
UNIT 3 INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE

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Learning Objectives



After reading this unit, you will know:

- the concept of indigenous knowledge;
- the place of this knowledge in the lives of people;
- aspects of this knowledge in two societies; and
- the need to preserve it.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In the last two decades, anthropologists have strongly felt about the rights of people and how they were being trampled and undermined by the external forces of development and change. As these communities are changing, their knowledge systems- technically called indigenous knowledge – are also disappearing. It is not only a loss of inestimable value but also without their knowledge systems, the people feel decimated, isolated, and lost. The action anthropologists work towards the preservation of this knowledge- let the people chose what they want to retain and what they wish to give up. Against these ideas of people’s autonomy that these two ethnographic accounts may be situated.

3.2 THEORETICAL PART OF WHICH THE ETHNOGRAPHY *Sacred Ecology: Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Resource Management* IS AN EXAMPLE

This work is a contribution to ecological anthropology. Each community improvises a set of techniques and a world view to adapt to the environment. In most societies this world view is rooted in religion, the sanction of which help in the preservation of the environment. Because of the close interaction between religion and ecological knowledge, the ‘ecology becomes sacred’, hence ‘sacred ecology’.

3.3 DESCRIPTION OF THE ETHNOGRAPHY

Sacred Ecology: Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Resource Management is a holistic study of TEK (Traditional Ecological Knowledge). The book is about traditional ecological knowledge in resource management.

3.3.1 Intellectual Context

Need for ecological insights from indigenous practices of resource use and to develop a new ecological ethic in part by learning from the wisdom of traditional knowledge holders gave rise to this volume divided in three parts, quoting Cree Indian hunters, to explain various concepts and aspects of TEK and explains how to make indigenous knowledge (IK) applicable to contemporary problems. Berkes was earlier a marine scientist and applied ecologist but later shifted to human ecology and environment and the work by him is an outcome of extensive fieldwork conducted on James Bay Cree Indians.

3.3.2 Fieldwork

Fieldwork was conducted using the standard anthropological methods. The author spent a long time with the people, collecting their understanding of their environment. The local conceptions were noted down and interpreted. The author also made use of the historical material; and all this was contrasted to the western conception of sustainability.

3.3.3 Analysis of Data

The Cree Indians

The James Bay Cree region lies to the east and south-east of James Bay and south-east of Hudson Bay. It has been inhabited by the James Bay Cree since the glaciers left about 5,000 years ago. The Cree now number some 12,000 people and live in nine distinct settlements from which they hunt approximately 375,000 square kilometers of land. (The word “Cree” in this chapter refers specifically to the James Bay Cree.)

The total resident population of the eight Cree communities in 1987, according to the list of beneficiaries of the James Bay Agreement, numbered 8590. The land, which is snow covered for six to eight months of the year, is unsuitable for growing crops or for grazing domestic animals. For these reasons, the traditional

Cree economy consists of hunting, fishing, and gathering wild berries, in contrast to the agricultural economies of Indian groups farther south, such as the Hurons and the Iroquois. The five coastal communities, Whapmagoostui, Chisasibi, Wemindji, Eastmain, and Waskaganish, and the inland community of Nemaska are relatively isolated. Over the past 10 years, the rate of social and cultural change has been particularly rapid in the Cree communities, increasing the influence of non-Native North American society on Cree society. The Cree have an extensive set of ideas about types and causes of illness, as well as a number of traditional remedies from plant and animal sources. Unfortunately, these ideas have not been incorporated into the medical services currently provided in the Cree communities (Robinson, 1988:1607-08).

Cree World View “from the Inside” as viewed by Berkes (1999)

Understanding Traditional Ecological Knowledge among the Cree Indians

James Bay Cree Indians are independent hunter-trapper-fisher and rural population at periphery of a dominant society. To get an animal in the Cree view does not mean to encounter it by chance, but to receive the animal. The animal is given to the hunter. A successful hunt is not simply the result of the intention and work of the hunter; it is also the outcome of the intention and actions of the animals. In the process of hunting a hunter enters into a reciprocal relationship: animals are given to hunters to meet their needs and wants, and in return the hunters incur obligations to the animals. Thus, the Cree conception of hunting involves a complex and moral relationship in which the outcome of the hunt is a result of the mutual efforts of the hunter and the environment. This is a subtle and accurate ecological perspective. It may seem odd that animal killed should be conceptualised as gifts, and it is important therefore to note that Cree do not radically separate the concepts of “human” and “animals.” In their everyday experience in the bush they continually observe examples of the intelligence and will power of animals. They express this by saying that animals are “like persons”; they act as if they are capable of independent action, and they are causally responsible for things they do (Feit 1995:3-4).

Belief system of Cree

Berkes (1986b) opines that in the belief system of Cree, the living environment is a community of beings that are supernatural as well as natural. These beings possess what Westerners’ might consider extra normal powers. They have spirits that are sentient; they are watchful and aware of people’s behaviour. Hence, Cree of Chisasibi have great faith in animal spirits. Berkes (1999:30) focused on three Cree beliefs to illustrate their world view viz. (a) It is the animals, not people, who control the success of the hunt. (b) Hunter and fishermen have obligations to show respect to the animals to ensure a productive hunt. (c) A continued, proper use is necessary for maintaining production of animals.

Characteristics of the Cree World view

- 1) The hunter’s obligations towards animals are intertwined with social obligations, so that the environmental ethic of the Chisasibi Cree is an integral part of a comprehensive philosophy of life.
- 2) The Cree world view is that animals in the past were able to communicate with humans and they are well aware about the human actions. Cree legends attest to such type of views. Cree believe that hunters have no power over

the game; animals control the success of hunt. Hunters have certain obligations to fulfill towards the animals; maintaining a respectful relationship, i.e. game has to be pursued and animals have the last say as to whether they will be caught.

- 3) Cree world teaches their youths to respect the animals.
- 4) According to Cree beliefs the success of a hunter peaks with age and after reaching its zenith, it again starts declining and his sons inherit part of an old hunter's success. This is a cyclic process in which the amount of animals available remains constant but the distribution of success varies.
- 5) The disappearance and reappearance of animals take place in a cycle. The belief in the eventual return of disappearing animals is very strong.
- 6) Cree express their respect to animals in many ways like- an attitude of humility is maintained towards animal; animal is approached and killed with respect; animal is carried to camp with respect, offerings are made to them, butchering and consumption is done with respect and remains are disposed off in a proper manner. The Cree do not consider the killing of game as an act of violence. The hunter loves the animals he kills (Preston 1975).

Cree social values such as reciprocity apply to human-animal as well as to social relationships as a continued proper use of resources is important for sustainability. Such type of beliefs among Cree people indicates a cosmology in which humans are part of a "community of beings" within an ecological system. The Cree world view emerging in the volume is not a unique one. It is consistent with Colorado (1988) characterisation of native science as holistic and religious grounded in empirical observation (Berkes, 1999:9).

Efficiency, Abundance, and Reliability of Cree Subsistence Hunting Practices

The Cree hunters do not encounter game on a haphazard basis but they carefully plan and organise their hunting activities. Hunting is organised into an annual cycle of activities so that each species of game is used at times likely to produce an efficient, abundant, and reliable supply of food (Feit 1995:7).

The Social Organisation of Hunting and the Power to Manage Game Resources

The Cree have a distinct system of rights and responsibilities concerning land, resources, community and social relations - a system of land and resource tenure, and of self-governance. This system provides a means with which the hunters can fulfill their responsibilities to animals and spirits and contribute to the conditions necessary for their mutual survival.

Cree society is organised around principles of community, responsible autonomy, and reciprocity. The central resources of land and wildlife are not considered to be owned because people are born and die while the land continues. The land is passed on from previous generations and will be transmitted to future generations. The land and the animals are God's creations, and, to the extent that humans use or control them, they do so as part of a broad social community united by reciprocal obligations. These gifts and obligations are not solely individual; they involve

the wider human community as well, so that all people have a right of access to land and resources to sustain themselves. This right extends to all Cree, and to others as well, but along with the rights go responsibilities to contribute to the continued productivity of the land and animals. The exercise and fulfillment of such responsibility requires knowledge and a subtle responsiveness to the relationships with animals and spirits and imply a willingness to exercise self-control and participation in a community of responsibility. The Cree are efficient enough at hunting that they could deplete the game. Regulation is both an individual and a community responsibility and is assisted through a system of stewardships (Feit 1995:8-9).

Eco- friendly Fishing Practices of the Cree

- Traditional system of fishing which provides ecological and resource management insights.
- Two basic strategies of fishing (a) small-mesh gill nets were used within commuting distance of the village i.e. in a radius of 15 kms; (b) Mix of larger-mesh gill nets were used further away
- Most distant locations were fished mainly with larger mesh sizes and were visited rarely once every five to ten years. Traditional rule of thumb of rotating over a cycle of 4 years was followed as in case of beaver trapping i.e. Rotation and resting was followed.

Three Cree practices known as '*Secrets of Cree system*'- are the sets of management practices incorporate- (1) Concentrating fishing effort on aggregation of fish, or other wise adopt for hunting if the catch is poor.(2) Rotational or pulse-fishing. (3) Use of a mix of gill net mesh sizes.

Cree during fishing also monitored key environmental signals and then decided when, where and how the fishing can be done in better way conserving the ecosystem as well. They also took into consideration fish health, sex or fatness and unusual patterns in behaviour and distributions as well. The conduct in fishery was guided by the need of food for social obligation, community exchange and hence helped in minimising waste of resources and proved to be a boon for ecosystem.

Pantheism is an important feature of the Cree world view. It is also found among the Iroquois. However, such type of religious-beliefs/world view help to maintain a balance in ecosystem. Cree believe that the continued use of resources is important to achieve a sustainable productive harvest. Cree trappers follow 'rotation'/resting in hunting areas. They continuously observe the environment and monitor the health of the beaver-vegetation system.

Pantheism is a profound feeling of reverence for Nature and the wider Universe. It fuses religion and science, and concern for humans with concern for nature. It provides the most solid basis for environmental ethics. It is a religion that requires no faith other than common sense, no revelation other than open eyes and a mind open to evidence, no guru other than your own self. *Every seed is awakened and so is all animal life. It is through this mysterious power that we too have our being and we therefore yield to our animal neighbors the same right as ourselves, to inhabit this land.* (file:///I:/14-12-11%20CREE%20INDIANS/indians%20%20PANTHEISM.htm)

It is not accidental that pantheism is often taken to be a view inherently sympathetic to ecological concerns. This makes a decision to deal with ecology alongside pantheistic ethics less artificial than it might be. A pantheistic ecological ethic will not be anthropocentric. This rules out the notion of man as a “steward of nature,” whether his own or God’s, who is responsible for nature. It also rules out utilitarian, contractarian, and Kantian approaches. The pantheist’s ethic and environmental ethic together are metaphysically based in terms of the Divine Unity. Everything that is part of the Divine Unity (as everything is) is also part of the moral community. Aldo Leopold (1949: 219, 240) says, “*The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively, the land ... A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community.*”

(file:///I:/14-12-11%20CREE%20INDIANS/Pantheism%20%28Stanford%20Encyclopedia%20of%20Philosophy%29.htm)

- The James Bay Cree Indians practiced pantheism.
- A significant tribal community which is confined to the Nilgiri region is the *Todas* in India. They have buffalo-centered economy. They practiced *pantheism* and made buffalo sacrifices in order to satisfy the tribal deities.

Other than the idea of pantheism, there is also a person who plays a very important role in Cree ecosystem management well known in Cree world as Tallyman (*uuchimaau*)

Tallyman (*uuchimaau*)

- Plays important and culturally significant role for Cree people.
- Has broader significance to the field of sustainable management.
- Senior grassroots manager.
- Ecological embeddedness is found.
- Acts as political leader and ensures no one goes hungry in the group. Some believe that in old age he also becomes a spiritual leader very similar to ‘shaman’. Similar to Tallyman of the Cree, the Shaman (Kakushapitak) among the Innu (Montagnais) is respected as great hunter as he knew where to hunt.

The *uuchimaau/Tallyman/steward* fulfills his responsibility by coordinating the activities of families using the ‘trap line’, ensuring that particular species of animals (especially beaver, the focus of fur-trade activity) are not over harvested and that the widely scattered camps are bringing in enough food to meet everyone’s needs. Some hunting leaders are specialists because of their skill in coordinating a particular activity, such as the caribou hunt. More permanent and wide-ranging stewardship of a ‘trap line’ (not, strictly speaking a ‘line’ at all, but an area of land or ‘territory’), is a privilege inherited from an elder hunter, usually an agnatic kinsman, but occasionally a maternal uncle or unrelated mentor, whose special relationship with a young man will involve education in the responsibilities of being a custodian of the hunter’s territory. No *uuchimaau* would long retain his status if he mismanaged through incompetence or attempted to hoard resources in a bid to accumulate political control (Niezen 2009:11-12).

- The **steward's** authority is, in principle, spiritually sanctioned, thus obligating him to protect and share the resources. In general, all members of a community have the right to hunt on any land on a short-term basis, while traveling through, while camping for brief periods, or while using small game or fish resources. However, extended and intensive use of the larger game resources is generally considered to be under the supervision and approval of the stewards.
- Stewards generally grow up in a territory on which they hunt repeatedly over many years before they take over their role. During this time they build up extensive ties with the spirits of the land and acquire a vast knowledge of its resources. They are constantly aware of the changing conditions of the game populations. Each steward has the right to decide if the hunting territory will be used intensively in any season, how many and which people can use it, how much they can hunt of each key species, and where and when they can hunt. The stewards do not exercise these powers in an authoritarian manner.
- Stewards usually act by suggestion and by non-personal public commentaries on the situation, and their knowledge, their spiritual ties to the land, and the sacred sanctions for their statements give them considerable influence. Typically, each steward inherits his position from a previous steward, and he has the duty to designate his successor. In practice, the system of hunting-territory stewardships works to maintain an ongoing balance between harvests and game (adopted from Feit 1995:9-10).

Tukano Cosmology

- Individual considers himself/herself a part of complex network of interaction of entire universe. Individual is in a set of relationships with animals, plants and environment. Such behaviour is aimed at conservation of ecological balance. For this Tukano develop many regulatory mechanisms and ensure that they are respected by all the members of the society.
- Tukano 'Shamans' plays the role of the shaman as a healer of illness, not so much at the individual level, but at the level of "supra-individual structures" that is parts of ecosystems that are disturbed by human action. Hence, shaman reestablishes the hunting rules and controls the depletion of natural resources. In this 'Shaman' acts as a very powerful force to control and manage the resources, (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1976:311-315).

Dubun Community

- Indigenous group, resides near Kinabalu National Park (Borneo). Inventory was prepared on Kinabalu Park to record medicinal, edible and decorative plants. Ecological awareness based on ancestral knowledge.

Zulu Herbalists of South Africa

- Silverglen Nature Reserve (220 hectares) located between Umlazi and Chatsworth, Medicinal plant nursery. 'Zulu herbalists', who are heirs to a mystic oral tradition and identify the important plants disappearing and grow them, play very important role in the park and conservation of medicinal plants.

Berkes (1999:107) formed a hypothesis that a conservation ethic can develop if a resource is important or limiting, predictable and depletable and it is effectively under the control of the social group in question so that the group can reap the benefits of conservation. For this he chooses the caribou hunting and management. He believes that monitoring of 'caribou fat content' is not merely an area specific bit of local knowledge but rather a principle of traditional ecological knowledge widely applicable across the whole area and it also provides a index of health for both the individual animal and the herd..

Some ways to conserve Indigenous Knowledge-

- Adaptive management
- Address the unity and diversity of indigenous systems
- Participatory and community based resource management
- Integrate local values into decision making
- Bridging of gap between utilitarianism (human-centric ethics) and biocentric ethics.

3.3.4 Conclusion

This study is an example of a harmonious interaction that people have with their environment. People know that they cannot survive unless they draw their resources from the environment and at the same time, they should not harm it, for if it is destroyed, it would also signal people's collective demise. Thus, they have to opt for a strategy that helps in safeguarding the environment.

3.4 HOW DOES THE ETHNOGRAPHY ADVANCE OUR UNDERSTANDING

This book is an example of the indigenous knowledge of people and how it can be collected. Anthropologists think that if these thoughts are not recorded soon, they are bound to disappear. These thoughts tell us how different societies interacted with their respective environments.

3.5 THEORETICAL PART OF WHICH THE ETHNOGRAPHY *Setho – Afrikan Thought and Belief System* IS AN EXAMPLE

This book is a study of the indigenous thoughts of a people from South Africa. Anthropologists think that if these thoughts are not recorded soon, they are bound to disappear. These thoughts tell us how different societies interacted with their respective environments.

3.6 DESCRIPTION OF THE ETHNOGRAPHY

Fezekile Futhwa's book entitled, *Setho – Afrikan Thought & Belief System*, is a detailed study of African thought and belief system. It explains 'Setho' as a belief system, its characteristic features, its cultural elements, mythological aspects related to it, rites and rituals, norms and customs prevailing in the African society. The author, Futhwa was born in apartheid South Africa. He was baptised and

adopted the Christian way of life and worship. Later on, tired out of harassment, his family got relocated to a homeland named Qwaqwa in 1979. He chose Africanness and never set his foot in church ever since. During his quest for African belief system he realised that, “faith and belief is the right term and not religion. Religion is the aftermath of the commercialisation of faith, something to which we do not subscribe as Africans.”

3.6.1 Intellectual Context

The intellectual context is that people’s knowledge needs to be documented, for there is every possibility that it would come to an end. This project could be called ‘salvage anthropology’.

3.6.2 Fieldwork

Intensive fieldwork was conducted among the Basotho of South Africa using the standard anthropological methods. The author spent a long time with the people conducting different varieties of observation and interview. Case studies of different people were also collected.

3.6.3 Analysis of Data

About the area and the people

The book is based on Basotho people of South Africa. The ancestors of the Sotho people entered the area south of the Limpopo river in several migrations. In time, they became dispersed over the vast interior plateau between the eastern escarpment and the arid western regions and formed four subgroups viz., the Tswana, North Sotho, South Sotho and East Sotho. Those who settled in the western regions preferred to be called Batswana (Tswana) while those living in the southern regions called themselves *Basotho*. The Sothos living in the northern areas also preferred the name Basotho but were sometimes referred to as Pedi. However, not all the North Sotho use this name. The East Sotho people lived in the Lowveld area of the Northern Province but lost their distinguishing characteristics and, in time, became assimilated into the present-day North Sotho group. The South Sotho or Basotho people settled in the area that was to become known first as Basutoland and later as Lesotho.

Understanding African Thought & Belief System- through the lens of Futhwa

Faith and belief are an integral part of human life and society. **Belief** is the psychological state in which an individual holds a proposition or premise to be true. **Faith** is the confident belief or trust in the truth or trustworthiness of a person, concept or thing. All humans therefore hold the conviction that their understanding of God is true and valid. But neither can ever be proven since faith is a belief. Religion is therefore never about the validity of the belief itself, rather about the cultural norms and practices of the belief. **Religion** is the systematic enactment of beliefs (Futhwa 2011: 4).

Mythology for creation of state

- African Basotho people believe that the place of origin for human beings was *Ntsoana Tsatsi*- a place in Far East. *‘Ntsoana Tsatsi’* means a place where sun begins to shine. It is also believed that at this place ancestors returned after their death.

- Creation mythology has three symbols viz. **the Sun** (represented by the East), **the Water** (represented by the River), and **the Mythological** (represented by the Reeds).
- The sun is considered as God who brings sunshine which represents 'hope'. East signifies beginning and end of life. That's why all rituals are performed facing eastwards.(Futhwa 2011:11)
- River symbolises the transition between life stages and it represents the window between this life and rest of the spirit world. In river itself traditional healers were bestowed with their healing capabilities and river gives shelter to 'reptiles' which are physical representations of the spirit world.
- Reeds stand guard between earth and spirit world and are symbol of purity. They are at the mouth of the gate to spirit world and hold the knowledge which controls subconscious mind (Futhwa 2011:11)

Fundamentals of African Thought & Belief

- Belief in the Supreme Being.
- Supreme Being is believed to inhabit all space.
- 'Humanism' - the value of humankind as the centre of life.
- Respect for elders.
- 'Communality' - community harmony and cohesion, private and public morality is found in the society.
- Family and human life is given importance.

Indigenous belief

The indigenous belief of the people of Africa in the supernatural is known as **Setho**. **Motho** is an individual (person) who practices **Setho**, i.e. someone who is born and raised within **Setho**. **Botho** is the value system encompassing the lifestyle and norms of **Batho** (plural for **Motho**= *community*). Hence, **Botho** is an integral part of a people's lifestyle and is a practical manifestation of how people live in Africa.

Elements of Setho

In Religious Sphere

- There is widespread belief in supreme God who is unique expressed through prayers and worships.
- Sense of 'sacred' and 'mystery' is deeply embedded like they have a feeling of high reverence for sacred places, persons and objects.
- Myths and funerary customs explain their belief in 'life after death', similar to the idea of 'metempsychosis'.
- It is believed that invisible world of spirits and ancestors is always present and the intentions of these spirits can be ascertained; care is taken to ascertain the will of the spirit to whom sacrifices may be due or from whom protection may be sought.

- No dichotomy exists between life and religion and ancestors are believed to be a mediator between God and human beings.
- Before offering sacrifices to God bodily and spiritual purification is required.
- It is believed that 'sin' hampers public good hence to promote public welfare periodical purification rites are performed.

In Ritual Sphere

- Ancestors and the dead are invoked by rites and various rites form an essential part of social life. Rites of passage, of initiation and of consecration are widespread and many rites of purification of individuals and communities are found. Sick persons are healed in rites. Cycle of rituals for various seasons is observed. Stages of life are sanctified by ritual action. During any crisis rituals are performed.
- During ritual performances each individual ensures that body and soul, is totally involved and each person contributes his share in a spirit of participation.
- In rituals, through dress and the arrangements of the places of worship they try to preserve religious sacredness and purity.

In Religious-Moral Sphere

- Children are given much importance and practice of abortion is an abomination. Taboos and rituals help in maintaining sacredness of life. Human dignity is considered important.
- Moderation in the use of alcohol is inculcated: only adults may drink. Drunkenness is shameful.

In Religious-Cultural Sphere

- Old folk are held in high esteem and community regards their wisdom as prophetic. Moral education of youth is taken seriously. Youths are initiated gradually to learn social and cultural practices.
- Cultural provisions are established to maintain stability of marriage as it is considered as an alliance between families and person.

In Religious-Social Sphere

- There exists a very strong sense of sharing and of solidarity and belonging among the kith and kin and people of the same clan. Both nuclear and joint families are found. Hospitality is performed as a duty.
- Respect for authorities; poor, sick, widowed and orphans are taken care of.

Botho Value System

- Botho literally means 'humanity'.
- The value system found in Setho is termed as Botho (*Ubuntu*).
- Botho is a set of characteristics that define the patterns of behaviour by Africans. This in effect defines the lifestyle of an African. Behaviour that does not comply with these characteristics is unacceptable and there are penalties for non compliance.

Characteristics of Botho

- Communalism, hospitality, humility, justice, tolerance, respect, family, kinship, language, clan, shared responsibility and accountability are considered important for Botho.

Penalties for non compliance of Botho

- The first level of punishment is termed as ***Kgalemo*** (reprimand) and non compliance with the values is to be reprimanded, depending on the severity of the act. Not too serious matters will do with just a verbal reprimand. Some times depending on the severity of non compliance, stick shall be used.
- The second level of punishment is termed as ***Tefiso*** (fine). For serious crimes people are charged formally and shall be made to pay by means of an animal (sheep, a goat or a cow), depending on the nature of the crime. A cow is the highest price that a person can be made to pay. In today's times when people do not own livestock, the price shall be put on the head of the animal in question by the offended party, and the offender shall be obliged to pay the requisite amount in lieu of stock (Futhwa 2011:16-17).
- When the council feels that cow is not enough then ***Banishment***, the third punishment is opted for. The banishment could be for a specified time frame or sometimes it lasts a lifetime in line with the nature of the crime.

Ancestral Rites

The Basotho practice ancestral worship. They believed that the spirit leaves the body after death but still hovers nearby.

Mokete wa Tjhai

- *Mokete wa tjhai* is a winter time ritual of appeasement for the good yield in the fields during harvest. It is a celebration of abundance in which ancestors are thanked for the good fortune.

Lesokwana

- *Lesokwana* is a ritual play by young people in the community which is played only during times of drought. It symbolises prayers of the nation to the ancestors to bring rain.

Ho Thwasa

- *Ho thwasa* is the ritual of training an individual to become a traditional healer.

(Futhwa 2011:26-27)

Places which are considered sacred in African belief system

Sacred place	Location	Features
Lesaka	Cattle kraal	Family space where spirits of ancestors are invoked; also represents wealth. <i>Lesakeng</i> is related place where sacrificial animals are slaughtered for rituals, and the symbolic link between man and animal is carried out.
Leifo	Cooking space of homestead	Only place where folklore and night stories can be told in a homestead. Symbolises life.
Seotswana	Single unit of housing structure, homestead	Each serves specific purpose. Separate units for parents, children etc.
Mophato	Initiation school	Place where the rite of passage from boyhood to manhood is performed. Generally initiation (<i>lebollo</i>) is meant for male children but some clans perform for females too. Purpose of mophato is to prepare young adults for the challenges of adulthood.
Mabitla	Burial ground	Resting place for ancestors. It symbolises the physical link between the living and the ancestors. By law, everyone who visits mabitla must wash their hands with water mixed with aloe to take away the spell of the dead. To accord the respect to the dead they point to the graves using the thumb and not the index finger.
Lepatlelo	Battle field or open space in the village	The battle grounds and the grounds used for communal / societal gatherings.
Ntlong	Unit where woman delivers a child	This place is banned for males and only father of the child (after ten days of birth) may enter the place other than midwives. Critical function of ntlong is that it is here where navel/ placenta (<i>mokgubu / inkaba</i>) of the child is buried. The burial of <i>mokgubu</i> is the first ritual of linking the child with nature.

Diboko, ('totem' names in English) are the focal point of identity in African Basotho people living in the South. All of them identify themselves with specific wild animals, which are then regarded as sacred by the nation which identifies itself by the name of that animal. This means that people belonging to a particular totem name are not allowed to kill or eat the meat of an animal through which they identify themselves. Diboko (totem) are essentially a direct account of lineage as these can be traced back to their origin. Diboko effectively defines a way in which members identify themselves through customs and praise song. All the different diboko have their own typical and special praise songs which are sung to identify themselves, and also these songs serve as chants during ancestral rituals.

Indigenous Knowledge Systems

The Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) policy was adopted in South Africa in 2004. IKS policy drivers in South Africa include:

- the affirmation of African cultural values in the face of globalisation – a clear imperative given the need to promote a positive African identity;
- practical measures for the development of services provided by IK holders and practitioners, with a particular focus on traditional medicine, but also including areas such as agriculture, indigenous languages and folklore;
- underpinning the contribution of indigenous knowledge to the economy – the role of indigenous knowledge in employment and wealth creation; and
- interfaces with other knowledge systems, for example indigenous knowledge is used together with modern biotechnology in the pharmaceutical and other sectors to increase the rate of innovation (Futhwa 2011:96-97).

Focus areas for indigenous knowledge systems include:

Language

Knowledge and competency of indigenous South African languages is fast disappearing. Preserving and developing indigenous languages is paramount to addressing socio- economic issues facing the country.

Remedies

The knowledge and skills that is inherent in African communal life of ordinary remedies for common ailments must be preserved. All members of society are taught, from a young age, what plants and herbs to use for these ailments such as flu, cold, headache, stomach ache, snake bites, fever, nose bleeding and the like. This is knowledge that ensures all in society are healthy as no one need consult a specialist for them (Futhwa 2011:96-97).

Most common traditional knowledge remedies in South Africa (Futhwa 2011:97-98)

Vernacular Name of plant/ herb	Ailment(S)	Method of use
Kgwana	Bed wetting habit of children	Four stripped grass mouse which is roasted and eaten.
Lesoko	Curing flu	Dried roots of the plant are either chewed or boiled in water than drank.
Lekgala	Stomach ache, running tummies, constipation of infants	Juice of leaves is taken.
Lengana	Flu, asthma	Leaves are dried and then used as tobacco to smoke or the wet leaves are boiled and then drank.
Kooma ya Lekoko	Head aches, blocked nasals	Leaves are dried and grinded to powder and then taken.
Matekwane	Asthma	The leaves are boiled and then drank.
Sebabetsane	For revitalising the mind, body and spirit.	A person takes a bath with the leaves mixed in the water.

Traditional healers were very influential in traditional Basotho society and they diagnosed and treated various diseases, helped people with their personal problems and prevented bad things from happening. To be able to fulfill his/her duties, the **Nkgekge** used medicines made from animal and plant material. The **Lethuela** on the other hand, threw bones and, depending on their position, decided what had caused the illness and how to treat it. This approach necessitated the use of magic and making contact with the spirits. Sacrifices and the observance of certain taboos were means of making peace with the spirits and causing illness to depart. A **senohe** was honoured as a person who was able to see what others could not and this gift enabled him/her to establish the causes of illness and to foretell future events.

Traditional Medicine

The WHO observes that it is difficult to assign one definition to the broad range of characteristics and elements of traditional medicine, but that a working definition is essential. It thus concludes that traditional medicines: **[Include] diverse health practices, approaches, knowledge and beliefs incorporating plant, animal and/or mineral based medicines, spiritual therapies, manual techniques and exercises applied singularly or in combination to maintain well-being, as well as to treat, diagnose or prevent illness.** (WHO 2002-05: 7)

Traditional Basotho Doctors/ Healers

Nkgekge

- Traditionally, men Nkgekge are found among Basotho.
- Fully qualified practitioner of traditional medicine.
- Specialty is administering medicine for curing ailments.
- Highly trained in plants and natural organisms.

Lethuela

- Fully qualified practitioner of divination. They do practice medicine also but are specialised in divination.
- They practice divination through the use of traditional artifacts such as bones and shells.
- Most of Lethuela are women. They play a significant role in acting as linkages between the living and ancestors. They are the ones called upon to preside at rituals and ceremonies.
- Also specialised in the interpretation of dreams.

Lethwasa

- A trainee *lethuela* who is still undergoing training.

Modes of transferring traditional knowledge

Neletsano Taba

- Also known as *neano taba*, is oral literature; where teachings and learning takes place in the form of verbal communication between members of a society.

Ditshomo

- Are folk tales. Folk tales are defined as “a story or legend that is passed down orally from one generation to the next and becomes part of a community’s tradition.”

Dithotokiso

- Poetry in praise of self, the other, nature or any other object of beauty in the eyes of the poet.

Dithoko

- Poetry that speaks of totem names. They are a celebration of clans, historical figures, kings, priests and *diboko* (totems).

Basotho indigenous art and items of material culture

Basotho, like many other indigenous societies, have art forms that are unique to them and which cannot be found anywhere else. These are art forms that have been handed down from generation to generation, and for the most part cannot be learned in formal learning institutions. Their acquisition and assimilation is purely a cultural trait as they form part of normal life of Basotho. Most of them are common knowledge to Basotho while others become specialisations for those who become practicing experts in them.

Ditema are unique artistic (geographic) patterns that Basotho women paint on the walls of their huts.

Mokgoro is the traditional thatched Basotho hut. The hut is made of mud bricks, cemented using mud and plastered with cow dung inside out.

Maseka is the art of sewing patterns using insulated copper wire, skillfully woven exclusively by men.

Thebe is the cow hide shield used as a shield by warriors.

Molamu is the fighting stick carried by men and boys from puberty.

Seqha is the bow that Basotho have adopted from the Khoi and the San.

Tswibila is a weapon for young boys who have not graduated to carrying *molamu*.

Mopotswana is the calabash used for drinking *moqombothi*, the traditional beer.

Mopotjo is the traditional container made of clay. Lately it is mostly used for carrying *moqombothi*, the traditional beer.

Modianyewe is the Basotho hat made of grass. It is also known as *Mokorotlo*.

Lelwala is the grinding stone used by women to grind food stuff such as grain, sorghum and maize.

Seshweshwe is the traditional wear for Basotho women. It is worn by married women and signifies one’s status in society. It is worn with *tuku*, head gear, or with *mokorotlo*.

Tsheya is three pronged garment traditionally worn by Basotho men.

Thethana is the traditional apron worn by Basotho girls.

Lesolanka is the blanket that is worn exclusively by Basotho.

3.6.4 Conclusion

This book describes the beliefs and ritual complexes of a people in South Africa. Their system is very elaborate as the above discussion makes it clear. The term people use for their supernatural system is called setho. People believe in the existence of omniscient God, relationship with whom is expressed through prayers and worship. Ancestors lie between the ‘world of Gods’ and the ‘world of living’, and they mediate these two spheres. If people want divine blessings, they should invite their ancestors who in turn will approach God. The book shows how different spheres of life interact.

3.7 HOW DOES THE ETHNOGRAPHY ADVANCE OUR UNDERSTANDING

This ethnography advances our understanding of the role of religion in every aspect of people’s life. The world view of people is embedded in religion. Around religion, an elaborate system is built up. In these societies, religion is the core of culture.

3.8 SUMMARY

Both these ethnographies discussed here are concerned with the indigenous knowledge of people. The aim to document these is also very strong.

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Suggested Readings

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Sample Questions

- 1) Discuss the belief system of Cree and state the characteristics of the Cree worldview.
- 2) Outline some of the traditional remedies in South Africa as discussed in Futhwa's work.