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Disobedience, (dis)embodied knowledge management, and decolonization: higher education in The Gambia

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Abstract

In this work, we sought to uncover the key strategies and challenges to the integration of Indigenous knowledge as knowledge management practices at a public university in The Gambia. It is often axiomatic in the literature that the incorporation of diverse epistemologies is a key resource for sustainable development; therefore, activities associated with the management of knowledge, particularly in higher education, are worthy of elucidation. We discovered that knowledge management activities at a university in The Gambia were often informal and required the invisible work of faculty. It was through the implicit use of tacit knowledge and epistemic disobedience that faculty were able to build upon a colonized curriculum that denied the presence of other knowledge. However, in the end, faculty were dependent on the power of referents within and without the institution to formalize their knowledge management practices. This work fills an essential gap in the extant literature on how the work of university faculty and managers, when situated within a knowledge management perspective, can contribute to decolonization and foster sustainable development.

Keywords Indigenous knowledge · Epistemic disobedience · Knowledge management · Higher education · Sustainable development · Africa; the Gambia

Universities around the world possess a social responsibility to the communities within which they operate, sharing resources, spaces for learning and knowledge. This responsibility is founded in the mission of higher education and evidenced in the formal and informal networks, partnerships with and communication to local communities (Preece, 2017). However, there are fundamental challenges to the enactment of this mission, such as limited resources, reciprocity, measuring engagement activities and determining *who* defines the problem (Goddard et al., 2016). Leal Filho and colleagues (2018) suggested that "[f]aculty, students and staff need to engage in real problem-understanding and problem-solving [to] ensure that their universities become a pivotal force to guide wider community efforts to advance societal sustainability" (p. 86). This approach requires that the university orients itself toward the community, engaging its knowledge and understanding

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and co-generating sustainable solutions to development problems (Johnson & Mbah, 2021; Mbah et al., 2022). As this reorientation underscores, there is a need for different types of knowledge; however, different ways of knowing and knowledge have been systematically marginalized, particularly in the Global South (de Sousa Santos, 2014).

This knowledge, often characterized as Indigenous, engaged through university-community interactions, has significant implications for the epistemological conditions of the modern university due to its relevance to the African context (Ndofirepi & Gwaravanda, 2019). Transcending disciplinarity, Indigenous knowledge brings together highly diverse bodies of knowledge, practices, beliefs and values accumulated overtime within a geographic context, related to both the material and nonmaterial realms: "it is passed on from one generation to another in the form of tradition and heritage, and people in each era adapt and add to it" (Jimoh, 2018, p. 8). However, despite an increasing outcry in the academy on the importance of such knowledge to decolonization, a highly contextual, complex and contested term that can be conceived of as dismantling Eurocentric hegemony and reclaiming agency (Heleta, 2018), and improving learning for development (Mawere, 2014), there has been only nascent systematic inclusion of Indigenous knowledge into the practices and policies of education in Africa (Ndofirepi & Gwaravanda, 2019). Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2017) framed this neglect as epistemic injustice, requiring "the struggle for epistemological decolonisation…[and] to secure Africa as a legitimate epistemic base from which to look at the world" within the academy (p. 77).

The institutionalization of knowledge into organizations, though, entails processes associated with the individual and collective effort of stakeholders within physical and social environments to create, retrieve, transfer and apply knowledge, in line with the purpose and mission of the organization, also known as knowledge management (Hislop et al. 2018). Rowley (2000) asserted that "universities need to be consciously and explicitly managing the processes associated with the creation of their knowledge assets, and to recognise the value of their intellectual capital to their continuing role in society" (p. 329). Therefore, students, faculty, managers, staff and community members, as knowledge workers, are critical to the struggle to incorporate diverse epistemologies into higher education, particularly the appreciation and curation of Indigenous knowledge (Mbah et al., 2021). In this exploration, we sought to explore the integration of Indigenous knowledge as knowledge management at a public university in The Gambia.

Conceptual framework

In the description of the concepts guiding this work, we draw out the main arguments presented in the literature related to development and higher education in Africa, epistemic injustice and Indigenous knowledge and knowledge management. Where possible, we focus our framework on the literature produced by African researchers.

African higher education

Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2019) succinctly wrote that "African institutions and African leadership were destroyed by colonialism, and the colonialists invented their own versions and called them African institutions, tradition, and customs" of which higher education was one (p. 209). Higher education institutions in the formerly colonized countries of Africa have been challenged to evolve past imported models toward versions grounded in localized needs

and requirements (Chipindi et al., 2022; Mbah et al., 2022). Inherited models of institutional culture, language, curricular development, teaching and learning persist (Luckett et al., 2019). Despite these pervasive challenges, higher education has become a growing focus of development efforts in Africa.

There has been a revitalization of higher education systems on the continent, with increased alignment to development needs and the creation of a knowledge economy (Molla & Cuthbert, 2018). Bailey and Cloete (2011) asserted that "higher education institutions are seen by many as playing a key role in delivering the knowledge requirements for development. Research has, for example, suggested a strong association between higher education participation rates and levels of development" (p. 1). While there is much room to critique the basis of the concept of development, its evolution and application (Okolie, 2003), broadly speaking, universities across the continent have seen a stream of reforms, initiatives and resources to bolster and orient their development opportunities (Cloete & Maassen, 2015; Evoh et al., 2013; McCowan, 2019; Molla & Cuthbert, 2018).

Shifts in the development discourse toward sustainability have further underscored the connection between higher education and development by focusing on the utility of knowledge to innovate solutions to pervasive social and environmental problems within the sustainable development framework (Chankseliani & McCowan, 2021). However, disciplinary cultures, bureaucratic rigidity, gender inequity, weak research funding policy and foreign exploitation trouble the development of African research and science for development (Maricola & Kariunke, 2020; Mbah & Johnson, 2021; Ulmer & Wydra 2020). Sawyerr (2004) stressed that "a university's contribution to development turns on the quality of the knowledge it generates and disseminates" (p. 34). Challenges to the successful use of knowledge to address sustainable development in Africa are often found in the conflicts between institutional expectations and resources, governance and foundational epistemological assumptions.

Epistemic injustice and Indigenous knowledge

These conflicts are evidenced in what knowledge is valued by the university and how those values connect to the needs of society. While African universities predominantly serve Black and Indigenous students and communities, researchers emphasize that postsecondary policies and practices often adhere to "European greenhouse" standards (Gumbo et al., 2022; Morreira, 2017), thereby gatekeeping the creation, development and dissemination of diverse knowledge within the academy (Brock-Utne, 2017; Jimoh, 2018; Mbah et al., 2021; Mbembe, 2016; Monareng, 2022; Shizha, 2015, among many others). The academic community has strongly critiqued this gatekeeping, particularly in Southern Africa, and the relevance of knowledge produced by African universities for Africa (Morreira, 2017; Vandeyar, 2022; Walker, 2020).

Framed as epistemic injustice, or rather the ways in which people and groups are oppressed in their capacity as knowers (Fricker, 2007), these practices emerge from the continual exclusion and denial of the legitimacy of different ways of knowing where "the university is alienated from the society in which it is found" due to neocolonialism (Ndofirepi & Gwaravanda, 2019, p. 583; Nyanchoga, 2014; Ogone, 2017). Often referred to as the politics of knowledge, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2021) cited asymmetrical power relations and the neoliberal global structure of knowledge production and dissemination as factors that enable epistemic injustice to persist. Contemporary political structures in many formerly

colonized countries may further trouble knowledge justice in universities in Africa (Aina, 2010).

Indigenous knowledge is one such knowledge system denied place within contemporary higher education. "This devaluing of [I]ndigenous knowledge systems through colonisation… is perhaps the greatest loss to our common shared civilisation and humanity on the planet" (Rajah, 2019, p. 12). Okolie (2003) declared that the African university must engage in a critical evaluation of itself and "examine the source of the knowledge that informs what is imposed on or prescribed for Africa…ask which ways of knowing scholars validate and promote and which ones they ignore, invalidate, and why" (p. 244). To this end, Dei (2011) has written of his efforts "to subvert and resist colonial hegemonic ideologies" by claiming his Indigenous identity and knowledge (p. 22).

These declarations in the academy toward claiming and privileging Indigenous ways of knowing emerge as a form of epistemic disobedience, defined as the political effort of an individual who "engages in knowledge-making to decolonize the knowledge that was responsible for the coloniality of his being" (Mignolo, 2009, p. 176). Morriera (2017) suggested that academics are implicated in this colonial matrix and must *disobey* by engaging education to disrupt knowledge hierarchies. Subsequently, African academics are increasing efforts to decolonize the spaces in which they teach, research and engage with communities and honour Indigenous ways of knowing (Chipindi et al., 2022; Mbah et al., 2022; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021).

Knowledge management

However, little is known about how universities in Africa incorporate, distribute and use Indigenous knowledge (Mbah & Foningchang, 2019). According to Ndofirepi and Gwaravand (2019), academic disciplines in the African university inculcate different knowledge paradigms in two ways: exclusive focus on Western knowledge and/or weak inclusion of African knowledge within the context of Western epistemology. To employ either of these approaches to knowledge within the university, some structures, policies and practices must be in place. This is formally known as knowledge management: the institutionalized processes that generate, access, represent, embed, transfer, use and grow knowledge within organisations (Galagan, 1997).

The organizational knowledge managed via knowledge management is both outcome and process. In terms of outcome, the literature on knowledge management tends to dichotomise knowledge along two lines: tacit and explicit knowledge. Tacit knowledge is the personal, historical and context-specific knowledge held by knowledge workers. Lam (2000) framed these demonstrations of tacit knowledge as both "embodied", or rather knowledge that is context-specific and acted upon implicitly by knowledge workers, and "embedded", that is, socially constructed and emergent shared knowledge. Explicit knowledge is the codified, technical and generalizable knowledge within organizations (Lam, 2000; Smith, 2001).

In terms of process, knowledge management can also be seen as both formal and informal approaches, codified organizationally through norms, history and material arrangements *as well as* assembled personally through the creative activities of knowledge workers. Framed as ecologies of practice (Värk & Reino, 2021), this knowledge management process includes informal practice and personal activities that interact to support formal knowledge management work. For example, knowledge workers may read a book on their personal time that has relevance for their work, then share that knowledge with co-workers

informally, which then results in a co-worker assigning the text in a course. Knowledge work therefore combines the personal and professional, the formal and the informal, to the benefit of organizational structures and goals. Figure 1 attempts to capture the connection between the knowledge that a knowledge worker holds and their connection to personal, informal and formal knowledge management activities.

However, organizational knowledge, as both an outcome and a process, is in flux, resulting from a complex interaction between knowledge workers and the organization. The tensions produced are inevitable; knowledge workers' decision-making and autonomy is in a push–pull relationship with an organization's desire to maintain control to mitigate risk and create conformity (Desouza & Awazu, 2005; Langfred & Rockman, 2016). "An 'overemphasis on integration'…too easily sanctions particular forms of knowing and learning" (Heizmann, 2018, pp.177–178). In addition to this tension, Rechberg and Syed (2013) identified the potential for organizations to unethically appropriate the knowledge of workers, creating conflict *between* the worker and the organization. But what if the knowledge of knowledge workers is contested? And, more broadly, as Galagan (1997) asked, "What kind of knowledge do you include or exclude" (p. 20)? Depending on the context, the answer to this question may be politically motivated and rooted in neocolonialism, as previously discussed.

In 2000, Rowley asked if higher education was ready for knowledge management, due to the unfocused nature of knowledge activities and the impermeability of governance structures at universities. This may explain the scarcity of literature on knowledge management and higher education. Regarding knowledge management at universities in Africa, the literature has evidenced that universities mostly rely on informal processes to promote and safeguard knowledge (Dei & Van der Walt, 2020); a lack of will to use institutional resources to actualize knowledge management (Krubu & Krub, 2010); inadequate resources for infrastructure development that impacts the efficacy of knowledge management (Enakrire & Ocholla, 2017); and may be absent the knowledge sharing cultures that enable knowledge management (Veer Ramjeawon & Rowley, 2017, 2020). Overarchingly, while universities are key to knowledge creation and dissemination in society, the literature

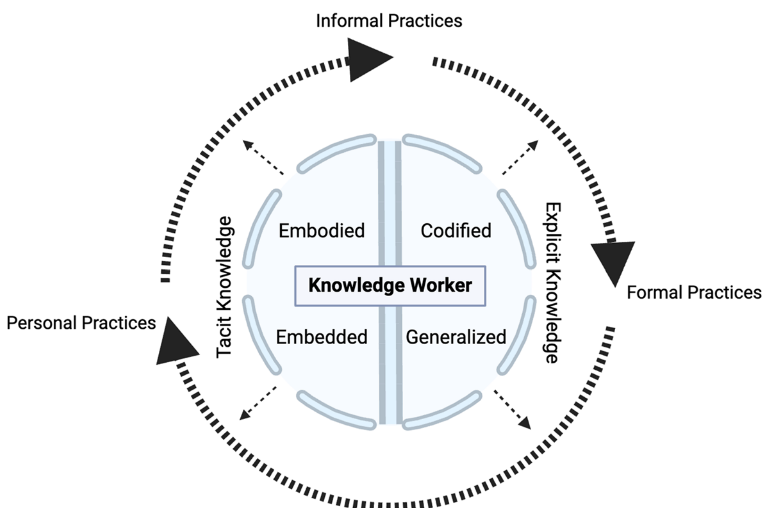

Fig. 1 The knowledge worker within an ecology of practice

suggests that internally, they are often unable to build appropriate knowledge management policies, to acquire or employ infrastructure to support knowledge management and to develop an environment conducive to effective knowledge management. How to engage Indigenous knowledge through the practice of knowledge management, in any form, within African universities has yet to be addressed in the literature. Considering the epistemic injustices inherent to higher education in Africa, this is likely a consideration whose time has come.

Context

This study focused on a country not commonly addressed in the African education literature: The Gambia. A former British colony that gained independence in 1965, The Gambia is in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). It is a densely populated country of 2 million people (176 people per square kilometre), belonging to the Mandinka (34%), the Fula (24%), Wolof (15%) and Jola (10%) ethnic groups, among others, 57% of which live in urban or peri-urban centers. According to the United Nations Human Development Index, The Gambia ranks below most African countries and sits at 174 out of 189 countries in the world in terms of human development (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2022). The mean years of schooling is 4.6: women achieve at least 3.8 years and men 5.6 (UNDP, 2022). Life expectancy is 62 years, higher than the average of 56 across Africa; yet the population, overall, skews heavily toward youth (World Bank, 2021).

In addition to the development challenges captured above, The Gambia has experienced changing weather patterns, drier conditions, excessive salinity in the rivers, coastal erosion and increased temperatures due to climate change. In 2022, the government of The Gambia stated, in its long-term climate action plan, that although its contribution to global greenhouse emissions is less than 0.01%, it is one of the most vulnerable countries to the impact of climate change. This vulnerability to climate change has significant implications for The Gambia's development. In *Long-Term Climate-Neutral Development Strategy 2050* action plan (Ministry of Environment, Climate Change and Natural Resources, 2022), the government has committed to reforestation, the installation of renewable energy infrastructure, climate resilient food security, and investment in education for equitable social development.

The University of The Gambia

The University of The Gambia was established by an Act of the National Assembly of The Gambia in March 1999. The enactment made it the first university in the country, with the president of The Gambia, Yahya Jammeh, functioning as its chancellor, who ruled from 1994 until his exile in 2017. Jammeh's role as chancellor solidified the institution as a political agent, as did the cycle of governmental appointments typical of Anglophone institutions (Teferra & Altbach, 2004). Periodically, Jammeh would dismiss the Minister of Higher Education, Research, Science and Technology, further consolidating his power over higher education.

According to the university website, the institutional mission is to promote equitable and sustainable socio-economic development of communities through relevant, high-quality gender-sensitive teaching, research and outreach programs. The main campus is in

Serekunda, the largest urban centre in the country. There are approximately 6000 students enrolled and over 300 faculty and staff employed at the university. While the language of instruction is English, there are at least 10 other languages used across the country. At the time of the study, no information on the prevalence of Indigenous students, staff or faculty at the university was publicly available.

Methods

The research employed an exploratory case study design as part of a larger project that sought to capture critical cases intended to eventually produce theoretically sensitive findings focused on the instrumentality of Indigenous knowledge systems and strategies to sustainable development at African universities. For the research reported here, we explored the question: What are the key strategies and challenges to the integration of Indigenous knowledge as knowledge management at a public university in The Gambia?

Participants and data collection

In 2019, we travelled to The Gambia and engaged institutional knowledge workers ($n = 28$); specifically, we recruited university managers (directors, heads of departments, deans, upper-level administrators, $n = 11$) and faculty members who engaged with indigeneity in their praxis (professors and lecturers, $n = 17$) to participate in relational interviews (Table 1). We were sensitive to the need for postcolonial approaches to methods and therefore placed emphasis on the participants' sagacity and authoritative, contextual know-how (Chilisa, 2012). To this end, our dialogues with faculty members were driven by questions regarding the participants' work with the community, how they understood Indigenous knowledge, how they were able to engage and represent Indigenous voices/practices within their research practice, how the university has employed the knowledge produced by research and the connection between Indigenous knowledge and sustainable development. The faculty participants represented a broad array of fields and disciplines. Managers were asked to describe structures that support the university's engagement with Indigenous knowledge and practices, management mechanisms related to Indigenous knowledge and the connection between Indigenous knowledge and sustainable development. Dialogues with managers and faculty were between 30 min and 1 h in length.

Data analysis

The first two phases of our analysis strategy used coding to parse the data to make sense of the whole (Stake, 1995). Coding began with structural coding that captured conceptual phrases and participant-driven examples consistent with the research question (Saldaña, 2021). The second phase of analysis entailed pattern coding, grouping the structural codes into a smaller number of categories and identifying emerging explanations of the case (Saldaña, 2021). In the next phase, we reassembled the parts of the case deconstructed during coding, using categorical aggregation, to create an interpretation of the phenomenon under investigation (Stake, 1995). We focused on the use of participant stories and other descriptions to illustrate aspects of the case, which are presented naturalistically.

Table 1 Participants

No	Positions	Gender	Age range	Subject	Length of service
1	Manager	Man	41–50	Public administration	20 years
2	Faculty	Man	51–60	Veterinary medicine	6 years
3	Faculty	Man	41–50	Sociology	15 years
4	Faculty	Man	31–40	Human resource	5 years
5	Faculty	Man	31–40	Political science	5 years
6	Faculty	Man	41–50	Rural sociology and extension	10 years
7	Faculty	Man	61–70	Aquaculture and veterinary medicine	8 years
8	Faculty	Man	51–60	Social work and law	12 years
9	Faculty	Man	31–40	Human rights law	1 year
10	Manager	Man	51–60	Crop protection	30 years
11	Faculty	Woman	41–50	Law	1 year
12	Faculty	Woman	41–50	Nursing	3 years
13	Faculty	Woman	41–50	Nursing	3 years
14	Faculty/manager	Man	41–50	Political science	10 years
15	Faculty	Man	41–50	Computer science	12 years
16	Faculty/manager	Man	51–60	Agronomy	2 years
17	Faculty	Man	41–50	Linguistics	8 years
18	Manager	Man	31–40	Business economics	6 years
19	Faculty	Man	51–60	Agricultural extension	10 years
20	Manager	Man	41–50	International Business	17 years
21	Faculty	Woman	51–60	Communication	12 years
22	Faculty	Man	41–50	Mathematics	6 years
23	Manager	Man	51–60	Medicine	3 years
24	Manager	Man	41–50	Economics	7 years
25	Manager	Woman	51–60	Development studies	10 years
26	Faculty	Woman	41–50	Biological science	5 years
27	Faculty	Man	41–50	Agronomy	10 years
28	Faculty	Woman	31–40	Nursing	3 years

Positionality

Reflexively interrogating assumptions, experiences and tensions in the research process is integral to producing trustworthy qualitative inquiry (Olukotun et al., 2021). As authors and researchers, we represented diverse perspectives that inevitably impacted what we chose to study and how we interpreted our findings. One author was a professor at a university in the United States, while the other author was a lecturer at a university in the UK. One hailed from the American South and the other from Cameroon, one a woman, the other a man. Inevitably, we brought these experiences with us to our research. Our positionalities were different from that of our participants, although we shared similar professional roles and educational qualifications. We used our collaboration to both monitor and interrogate the presuppositions that we carried with us into the inquiry process. What we have presented here is the product of that interrogation. We sought to center the participants' voice and context, privileging the unique social, political and historical conditions that shape their experience, while also acknowledging how our *own* conditions shape our

interpretations and reporting. While we used many techniques to ensure the quality of representation in the work, we ask the reader to determine the work's verisimilitude.

Findings

Below, we draw out aspects of how the participants understood the context for and nascently inculcated Indigenous knowledge. The first finding addresses the politicization of knowledge in the country. The second finding highlights the informal processes, that participants framed as syncretism, for incorporating Indigenous knowledge at the university. The final finding focuses on the institutionalization of Indigenous knowledge management at the university. We use examples from the case to exemplify the findings.

Politicizing knowledge

The nature of knowledge and its context are important characteristics for consideration when exploring knowledge management. Participants spoke about the history and context of the university, its creation, and its politicization and how this had impacted the way knowledge has been evaluated. Participants often indirectly referenced the former president. One participant focused on how the political system has created distrust between the university, often seen as an agent of the government, and the community.

> Yeah, obviously, in the Gambia, you have to understand that we are from 20 years of dictatorship, dictatorship, where the research……even before the dictatorship people in The Gambia were not very familiar...they didn't know what research is. And we had the issue whereby the saying the wrong thing to the wrong person can land you in prison. So, we researchers had a very difficult time trying to get access to people to give us information. Because they don't know [and say] 'no, I'm not gonna talk.' And that has been going for 22 years where research was hardly done in this country, especially research that has to do with development, politics, and those kinds of issues. So, it was very difficult. (Manager)

Here, we see how politicization had a cooling effect on knowledge generation through research at the university, particularly around certain subjects. Participants acknowledged the difficulty with creating a culture of knowledge creation and sharing, particularly through engagement with the community, when perceptions of political involvement persisted.

Internally, stakeholders exhorted a need to both be independent and to be perceived as independent to be effective in their social role.

> The university was formed by the former president and there's this belief that 'I started this, I have to be the head of this.' But I don't believe in that. A university means, government has to be out there, the university has to be independent. We need [to be] independent as a university. (Manager)

Another participant noted how the former president's claims to Indigenous leadership and ways of knowing created tension *within* the academy.

> Political environment that has been for the previous 20 odd years, where there is a kinda dichotomy about Indigenous knowledge, particularly when it comes to health

> matters. When it comes to Indigenous knowledge, the one that comes most prominently to mind would be the former Head of State's involvement with traditional healing practices and ways. And that had its kind of push-pull, but particularly for the more, if you like, orthodox scientific mind...you understand? So, that's why I'm saying there was a kind of tension over either take it freely, or if you are not sure, or you felt, I think, more safe not to go near it, in terms of trying to understand. So, that was a kinda, if you like, dissuasion from that. (Manager)

In the excerpts above and in the data elsewhere, participants demonstrated tensions with knowledge creation both inside and outside the university. First, perceptions of institutional politicization led to community distrust of the university and research on politically sensitive subjects. Second, the former president's affiliation with Indigenous knowledge and practices engendered a politicization of knowledge, which led to distrust within the academic community regarding the political safety and value of such research topics.

Syncretizing knowledge

Under these conditions, the faculty struggled with incorporating Indigenous knowledge into curricular and research activities. Aspects of knowledge management, such as the creative combination of tacit and codified knowledge, were further challenged by pressures to conform to Western knowledge. Faculty participants framed their efforts as "syncretism", the attempted synthesis of different schools of thought, to establish relevance.

> There are good things in our local…syncretism…picking local stuffs from the community integrating the university curriculum to remain relevant. There is a bit of that but predominantly, we are still Westernised, we are still teaching Western concepts, trying to localise them, Western technologies sometimes, Western books, Western thinking. (Faculty, Agriculture)

> There was a time I proposed the idea of bringing in the study of Indigenous culture into our curriculum, especially in my own field of sociology. We have a lot to read, we have a lot to learn from that area. Basing everything on Western system of knowledge hardly contribute to our understanding. What we can only do is borrow the knowledge, contextualise it to our own situation. But then, if we can use our own knowledge, our own local knowledge, and now use it to relate to our problems and challenges, I think the better for us. (Faculty, Social Work)

Faculty members recounted individualized, informal efforts to incorporate "local" knowledge into their work. Examples of syncretism participants described included using a textbook from Europe but supplementing with local examples or translating Western concepts into Indigenous ones to facilitate understanding. They also combined Indigenous knowledge with Western methodologies in their research practices. They did this despite a lack of political value being placed on such knowledge.

> Because what is happening in Africa is that we tend to concentrate too much on the white man's knowledge. Students graduate [and] they will read all the theories, but yet these theories are not applicable in our domain. So, what we should be doing now is look at issues around us. Government, like I said, should actually recognise and value Indigenous knowledge. (Faculty, Development Studies)

However, it was not just the government that did not value Indigenous knowledge, but also the faculty and managers, according to participants.

> It is the attitude of the academics themselves that is going to determine this. The reason is that, for many years, almost more than one century, we've looked down on our own Indigenous knowledge; we just need to realise that our people were not just existing, you know, without knowledge, they were not existing without observing their environments, you know, or trying to gain control over their environment, there was a way they were gaining control. So, once we, in the academics, once we are able to disabuse our minds, I think the problem is mainly with us. (Faculty, Communications)

The assertion to "disabuse our minds" suggested that participants perceived the need for decolonization of knowledge at the university, but this proposal was usually only implied in our dialogues. Ultimately, the focus among participants was on *combining* Western knowledge and epistemology with local practices and know-how, not replacing it.

Formalising knowledge

As the above demonstrates, the data shows an awareness of Indigenous knowledge among stakeholders at the case institution. According to our participants, this was nascent due to the efforts of specific champions, both in the curriculum and in their research. In this case, these individuals held referent power, or rather were individuals within the organisation who were perceived to be epistemic authorities or hold a key leadership role. Participants suggested that for there to be legitimation of Indigenous knowledge within the academy, there needed to be respected individuals promoting it.

> The university, usually, these things, to some extent, depends on the kind of academics, academic leadership; by academic leadership, I mean, just not necessarily the Vice Chancellor. So we've had scenarios where there are very respected political scientists who value the political understanding of where we are. We've had historians too, who have sought traditional ways of understanding history, and the story that goes with that; indeed, in terms of not just the content, but the methodology. We've seen that in this kind of university. (Manager)

Here, the participant stressed that it was necessary but insufficient for university leadership alone to advocate for Indigenous knowledge but must also include the example of "very respected" faculty who valued and employed these knowledge in their research, particularly through the use of Indigenous methodologies. However, there were no formal institutional mechanisms to encourage or support faculty choosing a specific research agenda.

> There isn't anything like those mechanisms. Whatever you do in the university here is based on self-initiative and, if your proposal is interesting and, you are about to win some confidence and trust of certain people, [then] yes, it's a good project, it's a good proposal, then it might be supported. (Faculty, Computing)

> When you do certain research in that [Indigenous community], which is very, very interesting, maybe then you have to bring it on board for everybody to share those results with academia in the university...Yes. So, I think it should be shared with other [academics] in the university to see if its relevance for implementation. (Faculty, Nursing)

Therefore, it was not just the championing of specific individuals to legitimize Indigenous knowledge and research, but the need for a framework for knowledge distribution within the university.

Discussion and implications

In this study, we asked what were the key strategies and challenges to the integration of Indigenous knowledge as knowledge management within a public university in The Gambia? In this section, we will address the answer to this question as it relates to decolonization strategies, ecologies of practice and the use of tacit knowledge and the connection of epistemic diversity to sustainable development.

Epistemic disobedience and decolonization

The findings suggested, in line with the extant literature on African higher education, a nascent awareness of aspects of knowledge management, such as formal process to manage knowledge within the university, but a weak inclusion of Indigenous knowledge into the culture of knowledge at the university. Ndofirepi and Gwaravanda (2019) argued that most universities in Africa demonstrated weak inclusion of Indigenous knowledge systems and that inclusive content tended to be siloed into certain disciplines. In our case, faculty from across disciplines described different strategies they used to bring Indigenous knowledge into the classrooms and learning opportunities for students, essentially engaging in a form of epistemic disobedience in their practice as they used their know-how to engage content not "authorized" by the dominant epistemology within the university (Mignolo, 2009; Morreira, 2017).

Moreover, the syncretism described by participants hints at a dualistic strategy for decolonization in the university, incorporating African Indigenous knowledge within a reigning Western epistemology. A dualistic strategy, according to Ndofirepi and Gwaravanda (2019), means that content of an academic program is substantially Eurocentric, taking "into account available resources such as existing textbooks and research material that is currently dominated by the global north" (p. 588). This strategy was present in our participants' narratives as they described textbooks and learning materials focused on Western theories and examples from Western contexts. As a result, the formal curriculum required the largely informal and often invisible work of faculty to be relevant to learners.

In university spaces, resources are critical to the creation and implementation of a curriculum. Participants suggested that the culture of knowledge and knowledge generation in the country that might lead to the creation of such materials was inhibited by politics associated with researching certain subjects. The politicization of knowledge within The Gambia, perceptions of the university's relationship with the government and a lack of formal mechanisms to legitimize such knowledge within the research culture and framework of the university may have confounded any embryonic efforts toward decolonization of knowledge and knowledge management. This echoes Ndlovu-Gatsheni's argument that "turning inherited colonial schools, colleges and universities into uncompromisingly African and inclusive institutions…has also been fraught with ambivalences, ambiguities and even contradictions" (2021, p. 888). To this, we add concerns for physical safety due to the politicization of knowledge, which may have perilous consequences for knowledge workers choosing to engage with Indigenous knowledge.

Ecologies of practice

The informal and the self-initiated incorporation of Indigenous knowledge into the curriculum is consistent with an "ecologies of practice" perspective in knowledge management. Värk and Reino (2020) asserted that knowledge management is more than a formal organizational approach, but a combination of personal, informal and formal practices "in a state of emergence and renewal, shaped by external and internal pressures" (p. 167) to accomplish knowledge work. Indigenous knowledge is tacit knowledge, the personally held knowledge of knowledge workers that required the informal knowledge management practices of faculty to perform organizational work (e.g., teaching) effectively.

In this ecology of practice, participants first *disobeyed*, as a personal knowledge management practice. They recognized the importance of Indigenous knowledge, evolving in the community and relevant to Gambian culture and society and their work as faculty. Next, they employed their embodied knowledge to syncretize, as an informal practice, to make changes in their classrooms by combining Indigenous knowledge with the Western, disciplinary knowledge privileged and codified within the institution. The formal knowledge management practice of incorporation of Indigenous knowledge has yet to be enacted, according to participants, due to a lack of epistemic referents and political support. It is at this stage where faculty-driven processes (once developed) would recognize and assess the relevance of Indigenous knowledge to the mission of the university and assert vocal support for work on Indigenous knowledge. These activities could potentially facilitate decolonization and epistemic justice on an organizational scale. Figure 2 depicts a theorized relationship between the knowledge of the faculty, their knowledge management activities and the potential for decolonization.

Implications of the research

To manage, preserve and disseminate Indigenous knowledge within the decolonized university, certain considerations for the protection of this knowledge are critical; the potential for knowledge appropriation is possible in any knowledge-based organization (Rechberg & Syed, 2013). Kaniki and Kutu Mphahlele (2002) recommended addressing the issue of ownership and intellectual property and substantively including Indigenous communities in

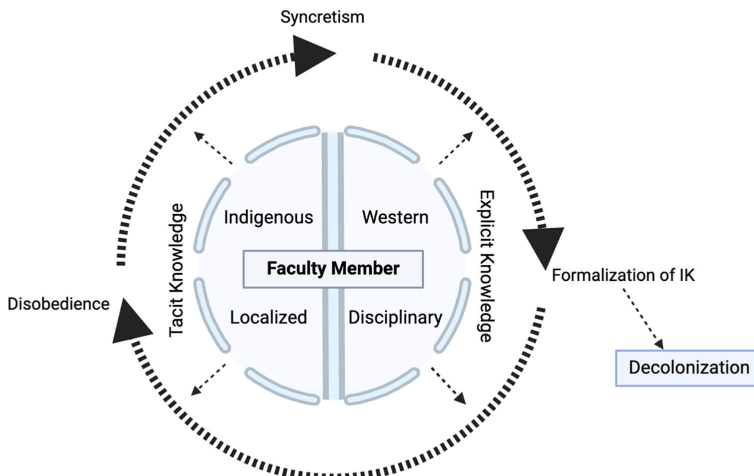

Fig. 2 Faculty knowledge management work in an ecology of practice at the University of The Gambia

the formal architecture of university knowledge management. Additionally, decolonization of knowledge at the university should include formal governance structures that support the Indigenizing of the curriculum and Indigenous knowledge research efforts of faculty, as well as reciprocity with Indigenous communities. This work contributes to calls for the university to decolonize through the decentering of Eurocentric epistemologies and suggests that knowledge management, specifically the formalization of embodied knowledge of faculty, staff, students and community members, may contribute to this process. There is much more room for work to investigate the connections between Indigenous knowledge, knowledge management and decolonisation in higher education. We invite researchers to take up this challenge.

In terms of research on decolonization, this work adds to the conversation on how *all* universities, not just African, can meaningfully engage in a process of decentering Eurocentric epistemologies. What this research, and other works, propose is that decolonization is not necessarily a process of replacement, but one of appropriate syncretization. This process is more than the work of a few faculty, but the work of the university and requires formal policy mechanisms, infrastructure and resources. Continuing to make this a personal and informal activity within the university will inevitably perpetuate epistemic injustice and *disembody* faculty knowledge work.

Regarding notions of development, participants viewed their knowledge work as connected to sustainability, in that an irrelevant curriculum disconnected from local knowledge and problems would be unable to contribute to development goals. The institution can be viewed as educating students for emigration to countries where their knowledge makes sense, thus facilitating brain drain, or as barring access to students who did not conform to institutional knowledge practices (language minorities and/or Indigenous people), underscoring the misalignment with local needs and thereby losing critical human resources needed to address climate change. As Goal 4 of the Sustainable Development Goals states, *all* learners need to acquire the knowledge necessary to promote sustainable development, including an appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development.

Knowledge management can contribute to the acquisition and appreciation of diverse knowledge that promote sustainable development. There is renewed interest in Indigenous knowledge, primarily due to the political efforts of Indigenous communities and groups, yet very little of this knowledge has been recorded for preservation (Lwoga et al., 2010). Masenya (2022) suggested that digital technologies be applied to this effort, as a form of knowledge management. Universities in South Africa have made significant attempts at digitizing Indigenous knowledge into institutional repositories; however, a paucity of policy plagues these efforts (Balogun & Kalusopa, 2022). Yet, this research is predominantly confined to South Africa. Best practices emerging from other majority world countries may resemble the context and resources necessary to engage in this work. Moreover, universities could learn a great deal from community, civil society, library or museum-based organizations already employing knowledge management in the preservation of Indigenous knowledge.

Conclusion

The purpose of this work was to explore how one university in The Gambia incorporated Indigenous knowledge as knowledge management. We discovered that the faculty, as knowledge workers within the university, used their tacit knowledge to make the curriculum meaningful for their students. However, this work largely required the personal and

informal activities associated with knowledge management. Participants underscored the need for organizational and political support for formalized incorporation of Indigenous knowledge and, subsequently, knowledge management structures that may lead to the creation and dissemination of knowledge for sustainable development and systematic decolonization of the university. In countries faced with challenges emerging from the climate crisis, universities must build formal university knowledge management structures that support, sustain and signal attention to diverse ways of knowing that may provide alternative thinking about significant, intractable problems. Indeed, it is the fundamental responsibility of the modern university to do so.

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