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A Torres Strait Islander Perspective on the Concept of Indigenous Knowledge

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Introduction

The concept of Indigenous knowledge itself has life; it is 'living' knowledge. This Indigenous knowledge or 'living' knowledge is not written, but rather transmitted orally by the gatekeepers and holders of knowledge, especially from our Elders 'Athe' (grandfather), 'Aka' (grandmother), our parents 'Baba' (father), and 'Ama' (mother), as well as our (uncles) 'Awahdeh' and our (aunties) 'Ama'. These holders of knowledge play a major part in our individual lives as they mould or shape our minds, values, ethics, morals and opinions about society today and its influences on us as individuals. The Elders also influence where we place ourselves in our community and in the wider community. This transmission of Indigenous knowledge is 'passed on' through traditional language, traditional lores, understandings of totems, kinship ties, performance of dances, songs, stories, myths, legends, rituals, ceremonies and activities or events which influence our lives daily.

Indigenous knowledge is about being connected to country, group, clan, race or to a specific place where roots or family ties 'Buai' come from, a place of 'belonging', which holds significant meaning only to yourself. This special place, land or country holds all knowledge necessary

for daily interaction and is not taught in a classroom setting but rather 'passed on' in everyday situations from generation to generation.

This article will discuss the concept of 'passing on' or the oral transmission of Indigenous knowledge. This is a verbal and hands-on practice between people and is not written in books. I acknowledge that Indigenous knowledge is a very broad area or topic and my perspective will touch on only a few areas. In this article, I will examine Indigenous knowledge or knowledge through the eyes of students taking ABTS2000 (Torres Strait Islander Studies) at the University of Queensland. I will also provide comments and perspectives of Indigenous scholars about Indigenous knowledge, as well as providing my own interpretation. This will be followed by a brief discussion on the importance of 'passing on' Indigenous knowledge and how this was applied to ABTS2000 in second semester, 2001. In conclusion, I will provide insight into why Norm Sheehan, the course co-ordinator, and myself have chosen to run this particular course according to Indigenous methodologies and teaching styles.

What is Indigenous knowledge?

Indigenous knowledge is 'living' knowledge, it is alive and used continuously by all Indigenous people of any first nation. For myself, as a Torres

Strait Islander, it is knowledge 'passed on' by my ancestors to my grandparents, to my parents then to me, about the importance of life, surrounding nature, sea, land, wind and sky, and how they interact in my life. This knowledge entails the concept that people 'belong' and are part of the land, sea and sky; these spheres are not set apart, but rather are kept balanced and in tune.

Indigenous knowledge is a living, breathing concept and as such, must be treated with care and respect. Indigenous knowledge reflects oral tradition that allows 'life' to flow through the expression of songs, dances, stories of myths, legends, hunting expeditions, and everyday activities that involve the interaction of people with the natural and supernatural worlds (Michael Redshirt, pers. comm., 2001). It is said that 'knowledge is power' and whoever holds the knowledge has the power to do whatever they wish with it. In essence, this idea of 'knowledge is power' is held in high regard by our elders, parents, uncles and aunties, who continue to share this knowledge with others daily. As Bani states, 'Indigenous knowledge or knowledge is the foundation of understanding which accumulates to become wisdom of the age' (2001: 13).

What is Indigenous Knowledge to students in ABTS2000 (Torres Strait Islander Studies)?

I have gathered information about Indigenous knowledge from the triad assessments undertaken by students of ABTS2000. These triad assessments were utilised as a learning tool, as they are culturally appropriate and link well with the use of Indigenous knowledge. In ABTS2000, students were put into groups of three, with each participant playing a specific and important role within the group – the roles of

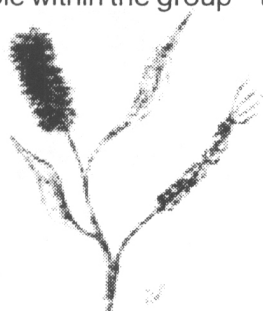
'deep listener', 'Mabuiag Island Torres Strait observer', and working from their 'heart' were assigned to each student (or they shared the role) by either nomination, selection, or decision.

This triad assessment assisted students in understanding the way Indigenous paradigms of teaching styles and methodologies worked and how it involved all students. It allowed students to respect, interact, share, negotiate, listen, experience, follow their heart, use their understanding, use their knowledge and participate openly with other students involved in ABTS2000. That is also how Indigenous knowledge works and is shared. I have selected a few student triad assessments from ABTS2000 to further investigate Indigenous knowledge.

Indigenous knowledge is about 'life' and how the natural and supernatural worlds are interrelated, live simultaneously and are different but also the same. Indigenous knowledge lives in the social, political, spiritual, secular and communal daily lives of people. It is a reliable, healing science of life, sacred law, and way of being. It identifies, it supports, it gives reason for and it is unknown – seen and unseen; heard and not heard. Indigenous knowledge lives in the relationship of all things, for example all floras, all faunas, land, sea, air, people, the planet, the stars, and the universe. Because it lives, some of this knowledge can be accessed, retrieved, learned and recalled for use. Those who do so carry the responsibility of passing it on to those who require knowledge in the degrees needed. As Indigenous knowledge lives in all things as well as people, it must be respected and it must be earned. It must not be altered in its truthful expression. Anyone with the eyes to see can see that Indigenous knowledge is the 'gift of life' (Student 1, pers. comm., 2001).

Indigenous knowledge is about the interaction of everyday activities that evolve around land, country, sea and sky. Indigenous knowledge is about 'Apsin' (respect) and 'Good Pasin' (sharing our good ways) with people around us. Indigenous knowledge is adaptive, evolving, interconnected and holistic, it's not taught but communicated (Student 12, pers. comm., 2001).

Indigenous knowledge is an understanding of the world, based on the ideas that the world and life have both constant order and dynamic change but have the component of 'learning' experience (Student 7, pers. comm., 2001).



Indigenous knowledge is 'living' knowledge, which is not written but rather practiced in rituals, ceremonies, creative artwork and everyday life. Indigenous knowledge is 'living' knowledge because it is dynamic, always changing and has many interacting elements. Indigenous knowledge is localised and occurs in every community, it is contextualised and holistic, it relates to specific contexts such as social, natural, environmental and spiritual areas, as knowledge of environment is detailed and based on an intimate relationship with country (Student 9, pers. comm., 2001).

Indigenous knowledge is passed on from Elders and parents to their children, extended families or younger generation, as the process of teaching continues and brings together traditions, culture, heritage, identity and spirituality of 'belonging' (Student 28, pers. comm., 2001).

Therefore, by using these triad assessments in this article, it is clear that students have grasped Indigenous understanding and teaching wholeheartedly. This exercise has allowed students to become productive participants and to interact fully within the ABTS2000 course. This particular process and teaching methodology has encompassed a wide range of interpretations and personal understandings in relation to Indigenous knowledge.

What is Indigenous knowledge to particular Indigenous scholars?

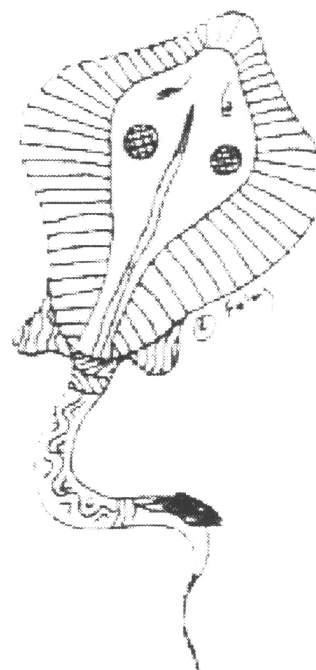
Indigenous knowledge is the essence of 'life'; it's a journey which tells a story of our lives from birth to death and beyond. During this 'life' we access, retrieve, learn, breathe, respect, share, retell, teach this knowledge to others through all things seen, unseen, heard, unheard – the natural and supernatural worlds that influence us. Indigenous knowledge is about one's identity of 'belonging' to a specific country, land, sea, wind, people, sky and how these areas interrelate or interconnect. It is about inner experiences, traditions, customs, lifestyle, rituals, ceremonies, creative artwork, dances, songs and stories that we share with families, extended families, with people in the community and the wider communities. Thus, to examine what is indigenous knowledge or knowledge to Indigenous scholars, is to look deep into the heart of their stories, to discuss

their understandings, interpretations and experiences.

To investigate Indigenous scholars' perspectives on Indigenous knowledge, I will focus on selective Indigenous writers, historians, native science professionals, and linguists. I believe Indigenous knowledge is a broad area and has many different perspectives from different Indigenous scholars all over the world. But, in this particular article, I will focus on select Indigenous professionals from America, Australia and Torres Strait.

Gregory Cajete, in his book titled *Native Science – Natural Laws of Interdependence*, has taken a major step towards articulating Indigenous epistemology, Indigenous view of reality, tradition of understanding, experiencing and feeling the natural world. He examines the word 'science' as deriving from the Greek word for 'knowledge' and points out that 'science is used in terms of the most inclusive of its meanings, that is, as a story of the world and a practiced way of living it' (Cajete, 2000:14). Further, he goes on to say 'Native Science is used as a metaphor for Native knowledge and creative participation with the natural world in both theory and practice' (Cajete, 2000:14).

Indigenous knowledge is like telling a special story unique to you and your people. This method of story telling is an Indigenous way of sharing and 'passing on' Indigenous knowledge, which is sometimes referred to as 'oral tradition' or 'oral



history'. To Cajete (2000:13) telling a special story or guiding stories explains 'the dynamic, holistic nature of creativity and its reflections [as] Native science or [indigenous knowledge] is celebrated' in different Indigenous cultures. These stories are shared to verify 'metaphors of natural creativity, imagination, and deep spiritual relationship in people's long journey' (Cajete, 2000:13). By telling stories or sharing Indigenous knowledge, it brings to 'life' their daily experiences about everyday activities, events, hunting expeditions, artworks, use of bush medicines, rituals and ceremonies that involve a special relationship to country.

To Jackie Huggins, another Indigenous scholar, knowledge is a cultural tradition whereby 'when people were living together in larger and enclosed communities history and tradition were passed on orally by the older ones' (Huggins, 1992:108). Huggins (1992:109) goes on to explain that this method of 'passing on' Indigenous knowledge 'is a rich tradition of oral history, story-telling, philosophy, autobiography and biography, stored particularly by the older people'.

Oral history or oral tradition plays a vital role in recording, retrieving, retelling, sharing, respecting indigenous stories that are important to an individual, a particular family, extended families, groups, clans, tribes and communities. From these particular stories, explanations about significant relationship to country, land, sea, wind, sky or every aspect of culture and lifestyle, are told to individuals, families and extended families, so to continue this oral tradition. By using this method of 'passing on' Indigenous knowledge, it becomes repetitive, continuing from generation to generation and will not be lost (Huggins, 1992:108).

Further, another Indigenous scholar, Isabel Tarrago (1990:140) points out that oral history is very important, as it is based on oral communication, builds on oral tradition and gives strength to Indigenous people. Tarrago (1990:141) expresses that :

in Aboriginal society we have an oral tradition which is very strong, whereas the white community has written communication. Also, oral traditions are expressed in a very intense language, so when incorporating oral tradition in writing, it

should really be the oral method that stands alone, as the more or less valid interpretation (Huggins, 1998:122). Thus, in academic discourse, you can shape all the words around it but don't touch or tamper with that vibrant, rich and purposeful, natural, spontaneous language (Huggins, 1998:123).

Indigenous knowledge must be 'passed on' to the younger generation so as not to lose their cultural links. Recording stories is one means of passing this knowledge on to future generations (Lowah, 1988:7). In writing his book *Eded Mer* (My Life) about his personal experiences growing up in Torres Strait, Lowah points out his contribution to the younger generation. Lowah relied on his memory instead of written records, because he learned about people and place by 'ear' rather than in writing (1988:8). Lowah explains that each family inherits properties; particularly lands and these plots of lands are recorded and handed down verbally to the next of kin (1988:13).

Therefore, to these Indigenous scholars, Indigenous knowledge is a process of telling stories, oral traditions and oral histories. These methods assist Indigenous people in expressing or sharing their experiences with their family, extended families, community and the wider communities. This particular method has been used since time immemorial and is still being used today by all Indigenous people, as it brings 'life' to sharing indigenous knowledge with 'others'.

Native science or [indigenous knowledge] embraces the inherent creativity of nature as the foundation for both knowledge and action with regard to 'seeking life' (Cajete, 2000:15).

What is Indigenous Knowledge – an Indigenous Perspective?

From an Indigenous perspective 'knowledge is shared' not kept for one's own self worth but to benefit others around them. Indigenous knowledge is shared so as to keep knowledge 'alive' and continuously flowing from generation to generation. By using this particular concept, it shows that knowledge has no end and will not die with our elders, parents, uncles and aunties but will continue onto our children, grandchildren and future generations.

Sharing Indigenous knowledge between individuals, families, extended families, and communities has shown to everyone, the importance of local knowledge, oral tradition and oral history. For example the weaving of coconut palm leaves into baskets, childrens' toys and everyday items used by women exhibits a specific expression of Indigenous knowledge being shared by older women in the community. Indigenous knowledge is a method used to clarify to 'others' that this knowledge, which is being shared has a reflection of either a personal or public experience.

Sharing Indigenous knowledge with 'others' means that this knowledge that is shared must be respected, sometimes earned, and requires a lot of care and attention. As Cajete points out:

Indigenous experience is evidenced not only through collective cultural expressions of art, stories, rituals and technology, but also through the more subtle and intimate expressions of individual acts of respect, care, words, and feelings that are continually extended (2000:20).

From a Torres Strait Islander's perspective and with respect to Torres Strait Islander elders, the way Torres Strait Islanders acknowledge Indigenous knowledge is through the illustration of a 'coconut palm tree'. This coconut palm tree plays an enormous part in Torres Strait society with the use of coconut leaves for building thatch houses, making baskets to carry fire wood, food, vegetables and toys for children. The bark of the coconut palm tree is used for seats, fencing and food. The coconut itself is used for preparing food, eating and as a cooking utensil.



Thus, the coconut palm tree is best used to explain Islander family life. The coconut palm tree is normally discussed and divided into ten different stages, as it explains in detail Torres Strait culture, tradition and heritage. In this article, I will not examine all ten stages, but will use specific areas of the coconut palm tree illustration, which will assist in explaining how Indigenous knowledge works in Torres Strait society.

So, picture a coconut palm tree. The roots of the coconut palm tree represent 'heritage' – the past, present, and future parents that hold 'life' and are the strength of the tree. It is the very basis of a family, which is referred to as '*kupai*' (lineage) (Mam *et al.*, 1993:19). The trunk of the tree is strong and channels vital spiritual energy between the upper and lower part of the tree, representing 'tradition'. The trunk's main principle and aim is the intimate union of male and female, which is referred to as '*gamu*' (the body) (Mam *et al.*, 1993:19).

The leaves of the coconut palm tree have many different stages; there are the leaves, the new shoots, the first tier of new shoots and the second tier of new shoots. The leaves of the tree represent 'culture' as it stems to families and extended families that interact with customs and practices, which is referred to as '*Buai Mabaigal*' (people of the clan/tribe) (Mam *et al.*, 1993:20).

The new shoots represent the siblings or the '*kazil*' (children), and surrounding the new shoots are two other tiers of new shoots. The first tier of surrounding leaves or new shoots is referred to as the teachers – '*Awahdeh*' (uncle) and '*Ama*' (aunty). In the traditional moiety system of Torres Strait Islanders, aunts and uncles are considered to be special people for each of the children, as they are their 'external teachers' and are the overseers of the growing child (Mam *et al.*, 1993:20).

The second tier of leaves or new shoots is referred to as the guardians of knowledge, namely our elder's '*Athe*' (grandfather) and '*Aka*' (grandmother). As Mam *et al.* point out: "

by virtue of their age, the elders are considered the wise ones of the community whose collective wisdom oversees the everyday existence of Torres

Strait Islanders (1993:20). The elders are the ones to whom the younger Torres Strait Islanders turn, when seeking specific knowledge about the dynamics of land matters, sea matters, and air matters – they are the holders and gatekeepers of knowledge (Mam *et al.*, 1993:20).

Therefore, this illustration of a coconut palm tree displays how Indigenous knowledge is shared within the families, extended families and communities throughout Torres Strait either in the homeland or in mainland Australia. The coconut palm tree displays the important role that the parents, elders, grandparents, ancestors (roots), the union of male and female (trunk), the uncles, aunties, siblings, elders (leaves) play in sharing, retrieving, learning, recording and teaching Indigenous knowledge so that Torres Strait culture and tradition is not lost.

'Passing on' Indigenous knowledge in ABTS2000

Indigenous knowledge must stay 'alive'. By 'passing on' this knowledge we will see a continuous process that has no end. Indigenous knowledge is the most powerful tool of any Indigenous culture. Without this knowledge, heritage, traditions, customs, identity and lifestyle is lost. Indigenous people are the essence and energy behind Indigenous knowledge, as they make it 'alive'. For Indigenous people, Indigenous knowledge is a way of life as it encompasses everyday activities of both the natural and supernatural worlds.

Therefore, it is vital that Indigenous knowledge continues from generation to generation within immediate families, extended families, communities and the wider communities so so to ensure the process of Indigenous method of teaching endures. We must hold onto our culture, identity, tradition, custom, lifestyle, language, stories, songs, art, craft work, performance of dance, rituals and ceremonies, as these significant factors identifies Indigenous people with particular Indigenous nations.

The 'passing on' of Indigenous knowledge is a concept that is held close to the older ones, in particular the elders of Indigenous communities.

For example, a young Torres Strait Islander would have an uncle or aunt watch over him/her from the time the child is born to when he/she is old enough to understand and learn about Torres Strait Islander culture, tradition, custom and way of life either in a traditional or contemporary manner. But, first and foremost, that child is taught to 'apasin' (respect) others around him/her because 'apasin' is regarded highly in Torres Strait society.

Thus, in ABTS2000 (Torres Strait Islander Studies) students were taught the importance of 'apasin' (respect) and to show 'good pasin' (good ways). The students were advised prior to the course commencing that when an elder was present in our lecture, students were to show the elders their utmost respect at all times. All students, who participated in this course, adhered to this protocol of 'apasin'.

During this course, students were informed that they must listen and observe at all times so to be productive in their group assessments as this is the main concept of 'passing on' Indigenous knowledge – this is the only form of teaching used in Indigenous societies. The students must listen, observe, use their understanding and work in group's with the willingness to learn different concepts as well as the openness to grasp different teaching methodology. The Indigenous methodologies and teaching style will enable students to grasp fully the concept of 'passing on' Indigenous knowledge. For many elders say, that to not listen would be disrespectful to the process of 'passing on' Indigenous knowledge and you would miss out on or misinterpret vital information that would benefit you later in life.

This 'passing on' of Indigenous knowledge was evident in ABTS2000 as Elders from the Torres Strait community in Brisbane were invited to participate in the running of the course. The Elders were involved from the beginning, from the formatting of the course outline to the running of cultural activities. These Elders were guest speakers at particular lectures, as they provided their personal experiences, personal stories and 'passed on' or shared their knowledge openly about Torres Strait culture, traditions, customs, language and lifestyle pertaining to that particular lecture topic. The Elders were present in cultural

activities as they spoke about the importance of coconut palm leaves weaving to Torres Strait Islander women and the performance of Torres Strait songs and dances, as well as the preparation of island food 'Amai' (underground oven). These cultural activities were openly discussed with ABTS2000 students and the students participated with great enjoyment.

During these cultural activities, ABTS2000 students were active participants, always willing to take part in all activities they were given, and they put their whole heart into doing these activities correctly. For example, when weaving coconut palm leaves, both the men and women took part in making grasshoppers, game balls and any other extra weaving that they could learn in such a short time. But, their willingness to learn rewarded them with great outcomes of beautiful creative artwork.

Then there was the island dancing practice, with the men being separated from the women and not one student sat down during this activity. All students participated and really enjoyed dancing, learning of the correct steps or movements in that dance, the use of words in the song as well as the rhythm. At the end of this particular activity, all the students were singing and dancing to the rhythm of the song they had been taught a couple of minutes ago, which turned out to be a very successful performance by both the men's and women's group.

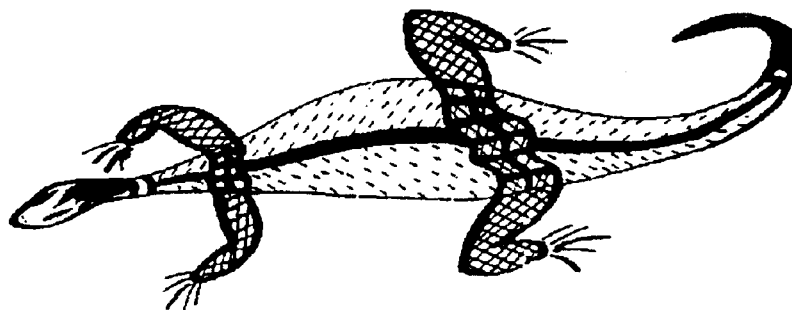
Thus, these cultural activities were taught through the use of Indigenous methodologies and teaching style, as it was explained, shown, and repeated if it wasn't clear the first time. Clearly, Indigenous knowledge was shared openly and the 'passing on' of knowledge was evident because of the successful outcomes, with all the cultural activities in which these students whole-heartedly participated.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Indigenous knowledge is a 'living', breathing concept and as such must be treated with care and respect. This Indigenous knowledge is vital and valuable to hold onto, as important information has been passed on by Elders who will one day depart from this world. In particular, to the students in ABTS2000, this vital knowledge has been passed on and they are now carriers of this knowledge. They have taken with them a small part of Indigenous knowledge, which will flourish and be shared with other people with whom they interact in the future.

By becoming carriers of Indigenous knowledge, it is evident that this knowledge will stay 'alive' and be continued forever. This process will continue through these students who will share with anyone they come in contact with in the future. These students may one day be Elders in their communities and play a major part in 'passing on' this knowledge to their families, extended families, community and the wider communities. They will be ambassadors of Indigenous knowledge.

Thus, this concept of 'passing on' Indigenous knowledge through the use of Indigenous methods of teaching in universities has brought about a whole different concept. This method of teaching has seen an active participation of Elders in lectures, cultural activities, with provisions of their personal experiences and stories it has made ABTS2000 course a great success and the Elders' participation a great asset. Through this vital process, students see Indigenous knowledge as 'alive' and taught to them first-hand by Indigenous Elders, community people or people who have earned respect in certain Indigenous communities to speak on



their behalf. So, I believe for Indigenous knowledge to flourish in an institutional environment, Indigenous elders, community people and other respected people must play an active role in teaching Indigenous knowledge.

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