the globe. And, as the ShamWow guy used to say, "But wait, there's more!"

The intersecting philosophies are held together by some additional observations regarding IKS. The philosophical pieces are important, because they demonstrate the complexities of thought processes, teaching and learning strategies, and the deep sets of values that drive knowledges and realities. The observations are a mechanism through which I want to help myself (and, ideally, others) understand the layers of our knowledge systems. The archaeology of them is deep. They deserve a patient exploration

beyond what they're receiving here. At some point, I will try to explore them, layer by layer. Or someone else may take that up.

IKS are *empirical*. They are rooted in observations, which happen over time—data are collected, analyzed, and used to inform decisions. These observations have traditionally been tied to survival and to community thriving. We observe to see where food lives. Where it travels. Or water. But we also pay attention to patterns tied to weather. Things that feed us. Sustain us. Or hurt or kill us. Indigenous peoples have always been scientists. The laboratories are places, waters, skies; the places where we live. Thrive. Struggle. Are born; and where we die. They aren't sterile; they are messy. Sometimes predictable and sometimes not. The laboratories have created knowledge that allows us to survive. Live. Continue.

These knowledges and the system that holds them are *sensual*. They are engaged through the senses. We see, feel, hear, smell things ... our knowledges are taken in through them. And they're multisensory. We often smell things before we see or feel them (e.g., rain or fire). Music engages us in every sense. In its very best iterations, music is transcendent. This is true of many things, and yet, other systems want to break the knowledge apart into component pieces and "grade" on those. How utterly tragic. Narrow. Stifling. Our senses work together, even when one or more of them is compromised.

IKS and its concomitant knowledges are *cumulative*. Knowledges cross generations. There are both spatial and temporal aspects to knowledges and the systems that hold them. What does it mean for me that I inherit the knowledges of my grandmother, who inherited her grandmother's knowledges, and so on? The accumulation and cumulative impact of knowledges are tied to our survival. And thriving. It is not multiplicative. It is *exponential*. IKS are *exponential*.

Humor is such an important part of these knowledge systems. I've only recently added humor to the list of traits of our systems that unite Indigenous peoples; we spend a lot of time laughing both at and with one another. We laugh at ourselves. Many of our nicknames are tied to moments where we were not at our best. Consider the story of the young man who unwittingly put diesel into the gasoline outboard motor and was then henceforth known as "Diesel" for the rest of his life. We reminisce about hard times (what commodity foods we ate growing up and how our mothers made do with nothing or the battered cars we sped around in or the tragedies unfolding in front of us). Weddings and funerals are places where we laugh long and loud. Surrounded by Pepsi (or Coke ... or Shasta) and blue jeans, these gatherings are loving and tragic. And we find humor in them. The irony, in some ways, is that Indigenous peoples are often framed as serious. Stoic. But we're goofballs, finding humor to manage the pain and trauma. And the humor points us to places of love and connection. Kinship.

The knowledges embedded in IKS are *connected to* and *located in place*. IKS are connected to waters. We learn from where we live. And travel. And where we—and others—die. Where we are born. This is kinship. Or one form of it. These knowledge systems are *lived* and *embodied*. They are not written down on the pages of books or articles. Or on sheets of music. They are lived. Played. Felt. IKS are *rooted in verbs*. Nouns matter, but they are often guided by verbs. IKS are four-dimensional; we live them through our bodies, and there is a spiritual element attached to them. In this way, IKS extend what we know through other lenses that place a primary emphasis on knowledge in a written form. And yet, many of us only want to engage knowledges as nouns. What might it mean to engage knowledges through a lens of living? Of the embodied?

IKS are *relational*. Between peoples, peoples and place, peoples and curriculum. If this is true, then they also carry an element of *responsibility*. If I recognize my relationship with you or a place, then I am necessarily responsible for it and its well-being. This isn't an obligation; it's a recognition and acceptance of our connectedness. This is, in part, what kinship is. And there are levels of

multigenerationality in it: I am responsible to my ancestors and responsible for my descendants. Some have framed this thinking as connected to the seven generations who preceded us and to the seven who are still to come. Relationality. Responsibility. Reciprocity.

I want to be clear that we could add other components to IKS, but these are the ones that I have found resonate globally. Indigenous peoples in Africa and Europe, along with those throughout the Pacific region of the world, will say, “Yeah, that works for us, too.” IKS is one knowledge system of many, although it is often hidden both because we—as Indigenous peoples—have not put them together in this form and because others have not taken the time to think seriously about knowledge systems and what they mean for the daily lives of peoples.

Not the end. A beginning.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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