

Editorial comment

Focus on the San community of Platfontein: Generating the knowledge of a First Nation People for Dispute Resolution

The San Writing Retreat held at Roodevalei Lodge (Gauteng) during July 2014, was a remarkable and extraordinary event. Twenty-seven persons gathered to process the data collected and collated during the second phase of a three-year longitudinal study for the San Dispute Resolution Project.

What is remarkable is that the Writing Retreat was attended not only by academics but also, in particular by members of the San community located at Platfontein some eighteen kilometres north of Kimberley. Members of the community comprised not only the field researchers but also community elders.

The extraordinary nature of the event is the synergy created through knowledge sharing between formal and informal knowledge holders. The Writing Retreat gave effect to the concept of “cognitive justice” through the recognition of a fraternity of knowledge. The Writing Retreat endorsed the “Other” knowledge expressed through the lived experience of the San community at Platfontein, knowledge that is so often relegated to the periphery of the dominant knowledge system. By means of participatory research, the “Other” knowledge is no longer “museumised” like some odd artefact in a museum that is interesting but unrelated to contemporary issues. A genuine knowledge partnership integrates community knowledge into the mainstream and hence it informs and critically interrogates conceptual research. This understanding was central to the Writing Retreat.

Community members and academics were cloistered for three days as eight hundred typed pages of transcripts containing the community narratives were jointly evaluated, interpreted and supplemented by means of additional interviews with the key community knowledge holders. The articles in this special issue are the product of the Writing Retreat.

There are also two other highly significant aspects of the Writing Retreat. The first is that it was unanimously decided that the articles would not only be subject to the quality control of a double-blind peer review but that in addition, out of respect for the principle of the equality of knowledge, the community would also review them. Secondly, in order to preserve the integrity of the transcripts and to respect the confidentiality of their contents on ethical grounds, academics at the Writing Retreat decided to establish an archive to house all the material gathered during the course of the project. The result is the establishment of the San Dispute Resolution Oral Archive (SANDROA) that is administered by the Library of the University of South Africa (Unisa). SANDROA may be accessed in Unisa’s Institutional Repository at <http://uir.unisa.ac.za>, as part of the College of Law repository. Only partial access to SANDROA is permitted since resources that are subject to the informed consent of the community may only be accessed once the necessary permission is granted.

The Writing Retreat is not an event isolated from the research agenda of the Institute for Dispute Resolution in Africa (IDRA) that is located within the College of Law, University of South Africa. The San Dispute Resolution Project is one of IDRA’s three projects that apply various methodologies within the broader context of community-based participatory research.

No matter how impoverished or marginalised a community might be, IDRA regards the knowledge within a community as its most valuable asset and treats this resource with great respect on the basis of an equal knowledge partnership.

IDRA is established as a transdisciplinary research institute. Experience arising from its community-based participatory research teaches that the narrative knowledge within communities is transdisciplinary since it cuts across conventional disciplines. Community knowledge is holistic in that it transcends the boundaries of academia's fragmented disciplines and is thus capable of informing and interrogating formal knowledge as well as providing practical solutions to deep-rooted problems. Apart from those articles that provide the background to the San community, the conceptual framework of the remaining articles is informed by community knowledge. Grounded on an interaction between formal and informal knowledge, each of these articles probes the causes of conflict and dispute within the community and identifies the architecture for resolving these problems. Essentially, these articles are linked to the Design and Implementation phases of the Project, which is solution orientated.

IDRA acknowledges with gratitude and esteem the support of Prof Johann Tempelhoff for his active involvement as a member of the research team culminating in his contribution to this special issue as well as his continued support in making this special issue possible.

The deepest gratitude is also expressed for the San community of Platfontein for the manner in which they have positively embraced the Project as well as to Dr Dries Velthuisen, the Project Leader, for his intellectual acumen and dedication. A vote of thanks also goes to Prof Narend Baijnath, Unisa's Pro-Vice Chancellor, who is responsible for the Portfolio of Community Engagement and Outreach; to Prof Rushiela Songca, Executive Dean and Prof Melodie Slabbert, Deputy Executive Dean of the College of Law; and, to Prof Sunette Pienaar, Executive Director of the Directorate of Community Engagement and Outreach. Their on-going support and interest has given impetus to the Project. The Project is wholly funded by Unisa, which should be acknowledged publically.

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