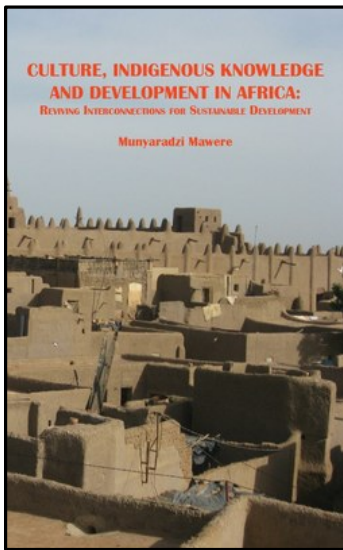

A Review of Culture, Indigenous Knowledge and Development in Africa: Reviving Interconnections for Sustainable Development

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Culture, Indigenous Knowledge and Development in Africa: Reviving Interconnections for Sustainable Development

by Munyaradzi Mawere. Bamenda, Cameroon: Langaa RPCIG, 2014. 169 pp. \$26.00 ISBN 978-9956-791-91-0

doi:10.18113/P8ik159730

Mawere's book discusses indigenous knowledge (IK) and its importance in the sustainable development of Africa. The author gives an overview of the rich and currently untapped IK of African cultures. As IK authors and researchers such as Herman Batibo, Ladislaus Semali, and Emmanuel Chiwome have argued, central to this book is the notion that, prior to colonization, indigenous people -- or, for lack of a better word, natives -- in different parts of the world already had the knowledge to help them solve and address health, political, economic, developmental, and social challenges. Throughout the book, Mawere makes the reader understand that colonization destroyed African cultures and IK, which led to Africa's developmental dependence on Western technology and knowledge. Mawere's point is that reliance on Western knowledge alone will not lead to sustainable progress for Africa. Rather, Africa needs to revive her indigenous cultures to guarantee her growth in a globalized world.

This book consists of six chapters, each unveiling the value of IK -- or indigenous knowledge systems -- and their importance in the sustainable development of Africa. The first chapter sets the tone of the book. The reader quickly realizes that, for Mawere, IK and indigenous knowledge systems refer to the same concept and are used interchangeably. The author then addresses misconceptions about IK. IK is not, as Eurocentric scholars have portrayed it, primitive or static, nor is it deprived from “physical validity” (Mawere 2014,10). Rather, IK is dynamic, connected with people’s culture and adaptive to changes and societal needs. The reader is also introduced to the concepts of development and sustainable development, which is discussed later in the book. Mawere argues that all models of development, economic as well as human, are cultural, and sustainable development is not different. In other words, ignoring IK and culture means preventing progress in Africa. The author argues that, in some contexts, African IK has the potential to steer development in a more efficient way than Western science. The chapter concludes with an emphasis on the need to connect IK, culture, and development to stimulate sustainable development.

The need for IK in the development of Africa is further discussed in the second and third chapters of the book when the author addresses the effects of colonization on African culture and on the IK embedded in them. The destruction of African IK also destroyed developmental, socio-economic, and political ambitions. Africans need to conserve and protect their forms of knowledge to solve problems specific to the continent, and also to contribute to solutions on a global scale. In keeping with this idea, chapter two discusses the idea of an integrated curriculum that values all forms of knowledge -- modern, indigenous, Western, Eastern, or African -- as a way to preserve and recognize the value of IK in sustainable development. And, in the third chapter, the author selects thirty-two cases, examples of IK across the continent, to demonstrate and explain the potential of IK in the development of Africa. In line with the author’s goal, the selected cases are a foretaste of the richness of knowledge that, if tapped, can benefit and better lives in the continent and across the world.

Throughout the book, the author persistently presents African IK as equal to Western knowledge, but Mawere makes this point most stridently in chapters four and five. Indeed, the fourth chapter shows that African technological knowledge is also embedded in African culture. Africans have interacted with their environments and have altered it to meet their needs. This ability to transform the environment is

what the author calls “indigenous technological knowledge” or “African science” (Mawere 2014, 91). And, just like other forms of IK, these indigenous technologies have been disparaged by colonizers, and are still seen as a hindrance to current dominant technologies used by developmental agencies. However, the potential of this science is crucial for the sustainable development of Africa and its freedom. Yet, in Mawere’s view, barriers such as the supremacy of Western technologies, isolation of indigenous technologies, or partial knowledge of indigenous technology have to be overcome for Africa to end its dependence on the West, and attain development and socio-economic freedom. It is essential to mention that the author does not call for Africa to isolate itself from the West, a point discussed in depth in the fifth chapter. The challenge for the West, writes Mawere, is to acknowledge that there are other forms of knowledge and that all forms of knowledge are equal. And for Africa, the challenge is to recognize that she has “something to offer from her own cultures and indigenous knowledge systems” (Mawere 2014, 90). African scientists need to make creative use of their IK in order to solve problems faced by the continent. The fifth chapter reveals the author’s desire to show throughout the book that there cannot be sustainable development or global solutions to complex problems, such as HIV/AIDS and global warming, if the division between Western scientific knowledge (SK) and African science and IK persists. Both forms of knowledge are complementary, and should be treated and viewed as such.

In the sixth chapter, the author concludes the book with a call for the decolonization of African minds through the integration of IK in all levels of education - primary, secondary, and tertiary – in Africa. Western-based education has alienated Africans from their cultures and the knowledge embedded in them. This form of education, the author contends, does not relate to African realities, and keeping African IK from the mainstream educational system prevents the development of innovative thinking and makes learning difficult for African students.

With practical examples of IK, and facts on the pre- and post-colonization experience in Africa, Mawere attests to the importance of IK as a key to the sustainable socio-economic and political development of Africa. Innovation and creativity will not happen in Africa as long as Africans rely on knowledge foreign to their culture or identity. In this view, he aligns with other authors who contend that Africa “cannot fully develop on the basis of borrowed intellectual, technological and financial resources” (Chiwome, Furusa, and Mguni 2000, vi).

Although the book mainly focuses on African IK, the author gives room for readers from every culture to understand that science, technology or social approaches to development are all based on the IK of specific communities as they interact with the environment. For example, in the first chapter Mawere relates his definition of culture and IK to the work of other authors. Development, another key concept in the book, is also explained using the United Nations Development program (UNDP), the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) understanding of this concept.

This book is a clear call for reflection and action. Yet, the reader may wonder how to make the changes the author is calling for, as the author does not offer a framework, or step-by-step process as to how to integrate IK into education or developmental projects for the socio-economic and political development of Africa. However, to the author's credit, suggestions such as teaching IK in all disciplines in Africa's higher education, or in primary level through tertiary level are laudable efforts towards the development of strategies of integration. Perhaps, the absence of a framework could be interpreted as Mawere's desire to point to the fact that frameworks are more of a reflection of Western conceptions of reality and Western responses to problems than they are of African IK.

The organization of the book allows the reader to easily follow the author's argument. The chapters and the ideas developed in them are well arranged, which shows the author's logic and sense of continuity throughout the book. The construction of the book meshes well with its organization and lends itself successfully to the study of indigenous knowledge and sustainable development. The author also does a great service to the readers by using short and simple sentences to make his readers understand that IK represents ways of knowing that, as humans and a global society, we can all benefit from, especially in terms of sustainable development. Although Mawere does not address the logic of progress and development in indigenous knowledge systems, he succeeds in making readers recognize that other forms of knowledge and technology have existed for millennia. In this regard, Mawere does service to the field of indigenous knowledge. This book is appropriate and a must read for Africans, developmental agencies, policy makers, educators, IK researchers around the world, and anyone interested in approaching the world and its issues with creativity from a different perspective.

References

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