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RESEARCH NOTE



## Leisure education and indigenous knowledge systems in South Africa: a commentary

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### ABSTRACT

The role of leisure education in equipping individuals and society to participate in leisure is well-researched in scholarship. In this commentary, we argue that incorporating indigenous knowledge systems (derived from South Africa's (SA) diverse peoples, cultures and languages) in leisure education may promote inclusivity, cultural relevance and alternative leisure perspectives. Drawing from various scholarly perspectives, this article defines leisure education, revisits the concept of leisure, explores the concept of indigenous knowledge systems and presents a case for the inclusion of indigenous knowledge in the SA context. The implications that are drawn from the discussion call for a re-thinking of leisure education so that it responds to SA's contextual realities through the strategic incorporation of indigenous knowledge. This may contribute towards contextualized leisure research methods, wholesome leisure education content, creative resource-attainment strategies, novel knowledge-transfer methods and unique skill-equipping techniques that may advance leisure wellness, social cohesion and the leisure profession in SA.

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## What is leisure education?

Leisure education is a developmental and learning process through which individuals enhance their awareness and understanding of leisure for wholesome leisure engagement (Edginton et al., 2004). All individuals, notwithstanding their demographic characteristics, have the right to access and engage in leisure (Dattilo, 2016; Sivan & Veal, 2021). The World Leisure Organization (WLO) Charter for Leisure affirms this right by stating that denying of time for leisure activity has negative effects for individual and societal well-being (World Leisure Organization, 2020). In SA, although leisure education is acknowledged for providing opportunities for leisure participation, lack of leisure skills and resources hinder effective leisure education processes and interventions (Malema et al., 2023).

According to Leitner and Leitner (2012), leisure education can be attained through specialized leisure disciplines or by incorporating it in pre-existing subjects such as

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physical education and social sciences. Leisure education aims to instill leisure-related knowledge, skills, awareness and self-determination in and through leisure (Dattilo, 2016). Through leisure education, people develop positive values, set their preferences and learn about relevant resources for leisure participation (Sivan, 2014). Edginton et al. (2004) summarize the main elements associated with leisure education to be:

- Skills – each individual should develop skills that are built on psychomotor, affective and cognitive competencies (holistic development);
- Knowledge – each individual should understand the leisure activity options at their disposal. It also constitutes knowing about the equipment required for the activities;
- Experience – each individual should have the opportunity to experience leisure activities and to perfect skills that add to overall leisure fulfilment and wellness; and
- Attitudes and appreciation – each individual should have a positive perception of leisure as this assists in appreciating the value of leisure.

### Revisiting the concept of leisure

Leisure is a nebulous concept whose meaning depends on context, hence its meaning is contested in academia (Baller & Cornelissen, 2013). Linguistically, leisure is a polysemic term with its etymological roots mainly drawn from Western Europe (López, 2018). As a multi-sided and ever-evolving phenomenon, leisure can be best understood through the lenses of socio-cultural, historical and spatial dynamics that transcend Anglo-Euro-American frameworks (Dattilo & Lopez-Frias, 2021; Sharma, 2018). Despite leisure being as old as human civilization, its systematic study as a discipline is recent. Oftentimes, attempts to define leisure focus on its juxtaposition with paid work (Therriault, 2024). Taylor (2011) argues that the understanding of leisure is only of academic interest and of limited value if it does not steer towards expansively meeting the needs of broader society.

Leisure is touted to be a keystone of holistic well-being, providing crucial opportunities for creativity, fulfilment and relaxation (Wong & Ngui, 2024). In modern society which is characterized by the regulation and commercialization of time, leisure is subordinated to market forces by being linked to money and materialism (Akyeampong & Ambler, 2002). This gives the impression that for peak leisure time to be attained, one should have economic clout. This results in a situation where some people work long hours for a few economically-endowed elites to enjoy longer and quality leisure hours. This seemingly confirms Aristotle's classist line of thinking that leisure is the privilege of elites, who as supposed, deserve time and privilege for philosophical contemplation, which is the gateway to intellectual and moral virtue (Asakitikpi, 2018; Inoguchi, 2018). However, discourses that explore leisure across cultures can provide nuanced counter-perspectives and insights to broaden conceptual understandings of leisure (Purrington & Hickerson, 2013).

High unemployment in most African cities nullifies the traditional definitional dichotomy between work and leisure. For example, unemployed youths with high free time, cannot be regarded as the "leisured class" because free time occasioned by unemployment is simply unoccupied time (Akyeampong & Ambler, 2002; Asakitikpi, 2018). However, even among the employed, leisure is instrumentalised as a replenishment tool to re-energise one for work in the pursuit of profit in some never-ending cycle, as

opposed to leisure being an end in and of itself (López, 2018). From the foregoing, it can be deduced that the normative customary work–leisure paradigm no longer holds in presenting leisure as a pathway to flourishing (Snape et al., 2017). Thus, the authentic leisure experience is not just free time after obligatory activities. It is filled with relaxing and creative expressions as constitutive aspects of good quality life associated with personal growth, fulfilment, flourishing and self-actualization (Taylor, 2011; Zowisło, 2010).

In most African contexts, leisure as a concept is hardly explored, as opposed to Western scholarship which has extensively fiddled with the term to interrogate how the concept affects Western societies (Asakitikpi, 2018; Naidoo, 2016). However, African people across cultures and geographies evolved their own leisure experiences which are unique to their realities regardless of whether they use the term “leisure” or not (Sharma, 2018). Casimir (2013) argues that leisure-related disciplines should be underpinned by communal values as a basis for establishing the well-being of Africans. One of Africa’s foremost writers, Chinua Achebe, in the classic literary masterpiece *Things Falls Apart*, states that

A man who calls his kinsmen to a feast does not do so to save them from starving. They all have food in their homes. When we gather together in the moonlit village ground it is not because of the moon. Every man can see it in his compound. We come together because it is good for kinsmen to do so. (Achebe, 1958, p. 125)

From this quote, it can be distilled that the ideal value of leisure is to develop a society filled with valuable human relationships, without materialistic tendencies, thereby reclaiming the primary place of leisure as a noble activity of the human spirit, soul and body (Casimir, 2013). This is also consistent with the African philosophy of Ubuntu, a philosophy which stresses inter-connectedness, community, solidarity and mutual respect as cornerstones of the social order. The potential effect of philosophies such as Ubuntu on leisure is the promotion of inclusive leisure opportunities, as well as exercising cultural humility in appreciating leisure expressions from different ethnicities and peoples (Goff et al., 2024; Mkabela, 2015; Nxumalo & Mncube, 2018).

### **The concept of indigenous knowledge systems (IKS)**

Scholarly disciplines are re-imagining sustainable frameworks that maximize locally available indigenous knowledge to benefit current and future generations (Odora-Hoppers, 2021). This interest occurs against the background of prejudiced Western ethnologists and missionaries who viewed African knowledge systems as inferior (Roux, 2009). In Africa where colonialism was accompanied by European nationalism, all knowledge systems that people had used for generations were declared irrelevant (Odora-Hoppers, 2021). However, in rural Africa where colonialism had not yet made a deep impact, leisure activities were based on indigenous knowledge which was woven into people’s lifestyles. For example, some of the activities were laden with life-skills which prepared children for a well-adjusted adult life (Naidoo, 2016; Sharma, 2018). One such activity in SA is called *mahundwane*. It is a leisure activity among the *Venda* tribe played after the harvest season. It involves mimicking real family life and structures (make-believe play) as children learn about and express the norms and values of the *Venda* people (Mdhluli et al., 2021).

Indigenous knowledge is a set of beliefs, intellectual ideas, explanations, logic, practices, strategies, techniques, tools and values accumulated over time in a particular locality (Emeagwali, 2014). This knowledge develops through acculturation and kinship relationships, and is handed down mainly through oral tradition, ethnic practices, rites and festivals (Mawere, 2012). Such knowledge is steeped in cultural-specific paradigms such as communal interdependence, and is woven in folktales, parables, proverbs, riddles and songs (Dei, 2014). The under-utilization of indigenous knowledge in African contexts is lamented in scholarship, particularly when disciplines duplicate knowledge systems from other countries even where there are opportunities for indigenous knowledge to provide context-specific and cogent solutions locally (Nimoh, 2014). Odora-Hoppers (2021) says this has resulted in knowledge-generation processes that are instrumentalist, mechanistic and materialistic, resulting in self-doubt among Africans on the epistemic efficacy of their knowledge systems. The solutions to Africa's challenges and the drive towards epistemic empowerment are dependent on organic knowledge generation as heralded by former SA president Thabo Mbeki in his African Renaissance drive (Naidoo, 2016). Hence indigenous knowledges ensure that alternative forms of knowing play an important role in enriching and diversifying scholarly disciplines (Ndlovu, 2014).

### **Building the case for indigenous knowledge in leisure education in the SA context**

The onset of colonialism conceptually and spatially redefined the leisure space in SA. Most newcomers to cities discovered that they had less free time and space for leisure compared to rural areas. Their only public places were crowded places, narrow streets, courtyards and beer halls (Sharma, 2018). Signboards stating "Nie Blankes/Non-Whites", or "Blankes/Whites" were a common sight on beaches, recreational parks and sports fields (Mapadimeng, 2018). Colonial employers, especially in mining companies, used leisure activities such as soccer as a means of social control, to keep employees occupied so as not to rebel (Sharma, 2018). At the disposal of employees were also indigenous games such as *mancala* (a type of board game) which, as a testament to the simplicity and affordability of indigenous games, required no monetary spending, classy equipment, or standardized facilities (Mapadimeng, 2018; Naidoo, 2016).

SA is diverse, and it is regarded as a rainbow nation for its various cultural, ethnic and racial groups consisting of 12 official languages (Afrikaans, English, Ndebele, Pedi, Sign language, Sotho, Swati, Tswana, Venda, Tsonga, Xhosa and Zulu) (Ralarala, 2019). It is also regarded as a rich repository of indigenous knowledge, which knowledge could contribute to leisure sustainability (Masenya, 2022). Given this diversity, harnessing such knowledge does present challenges such as the lack of written texts and experts across diverse cultures. However, this should serve as a basis for opening up the conversation to creatively develop key strategies and frameworks on how to retrieve, preserve, promote and disseminate such knowledge (Madlela, 2023). Article 4 of the Charter for Leisure states that within the context of leisure, everyone can freely participate in the cultural activities (which are key elements of indigenous knowledge) as active participants or even spectators in song, ceremonies and indigenous games. Everyone can interface with natural resources like mountains, forests and rivers as part of their leisure experiences

within their indigenous knowledge framework (WLO, 2020). In SA, a variety of well-being and health-related disciplines such as psychology, social work and pharmacology are making some headway in incorporating indigenous knowledge systems in discourses and practices for sustainable development (Emeagwali, 2014; Odora-Hoppers, 2021). However, the place of indigenous knowledge in the SA leisure discourse is indeterminate.

SA passed the Protection, Promotion, Development and Management of Indigenous Knowledge Act 6 of 2019 (South Africa, Republic, 2019) which provides for the advancement of indigenous knowledge. The Act recognizes indigenous knowledge to be a national asset and promotes its usage (South Africa, Republic, 2019). In relation to leisure, a nationwide indigenous games study was commissioned in the early 2000s to provide a comprehensive classification framework for indigenous games (Burnett & Hollander, 2004). Added to that, the SA Department of Sport, Arts and Culture annually hosts the Indigenous Games Festivals for each province to showcase indigenous games for its various tribes, ethnicities and races (Sakala & Roux, 2024).

Indigenous forms of leisure are also promoted through tourism enterprises, in which cultural events and activities are showcased (Sibiya et al., 2023). However, such representations receive criticism as they are regarded more as profit-making enterprises than educational endeavours, oftentimes expressing ahistorical and superficial cultural expressions. Local communities who perform to generate income merely do so as cheap labour through such staged authenticity (Ndlovu, 2017). The concept of the entertainer and the entertained is largely a Western construct, whereas in African indigenous knowledge frameworks, in a typical leisure experience involving for example festivals or storytelling, the audience is made to be a part of the story through active participation as everyone sings and responds to the presentations (Asakitikpi, 2018).

The education system that was introduced by colonial regimes still persists in SA schools (Shizha, 2014). The worldwide spread of mass media such as film, radio, television, mobile phones, the Internet and social media dominate current forms of leisure (Modi & Kamphorst, 2018). Shehu (2004) notes that apologists of Western forms of leisure in postcolonial societies such as SA argue that the phrase “indigenous” is loaded with false idealism, superficiality, nostalgia and romanticism. However, cultural expressions of leisure symbolize how local people engender their own well-being through shared values and understandings (Sharma, 2018; Shehu, 2004). This is not to say that indigenous knowledge is pristine and unblemished, but rather leisure education in SA must resonate with its diverse identities by being rooted in history and culture in its evolvment (Dei, 2014). Being culturally sensitive and applying cultural significance to education is one of the most significant ways to achieve equity, inclusion and social justice (Centeio & McCaughtry, 2017). Leisure programmes, by necessity, involve encounters with various cultural diversities, and therefore the leisure education profession should explore how such diversities find expression and recognition in practice (Therault, 2024). To that end, we outline the following as the pertinent implications for future directions in leisure education in the SA context:

*Possible implications and future directions for leisure education in SA*

- The involvement of elders, cultural custodians, and indigenous knowledge holders (community engagement) to contribute their knowledge in activities such as indigenous games and other cultural forms of leisure in academic environments. They can

also provide contextually relevant philosophical underpinnings of what constitutes leisure (Dei, 2014);

- The engendering a sense of cultural pride through activities that were otherwise thought to be inappropriate forms of leisure such as indigenous games, cultural dances, indigenous artistic expressions and crafts. These activities should feature in leisure education-related texts, illustrations and examples to debunk myths and stereotypes about indigenous forms of leisure expression;
- The inclusion of sustainability topics in leisure education such as environmental sensitivity, cultural sensitivity, ecological sensitivity which dovetail with indigenous knowledge systems.
- The steering towards more holistic understandings of leisure, including aspects to do with nature, the cosmos and spirituality in the context of leisure;
- The involvement of experiential and reflective learning in which students participate in cultural festivals and indigenous forms of leisure and other community social events, then come back to write or present their reflections on such activities (Dei, 2014);
- The tapping into history to extract some treasure troves and lessons of how traditionally, various people groups in the past enjoyed leisure. For example, the San people (also known as the Bushmen) of SA are famous for their rock art (paintings) and dances which have endured for centuries and tell profound stories about their lifestyles (Sharma, 2018);
- The re-conceptualization of leisure not as a universalistic entity but link it to context-specific settings. Much of what is known about the definition of leisure is mainly from Latin, French and Greek. Only around 10% of known languages have a word that corresponds closely to “leisure” (Roberts, 2013). New dimensions of conceptualizing leisure may emerge through investigating the etymological roots of what is termed leisure from other local or indigenous dialects;
- Leisure education should be undergirded by indigenous philosophies such as *Ubuntu* in which individuals, in their various stations of life, united in their diversity, may learn to be noble stewards in sharing and distributing leisure facilities, equipment and opportunities with the understanding that the welfare of one is the welfare of the rest even in activities that may not be categorized as indigenous. While the contributions of Aristotle, Plato, Marx and others are noted, it is pertinent to re-centre African philosophies which are not necessarily linked to personalities, but to collective communities;
- The promotion of teaching practices that develop students with self-confidence and a stronger sense of cultural identity through leisure activities (Shizha, 2014);
- In a country with high inequality such as SA (Mapadimeng, 2018), leisure education, should educate individuals to check their privilege in relation to leisure by recognizing their advantages (educational, economic, etc.). Being aware of systematic inequalities, considering marginalized voices, and advocate for change in leisure participation dynamics may be starting point towards optimum inclusivity;
- Pedagogies should give agency to students by placing them at the centre of learning, as co-generators and not just consumers of leisure knowledge. The cultural knowledge that they bring to the classroom on leisure should be harnessed (Makaudze & Mkhathshwa, 2023).

## Conclusion

This commentary presented a case for pragmatically incorporating indigenous knowledge in leisure education. Leisure education provides a systematic approach to influencing services and motivating people to participate in socially acceptable and individually satisfying leisure-time activities. Hence the application of indigenous knowledge systems in leisure education may play a critical role in attaining inclusive and satisfying leisure. This is not to say that indigenous knowledge is so unadulterated that it can, in a wholesale manner, be mindlessly adopted in leisure education. Rather, the reclaiming and adoption of such knowledge must be based on critical evaluation because all knowledge, including indigenous knowledge, evolves and adapts to the times and contextual realities (Kong, 2021). What is not questionable, however, is the need to reclaim indigenous knowledge to enrich discourses and promote contextual relevance in leisure education in the SA context.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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