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Indigenous knowledges and development: a postcolonial caution

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Abstract

As a result of the failure of formal top-down development, there has recently been increased interest in the possibilities of drawing upon the indigenous knowledges of those in the communities involved, in an attempt to produce more effective development strategies. The concept of indigenous knowledge calls for the inclusion of local voices and priorities, and promises empowerment through ownership of the process. However, there has been little critical examination of the ways in which indigenous knowledges have been included in the development process. Drawing upon postcolonial theory, this article suggests that indigenous knowledges are often drawn into development by both theorists and development institutions in a very limited way, failing to engage with other ways of perceiving development, and thus missing the possibility of devising more challenging alternatives.

Introduction

The rhetoric of indigenous knowledges has been heralded as seemingly offering a way out of the development impasse. In contrast to the past, when traditional knowledges were typically seen as obstacles to development, it is now claimed by some that these are pivotal to discussions on sustainable resource use and balanced development (Agrawal 1995). Central to this rhetoric is the inclusion of the local knowledges of groups at whom development projects are aimed, rather than assuming and relying on the universal applicability and superiority of scientific knowledge and “developmentalism” (Escobar 1995). Such approaches appear to offer a positive way forward in that they take greater account of the specificities of local conditions, draw on the knowledge of a population who have lived experience of the environments in question, and provide peoples with ownership of the development process. While a consideration of the voices of marginalized people is

a relatively new departure for development research – and more especially its practical application – this is an issue more thoroughly dealt with in the literature of postcolonial theory. Postcolonial theorists have critically examined the ways in which Western theory and knowledge have dealt with alternative voices and different ways of knowing. These can offer important challenges to development theories, notwithstanding Goss's (1996) concerns about the practical value of postcolonial theories to everyday development issues. This paper therefore presents a postcolonial engagement with notions of indigenous knowledges used in development discourse to suggest a number of cautions about the nature of this inclusion.

Indigenous knowledges

By the close of the twentieth century, development had become a deeply problematic concept which had lost much of its initial promise. Post- and anti-development theorists have argued that, rather than breaking away from the colonising attitudes of the past, there is greater evidence of continuity in the preservation of Western-centred attitudes, as well as an arrogant confidence in the almost unquestioned validity of science and Western knowledge (Escobar 1995; Pretty 1994; Nustad 2001). Typically, “development experts” from the West are brought in to analyse a development problem and to offer a solution based on scientific method. Just as in the colonial period, an assumption dominates that either Western science and rationality are more advanced or refined than other positions, or, more simply, that they are the norm – “knowledge” in the singular form – from which others deviate in their fallibility. Voices that are local and indigenous to a particular area are deemed to face development needs as a result of their deviation from this norm (Escobar 1995). Development can therefore only be achieved by bringing them into line with the universal knowledge of scientific truths, whether this referred to the management of soil or the management of people. This certainty in the scientific path out of underdevelopment has been shaken, of course, by the witnessing of continuing high rates of poverty, and growing economic differences between countries. The effects of development have not achieved their claim of drawing together all nations into the realm of development, but rather has witnessed ever increasing levels of poverty.¹

Faced with this failure of development, some development theorists and practitioners have critiqued modernisation approaches for being based on the uncritical transfer of science and technology from the North to the South (Peet and Watts 1993; Escobar 1995). A number of writers have come to question scientific approaches as being the best, or the only, solution to development problems (see, for example, Ellen and Harris 2000; Kalland 2000; Leach and Mearns 1996; Sillitoe 1998). They argue that other knowledges – the indigenous knowledges of the people resident in particular places – can be of equal, or more, value. Within this argument, Western (formal) science loses its universal position, and becomes one of a range of competing and contested knowledge systems (Homann and Rischkowsky 2001; Mohan and Stokke 2000). It too has to be regarded as a local or indigenous knowledge: one that is localised in the institutions of the West and has gained its apparent universality by being projected throughout the world through the formation of colonial and neocolonial power relations. Thus, the domination of Western knowledge is explained not through a privileged proximity to the truth, but as a set of historico-geographical conditions tied up with the geopolitics of power (Escobar 1995).

The recognition of indigenous knowledges presented the development community with alternative experiences with which to challenge conventional development praxis, and, indeed, as a way of potentially empowering hitherto neglected populations (see, for example, Leach and Mearns 1996; Holland and Blackburn 1998). Increasingly, development writing and, to a lesser extent, practice, is channelling efforts to draw in the voices and understandings of those who are to be involved. In the 1980s, Chambers (1983) was already signalling that local people were rarely consulted about their needs, priorities or local environmental or technical knowledges, let alone allowed to set the agenda. Hence, the results of such “development” were frequently inappropriate or even irrelevant. Although Richards (1985) took the debate about the utility of local knowledges significantly further forward, with his work clearly showing how West African farmers used local, indigenous knowledge systems as the basis for successful agricultural development, there remains a persistent reluctance among many in the development

community to embrace some of these ideas. This may be due to the continuing dominance of a scientific worldview, as well as perhaps the authority and prestige of the label “expert” which science provides. However, the proliferation of academic study in the field of indigenous knowledge, highlighting the dangers of proceeding as if formal science alone could offer answers, makes it increasingly difficult for development practitioners to ignore this approach (see, for example, Bellon 1995; Briggs *et al* 1998; Lamers and Feil 1995; Maddox *et al* 1996; Tiffen *et al* 1994; Reij *et al* 1996; Sillitoe 1998). Nevertheless, the extent to which various writers and practitioners have actually dealt with this issue is, as we shall see, variable.

While the debate about the inclusion of other voices and knowledges into development studies is relatively new, it has been more fully debated in the literature on postcolonialism. Analysis of the complicity between power and knowledge is central to postcolonial theory, an approach which seeks to examine how Western knowledge systems have become bound up with the construction of both colonial and postcolonial ways of knowing and acting in the West, but more significantly, also around the world (Said 1978). Various postcolonial theorists have therefore examined the effects of Western domination of knowledge and attempted to formulate theoretical and practical strategies of resistance to this dominance. Despite the apparently vital connections between development studies and postcolonial theory, however, there has been very little in the way of cross-referencing between the two. This reflects differences in political attitude, wariness over motives and divergence in specialised languages used to articulate relevant issues. Many postcolonial theorists consider development studies still to be mired in modernist, or even colonialist, mindsets; to many involved with development work, postcolonialism is seen to offer overly complex theories ignorant of the real problems characterising everyday life in the majority world. The two approaches apparently have little in common. Sylvester (1999: 703) notes: “development studies does not tend to listen to subalterns and postcolonial studies does not tend to concern itself with whether the subaltern is eating”, a lament for the lack of communication between development studies and postcolonialism. However, precisely as a result of their divergent traditions, she suggests that a dialogue

between development studies and postcolonialism offers great potential for an alternative conceptualisation of development. Certainly, there may well be elements of postcolonial critique which could be important to reconceptualisations of development around the notion of indigenous knowledge, just as much as there may be very practical concerns in development studies which provide an important grounding for the conceptual and theoretical concerns of postcolonial thinking.

Listening to other voices

Yet to receive much critical attention in development theory and practice is the *nature* of the inclusion of indigenous knowledges in development thinking. A central tenet of postcolonial theory is its concern with the ontological and epistemological status of the voices of subaltern peoples in Western knowledge systems, and a postcolonial interrogation of the inclusion of indigenous knowledges in development suggests caution. Indeed, Spivak (1988) has questioned whether “the subaltern” can ever speak; even when apparently expressing her own views, the subaltern is not able to express her true self. Writing about attempts to recover the voices and experiences of the subaltern in South Asian historiography, Spivak has argued that the subaltern cannot speak, so imbued must she be with the words, phrases and cadences of Western thought in order for her to be heard. In order to be taken seriously – to be seen as offering knowledge and not opinion or folklore – the lifeworld of the subaltern has to be translated into the language of science, development or philosophy, dominated by Western concepts and Western languages. For Spivak (1988), the implications of this “epistemic violence” mean that the ways of knowing the world and knowing the self in non-Western culture are trivialised and invalidated by Western scientists and experts. Hence, the subaltern must always be caught in translation, never truly expressing herself, but always already interpreted.

Furthermore, postcolonial theorists (for example, Spivak 1988; hooks 1990; Goss 1996) have questioned the degree to which academics and experts in the West really want to engage with people elsewhere, an engagement which requires a de-centring of themselves as experts. Some postcolonial theorists have already bemoaned the lack of true engagement with the knowledges and voices of the West’s “others”,

and, despite claims to be interested in others, suggest that the West is only interested in hearing its own voice (hooks 1990; Spivak 1988; Mohanty 1988). Hooks' (1990) autobiographical approach tells a similar tale to Spivak in her attempt to be heard from the margins. For her, the margins are a site of "radical possibility" which reject the politics of inside and outside, because "to be on the margins is to be part of the whole but outside the main body" (hooks 1990:341). It is a hybridised indigenous knowledge which she believes offers a unique and important perspective which is not distorted by the power and prejudices of the centre. However, hooks has felt silenced by those who seek the experience, but not the wisdom, of the other. She argues that "I was made 'other' there in that space...they did not meet me there in that space. They met me at the center" (hooks 1990:342). The experiences of the marginalised are used in the West, but without opening up the *process* to their knowledges, theories and explanations. When there is a meeting, it is at the metropolitan centre, in the (predominantly) Western institutions of power/knowledge (aid agencies, universities, the pages of journals) and in the languages of the west (science, philosophy, social science and so on, expressed in English, French, Spanish and so on). So by approaching the institutions of knowledge, she has been forced to the centre, a location both metaphorical in its control of authority and geographical in its physical presence. For local knowledge and narratives to be heard at all, they have to move to this central terrain, where they may be "accepted" and subsequently appropriated. She claims to have met a reluctance to abandon the mark of authority, experiencing instead only a desire for material from which explanations can be made. Western researchers want to know about her experiences, but not her own explanations:

No need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way (hooks 1990: 343).

By retelling her experience from a Western point of view, hooks' voice is included, but only as an example, or as data which the Western "expert" alone can interpret. Moraga (1981, quoted in Weedon 2002, para 8; see also Escobar 1995: 46) explains the effects of this appropriation:

the white writing about Native peoples or cultures displaces the Native writer and often appropriates the culture instead of proliferating information about it. The difference between

appropriation and proliferation is that the first steals and harms; the second helps heal the breaches of knowledge. These arguments can be brought to the discussion of indigenous knowledges in development studies.

The knowledge of indigenous knowledges

Frequently, where there has indeed been some engagement with local knowledges by development practitioners, it has most often been at a technical or artefactual rather than fundamental or conceptual level (Briggs *et al* 1999). Concern has typically been with technical issues related to cultivation, such as methods of indigenous soil management, water preservation and medicinal plant use. There has been rather less engagement with those knowledges underlying such indigenous technical and environmental knowledges. Indigenous knowledge is allowed to offer contained technical solutions that fit within the current scientific/development worldview, but not challenge the content, structure or value-system of this view. There continues to be a suspicion and wariness about the extent to which indigenous knowledges are capable of challenging currently accepted ideas of development by pushing formal science to the margins. Formal science still represents a powerful body of knowledge, and it is still the language of authority and dominance in many development debates. Indeed, Pretty (1994: 38) has observed that “the trouble with normal science is that it gives credibility to opinion only when it is defined in scientific language, which may be inadequate for describing the complex and changing experiences of farmers and other actors in rural development”. As a result, knowledges, other than those derived from formal science, are still eyed suspiciously by many in the development community, except where perhaps relatively straightforward and uncontroversial indigenous technical solutions can be incorporated into development practice. Just as in hooks’ example, the experts look for experiences to analyse, but not the voice of the indigenous peoples which might offer different – and challenging – interpretations.

In part, this may be due to where Western academics look and listen for the voices of the other, and how. As Escobar (1995: 219) has argued, everywhere there is the production of alternatives to developmentalism, resistant practices, however mundane. Similarly, Scott (1985) has highlighted some of the “hidden transcripts”

of resistant action of the apparently powerless, what he calls the “weapons of the weak”. The “voices” are there if the methods of the researchers are appropriately tuned in to them. Moreover, the voices may actually be embodied performances, rather than the coherent articulations of speech or writing which the academic usually seeks. Escobar (1995: 223) argues that the “subaltern do in fact speak, even if the audibility of their voices in circles where ‘the West’ is reflected upon and theorised is tenuous at best”. Rather than always expecting debate to come to the West then, it is important that Western research is itself decentred.

In this context, there has sometimes been a tendency to see indigenous knowledges as ideas that can be brought together with formal science in unproblematic ways (De Queiroz and Norton 1992; Haburema and Steiner 1997; Payton *et al* 2003). Rather than seeing localised knowledges as offering potential challenges to formal approaches, there is an expectation that there exists a simple process of addition of a variety of knowledges to produce a better way of knowing. This may be a valuable end in itself, particularly when marginalized peoples can adopt and adapt those knowledges which fit their situation, but this approach can be naive of political power relations which ensure that never can all knowledges sit equally together. The exigencies of each situation mean that certain views and voices will be heard much more clearly. Liberal desires for the inclusion of a range of voices in the development process is a case in point. This offers an unproblematic call for the meeting of voices, ignoring the power-politics of how this might actually occur in practice. Part of the liberal argument is that indigenous practices of, for instance, soil management, need to be understood to ensure that inappropriate development approaches are not introduced. However, attempts to deal with issues beyond this material or technical level are often unclear. How should there be a resolution of a conflict of interests, as in the examples Blaikie (1995) presents in his argument for a Third World ecology between Western conservationists who want to preserve large animals such as elephants, and local farmers who see them as a dangerous pest? He insists that all voices need to be considered. While this is all well and good, at no point does he indicate *how* this drawing together of voices should be managed. From whose perspective should competing views be judged? Who should decide which point is most valid? The examples he presents are resolved from the

perspective of Western science, a “good” version of this science which involves fieldwork, and attention to local detail, but a Western-centred understanding of environment and resources nevertheless (Blaikie 1995). For Blaikie, problems only emerge with science once results and recommendations are passed on to politicians; this is where the distortions and misrepresentations emerge. The problem with views on indigenous knowledge such as Blaikie’s is that in a liberal (as opposed to a more radical) embracing of different voices, there is an obfuscation of the process through which conflicts are resolved and decisions are made and, more often than not, this disguises the ongoing dominance of Western knowledge and Western power. The common adoption of the abbreviation “IK” seems to emphasise the view of indigenous knowledge as a technicality, hiding deeper ways of knowing behind this neat sign.

The recent adoption of the language of “IK” by development institutions such as the World Bank further emphasises this point. The World Bank’s “Indigenous Knowledge for Development: a framework for action” (1998: i) appropriately argues that there is a need “not only to help bring global knowledge to the developing countries, but also to learn about indigenous knowledge (IK) from these countries, paying particular attention to the knowledge base of the poor”. However, the framework continues by listing a range of mostly technical and discrete knowledges which can be identified (such as herbal medicine, p.1). There is no sense of dealing with embedded knowledges which are part of the wider worldview of the people involved, such as understandings of social justice, gender relations, familial responsibility and so on. The World Bank’s indigenous knowledge framework similarly reveals a displacement of the valuation process. When noting that not all indigenous practices are beneficial to sustainable development (using the well-worn examples of slash and burn agriculture and female circumcision to make its point), it suggests that before adopting an indigenous knowledge,

...practices need to be scrutinized for their appropriateness just as any other technology. In addition to scientific proof, local evidence and the sociocultural background in which the practices are embedded also need consideration in the process of validation and evaluation. (World Bank 1998: 6).

There is no indication of how this evaluation will take place. It is clear later in the document that essentially indigenous knowledge should not offer too great a

challenge to the established order. The report states that “IK should complement, rather than compete with global knowledge systems in the implementation of projects” (World Bank 1998: 8). Thus, just as with Blaikie, it is still the scientific view, in all its wisdom, that can decide which indigenous knowledge is worthy of serious investigation and dissemination elsewhere. Indigenous knowledge is not being allowed to offer a fundamental challenge to development, just the opportunity to offer a few technical solutions, place-specific tweakings and so on. Elsewhere in the World Bank’s website,² this unproblematic view is reiterated, in that the “IK Program promotes the *integration* of IK systems into World Bank-supported programs” (Gorjestani no date, accessed 2003: 4, emphasis added). The illustration accompanying this article reinforces the idea of a seamless incorporation of ideas, with no sense of the conflict that alternative views of environment and development might produce (fig. 1).

However, if indigenous knowledges are to be genuinely brought into conversation with Western notions of development, this does have to be a true exchange and cannot be a simple case of incorporation. Western science as a knowledge must be open to change, however difficult this might be. In discussing scientists’ fears that fully embracing the significance of indigenous knowledge might lead to the validation of approaches such as creationism and astrology, Nakashima and de Guchteneire (1999:40) suggest that:

we might consider that the discomfort of these scientists gives expression to a more fundamental concern...about the relationship between science and these other systems of knowledge, other understandings of the world. Of course, if indigenous knowledge is conceived as just another information set from which data can be extracted to plug into scientific frameworks of understanding, then we do not trouble the scientific worldview. However, this practical approach – that of the pharmaceutical industry or of conservation ecologists who validate traditional information and use it to attain pre-defined ends – may threaten the integrity of traditional knowledge systems. On the other hand, if science is seen as one knowledge system among many, then scientists must reflect on the relativity of their knowledge and their interpretations of ‘reality’. For the survival of traditional knowledge as a dynamic, living and culturally meaningful system, this debate cannot be avoided.

This suggests a call for a much more significant reconceptualisation of development than the liberal views suggested by Blaikie (1995) and, even more so, by institutions

such as the World Bank. Voices of others, Nakashima and de Guchteneire (1999) argue, must be allowed to critique dominant world views, challenge terms of debate and propose alternative agendas, rather than simply being added in to an existing way of doing things. It is interesting that although there is much discussion of the possibilities of shifting indigenous knowledges between different geographical locations and the problems of place-specificity, there is no discussion on these terms about the movement of Western science and development between differing economic, socio-cultural and political places. There is little recognition of the embeddedness of these knowledge systems and the changes to them that will be effected with geographical movement. Nakashima and de Guchteneire (1999) suggest that this failure will either end up preserving indigenous knowledge as an unchanging artefact of a timeless culture, or will decontextualise it, distorting it out of all recognition to those who had depended upon it for daily life. The following examples exemplify these concerns.

Indigenous environmental knowledges

Some approaches to indigenous knowledge can lead to a freezing of traditional cultures and ways of knowing. Such treatment supports indigenous knowledge only if presented as an unchanging presence. Silvern (1995) explains how this is played out in terms of native American use of natural resources. He discusses European-American protests of the Ojibwe tribe's fishing practices in the lakes of northern Wisconsin. The Ojibwe have traditional rights to fish in this area as a result of the Wisconsin Treaty Rights but their spearing of the fish, especially in the spawning season, is seen as "unsporting" by many other residents of the area. For some, their hunting would be acceptable only if it were ceremonial, "and only if the tribes used spearing technology and methods that were available at the time of the signing of the treaties in the nineteenth century" (Silvern 1995: 281). That the Ojibwe now use motorised boats, battery-powered lamps and metal harpoons, marks them, and their knowledges of environmental management, as non-traditional, and there have been calls for them to return to birch bark canoes, pitch torches and wooden spears. Although the knowledges of conservation (rather than sport or profit) that underlie these technological advances remain, they are seen as irrelevant. For many, to recognise these claims to indigenous knowledge, Ojibwe practices would have to

remain unchanged from some point in the nineteenth century which was considered “traditional”.

It is also important to consider carefully the effect of incorporating different knowledges into Western knowledge. There may be unintended outcomes. Kalland (2000: 327) provides the following example concerning the appropriation of Indian and Oriental philosophies into “a Western tradition of absolutism”:

This has produced environmentalist and animal rights discourses which are quite alien to the donor cosmologies. Not only has animal rights discourse – and to a lesser extent the environmentalist discourse – turned respect for game animals into ‘intrinsic value’, but also their missionary zeal stands in sharp contrast to the contextual approaches of many local peoples. Ironically, then, the environmentalist and animal rights discourses at times pose a threat to the life-styles of local people who depend on the utilization of animal resources.

Such mixing of notions of conservation can lead to quite ridiculous situations, leaving people’s belief systems captured within a Westernised structure. An example can be found in Wadi Allaqi in the Eastern Desert in southern Egypt. In 1989, Wadi Allaqi was declared a Protected Area under Egyptian law, and subsequently as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve in 1994. As part of the process, those Bedouin communities resident within the area were consulted about the proposals. Hence, liberal views of how indigenous knowledges might be incorporated were satisfied. Significantly, though, the key decisions were taken within the context of a Western environmental discourse. In particular, boundaries were drawn around different tracts of land, including core and buffer zones, as well as around the whole protected area. Within these boundaries there are particular conservation practices that should be legally observed. However, the idea of drawing a boundary around an area of land, the inside being resources to be preserved, the outside being an area where no conservation needs to be applied, is very different to Bedouin understanding and use of their local environment. For them, resources are defined in a more fluid manner. Conservation is practiced according to need regardless of location in or outside a particular area. It also reflects differing drought pressures on different vegetation resources at particular times, both on annual and significantly longer time-scales. It is a temporal practice for them, necessary at certain times of the year, or in particular seasons.

Conservation practices also differ in times of drought, where there is by necessity less dependence on seasonal or ephemeral grazing, and a greater dependence on conserved tree stock. At other times, these resources may be fully exploited. This cyclical, temporal knowledge of conservation and resources is rather different to a Western spatial definition which constrains or excludes certain practices in defined geographic locations. It is this latter view, based firmly in Western conservation discourses, which dominates conservation practice in Wadi Allaqi.

This has resulted in some frustrating consequences for Bedouin living in the area. One example is illustrated by conflicting understandings of conservation of acacia trees by Bedouin and Western conservationists. Acacia trees, of which the two main varieties in the area are *Acacia raddianna* and *Acacia ehrenbergiana*, constitute an important economic resource for the Bedouin to be exploited in a sustainable way. They provide a source of feed for livestock from naturally fallen leaves, shaken leaves and fruit. They also provide an important source of wood for charcoal making; acacia is particularly valued for the quality of charcoal that can be made from it. Access to the various economic elements of acacia trees and bushes can be complex. From the same tree, one family may have claims to only naturally fallen leaves, whilst another may have access to those leaves which are dislodged when the plant is shaken, and a third to only the dead wood for charcoaling. For another tree, one family may have rights to all its production. The situation can be further complicated by the existence of some prohibitions against taking resources during some times in the year, whereas at other times resources can be removed without any such difficulty. This system, therefore, provides for a system of conservation of scarce resources, even though it may not necessarily meet the requirements of formal Western-based conservation practice. Bedouin conceptualisations of conservation are culturally and economically embedded, and managed in the interests of their community interests.

The issue about taking only dead wood from acacia trees becomes crucial. In 1998, the annual level of water in Lake Nasser rose to unprecedented levels. As a result, about twelve mature *Acacia raddianna* trees, located relatively near to the lakeshore in Wadi Quleib, a side wadi of Wadi Allaqi, were inundated. Whereas other

varieties of acacia (e.g. *Acacia nilotica*) can withstand occasional inundations, neither *Acacia raddianna* nor *ehrenbergiana*, being desert varieties of acacia, are able to do so. Inevitably, the trees died. In these circumstances, the trees would normally be used to make charcoal due to the fact that they would never again produce new wood. However, as the trees had grown within the conservation area, there was a prohibition against their use by humans. And so, in order to comply with the regulations imposed by the conservation area label, Bedouin were expected to ignore the dead trees. Unsurprisingly, Bedouin saw little logic in the formal, Western position of conservation. There was a clear cultural divide between the two rather different views of conservation.

But it is also on a daily basis that these tensions arise. The fauna, as well as the flora, of the Wadi Allaqi Protected Area are also subject to Egyptian conservation law. Consequently, it is illegal to kill snakes and scorpions, but, for Bedouin, these represent the two most pervasive and dangerous pests in the area. Children and older people are particularly at risk and there are regularly serious illnesses and even fatalities as a result of contact with snakes and scorpions. In practice, there is no dilemma for Bedouin, even though they are theoretically contravening conservation law. Yet again, there is a clear disjuncture between indigenous and Western conservation priorities and approaches.

Locating indigenous knowledge

Of course, fully embracing the potentials of indigenous knowledge is no easy task. Once the stable point of science or development has been challenged as a neutral position from which to judge the merits of different indigenous knowledge, the ground becomes difficult to stand upon with any certainty. Fear of imposing inappropriate judgements on different voices has led some to suggest relativism, and it seems that the fear of appropriating the voice of others has led some researchers to question their abilities to say anything about communities of which they are not a member (see, for example, England 1994), creating a general anxiety around questions of representation. However, Radcliffe (1994) argues that this is not a solution to problems of power and (mis)representation. She argues that “disclaiming the right to speak about/with Third World women acts ... to justify an

abdication of responsibility with regard to global relations of privilege and authority which are granted, whether we like it or not, to First World women (and men)” (Radcliffe 1994: 28). In a world made up of complex interrelationships and dependencies, to talk of coherent communities, within which some are members (and therefore somehow able to represent their community) and others are outsiders (and therefore cannot), is simplistic and misleading (see Jones 2000). Moreover, this view of discrete communities is not one that most postcolonial theorists would be willing to adopt when analysing the identities of groups other than academics and their research participants.

There has been further concern over the danger of what might be considered an extreme localism or what has been called, in a slightly different context, “anthropological particularism” (O’Laughlin 1995: 69). Work on indigenous knowledges can lead to an impression that every situation is unique, and that each development struggle is entirely localised and specific. Spivak (1988:290) has voiced this concern in relation to postcolonial studies which focus on particular constructions of power/knowledge, wondering whether this is at the expense of a global vision. Such a view insists that while the experiences of “underdevelopment” may well be unique to each place, there are nonetheless important structures which link them together. In a similar vein, Harvey (1996) fears that recent concerns with an identity politics sensitive to each situation allows capitalism to operate at much larger scales, unexamined and unopposed. The effects of embracing notions of development around indigenous knowledges should not be at the cost of no longer theorising about the processes and systems through which the countries of the Third World are systematically resigned to poverty.

Such dilemmas are not confined to those who study global capitalism. Those concerned with understanding the workings of patriarchal power also face challenges in coming to terms with indigenous knowledge. Fear of being insensitive to locally constructed gender relations has led some feminists to question their attempts to theorise patriarchy. This has meant that often the social relations of gender “are labelled as falling into the realm of culture and strong advocacy for a rethinking of gender relations would be seen as unwarranted ‘cultural interference’”

(Rathgeber 1995: 207), although social relations based around class and income, for instance, are seen as open for criticism (Chant and Gutmann 2000:20). While this discussion of cultural imperialism is undoubtedly important, vital to ensuring that feminism does not go the way of other discourses of development in a colonising mentality, which suggests that the outside expert is always right, it should not silence critical engagement between women in different places:

Women need to be free to act from their own analysis and priorities and not be manipulated by outsiders; yet the restrictions of internalised oppression, which limit women's options, must be challenged (Rowlands 1997: 134).

Thus, without imposing outside views on a population of women, "a methodology should be adopted that will help women to perceive the limitations that they place on themselves" (Rowlands 1997: 134). Only when the critique of current conditions comes from the women themselves can development processes effectively challenge the relations of patriarchal domination and achieve empowerment.

Thus, it is important to embed understandings of local processes of knowledge production within a greater awareness of systematic processes. Indeed, some authors have argued for the necessity of work in other places in order to ensure that Eurocentric biases are countered with other approaches (Duncan and Sharp 1993; Sidaway 1992). Sparke (1994:119) has argued that it is only the "hard work of specific analyses" which ensures that academics (Western or otherwise) cannot resort to easy stereotypes and instead appreciate the complexity of each society.

To find these other voices (if indeed they want to be found³), it is necessary for Western academics to de-centre themselves: geographically, linguistically and culturally. Rather than abandon fieldwork, it is perhaps now needed more than ever to de-centralise Western centrism. This does not mean a naïve return to the field (see Nast 1994). A number of authors fear the dangers of "exoticising" the other, of choosing a difference to study, for its difference, rather than because of any particular commitment to the group in question. For example, Katz (1994:68) uses a comparative approach, not only to foreground her relationship to those involved in the research, but also to allow the research to reflect upon larger-scale processes:

By displacing the field and addressing the issue in rural Sudan and East Harlem, New York – settings that on the surface appear to have little in common – I am able to tell a story not of marginalization alone where “those poor people” might be the key narrative theme, but of the systemic predations of global economic restructuring.

Hence, Katz recognises her ambivalent position within the research process; she is neither part of the communities being researched, but nor is she entirely separate from them. She explains that each of us is always already in the field. There are further strategies that can be adopted to increase this sense of connection, more obviously perhaps the importance of collaborative work, or engaging with local researchers at each stage of the research process, from project inception through to publication. This is one of the reasons why some have argued for the importance of authorship with Third World academics, or the inclusion of research subjects in the production of final reports and papers which will represent them and their communities (see McDowell 1992; Scheyyens and Leslie 2000).⁴

Conclusions

It is important not to see indigenous knowledge as an artefact, simply something to be preserved (perhaps akin to the collection of genetic diversity) as a record of what has been lost to the seemingly inevitable march of Western science. This means a wariness of glib uses of concepts of indigenous knowledge in development discourse, and a wariness of what we are perhaps now seeing as an institutionalisation of indigenous knowledge in the World Bank, and elsewhere, as “IK”, an uncritical addition to development practice. Although there seems to be an implicit assumption in much of the literature that capitalism and western science are inextricably bound to each other, it may well be that if alternative knowledge systems offer potentially higher returns on capital than western science, then capitalist interests will inevitably embrace such knowledges. Hence, we have a possible explanation for the World Bank’s recent interest in indigenous knowledge. However, the local knowledges of people on the receiving end of development practice must be allowed a more thorough challenge to the agenda.

Indigenous knowledges all over the world are malleable, changing in response to Western ideas and practices, but also to an ever-changing array of other ways of

knowing and doing. This is due to economic and social change, especially as the result of modernisation. Thus we must not underestimate the significance of material conditions which influence the need for different knowledges. Indigenous knowledge cannot ever be understood in isolation of the critical analysis of economic, social, cultural and political conditions. As Agrawal (1995) argues, indigenous knowledge is not simply about language and expression, but about these material conditions through which people must survive.

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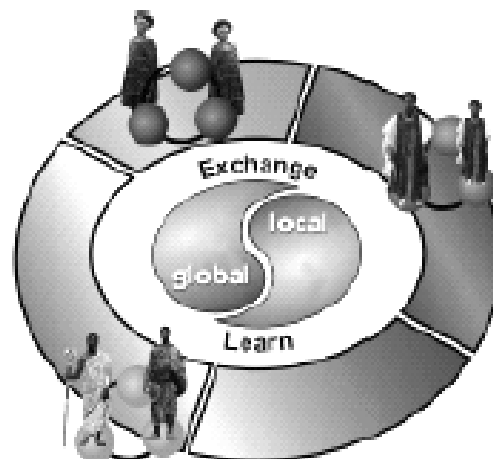


Figure 1. Image from World Bank IK web site
(http://www.worldbank.org/afr/ik/ikpaper_0102.pdf)

Endnotes

¹ This was underlined in the UN Human Development Report 2003 which showed that living standards had declined in 54 countries in the world between 1990 and 2001, 21 of which are in Africa.

² A caveat appears at the end of this article which states that “The views expressed in this paper are entirely those of the author and should not be attributed in any manner to the World Bank, to its affiliated organizations or to members of its Board of Executive Directors or the countries they represent”. However, the prominence of this article on the World Bank’s website suggests a degree of convergence of viewpoints.

³ This set of arguments does assume that the subaltern want to be heard. However, there are suggestions that the identification of the “hidden transcripts” of resistance, makes them legible to the very people they seek to evade (Scott 1985). Alternatively, some may want to adopt silence as a strategy of resistance. Katz does accept the possibility though that there are times when the most appropriate method might be one of silence, acknowledging that “ethnographic work can (inadvertently) expose sensitive practices of subaltern people to those who (might) use this knowledge to oppress them” (Katz 1994: 71; see also Stacey 1988).

⁴ This, however, is an intention more often discussed than practiced (Parpart 1993: 455).