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Indigenous Knowledge and Local Power: Negotiating Change in West Africa

Though the development, articulation and systematization of indigenous knowledge in Africa are most often seen as issues of culture and local epistemology (the study of the nature and grounds of knowledge), they have at the same time critical power dimensions. The relation between local knowledge bases — and practitioners — on the one hand and central or Westernized ones on the other is manifestly a high-power/low-power situation, a matter most often quite acutely and accurately perceived by local people themselves. Until and unless the “terms of trade” between these two spheres are significantly altered, or at least cast in a framework that promises some renegotiation, it is entirely understandable that the repositories of indigenous science would choose to keep it “off the market.”

Telltale patterns of literacy acquisition

A story from an evaluation of functional literacy in Mali two decades ago illustrates the point and provides a basis for further examining the problem. In the late 1970s an effort was undertaken — with joint Ministry of Education, Ministry of Rural Development and World Bank funding — to inventory and assess results from several years of functional literacy classes in the villages of the western portion of the country. The literacy program had been established through the

parastatal agricultural operation responsible for the development of cash and food crop farming in the region, as a means of gaining local farmer confidence and providing people with ways of scrutinizing commercial transactions. The results were mixed. Two aspects of the “balance sheet” of outcomes drawn up by the team responsible for the participatory evaluation effort clearly illustrated the concerns of villagers with power relations.

The first lay in the figures on that balance sheet themselves. In the initial design of the Bambara-language literacy program, it was assumed that each community would create a training center, enroll and make literate some twenty adults, then create another class and train a second group of similar or larger size. By the end of four years, somewhere between thirty and fifty newly literate participants should have been on the rolls in each community concerned.

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The actual results both fell well short of this objective and turned out, upon closer examination, to be highly significant. Almost nowhere across the entire region did one find a community where more than ten “new literates” had been trained. On the other hand, it was equally rare — excepting a few cases of major implementation failure — to find villages where no one had learned anything. In case after case, the program seemed to have resulted — after several years of effort, an appropriate amount of rhetoric and a generally weak record of material support by government agencies — in the emergence of a nucleus of new literates, generally between four and seven young men. Why this number and so seldom less or more?

Interpreting the record

The answer seemed to lie in the real uses to which literacy in Bambara could be put under circumstances then applying in western Mali. Though the program was publicized with all the

appropriate rhetoric about the importance of learning and the functional value of the new learning, in point of fact there were few opportunities to apply knowledge of written Bambara in the rural environment. What formal schools existed were all conducted in French, few if any publications in written African language could be found, and the medium of writing in Bambara was not used to any practical ends by either the local government or the agricultural operation itself. Moreover, there was an acute lack of credit or investment opportunities that might have made the creation of locally run enterprises a viable alternative.

But to say that there were few outlets for the use of literate and numerate competence did not mean that there were none. Control of tax transactions with the government and oversight of farm marketing functions were two issues of major interest to local actors, because they saw themselves as being so regularly exploited in these areas. Viewed from an individual perspective, the monitoring of tax remittances and agricultural marketing was not a frequent enough activity to justify each adult becoming literate and, perhaps more importantly, “numerate.” However, when these functions were “collectivized” and confided in a handful of (generally young male) villagers, they made for valuable, regular and sometimes remunerated work undertaken in defense of the community as a whole. As a consequence, in village after village, the evaluators found that the training programs had resulted in the creation of a nucleus of four to seven new literates who organized and assumed these functions. The local people seemed to have very accurately assessed the magnitude of opportunities for use of the new knowledge as well as the imperative of better collective self-defense and to have modulated their response to the programs on this basis.

Results from the first year’s participatory assessment were communicated to officials of the agricultural operation to demonstrate the existence of core groups of literate farmers across the region. This was done in the hope of motivating them to offer communities with this sort of nucleus — and the demonstrated capacity to train the number of people that new economic and political opportunity justified — the chance to take over larger portions of agricultural marketing responsibility and to receive, in return, a significant slice of the profit margin on the sale of the crop for rebate to indi-

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vidual farmers or collective reinvestment in locally-directed development projects. After some negotiation, agreement was finally reached on this major change of policy and the evaluation team set out, on the eve of the following agricultural marketing season, to communicate this news to local authorities along with a summary of the results of the initial round of the participatory literacy evaluation. The effort produced the second major lesson about local knowledge and collective self-defense.

Distinguishing “for show” and “for go”

First, though, a word of background. During the period of French colonial rule, throughout rural areas of the western Sahel, local communities became accustomed to dealing quite circumspectly with representatives of the central regime. Each village named, in effect, its own puppet government — that is, a set of fictional local authorities who would meet with the French whenever that was required, gather information to be relayed back, if necessary, to the real village chief and his counselors and generally relieve them of the necessity of dealing directly with colonial agents. This pattern was maintained well into the period of African independence, because the representatives of the new national regimes were often perceived as no less alien or inimical to local interests than their colonial predecessors.

This attitude was clearly if subtly manifested during the first year of evaluation work on more than one occasion. One of the Malian evaluators involved in discussions with local authorities noted that the word they themselves used in Bambara for the cooperatives set up by the national government to handle farm production and marketing was something more than what it seemed to be — a deformation of the French term “coopérative.” He asked people to repeat what they were saying, listened respectfully and made a few discreet inquiries after the discussion was over. What people were actually saying was “ko-fara-tinti,” a Bambara pun on the French term that meant, literally, “skin the back and plunge in a dagger.” It was, in effect, an eloquent and lapidary commentary on how local people then saw the underlying objective of State agricultural policy.

Given this level of suspicion, it was no surprise that the

evaluation team ended up meeting — both in the first year and during the dissemination efforts at the beginning of the second — with puppet authorities in most communities visited, even if these people were indistinguishable, to an unpracticed eye, from the true local officials. But something of great interest transpired early in the second year when the evaluators came back to relay the news of the government’s decision about the transfer of marketing responsibility and related resources into local hands. No sooner had these topics been broached than their interlocutors asked for a pause in discussions. They quietly disappeared from the scene and, after a short interval, were replaced, as if on a revolving stage, by a new set of counterparts — the true village authorities. If there was a chance that real transfer of power and resource was in the offing, then it was time to bring indigenous culture and authority into the balance.

Four decades of experience

The lesson is reinforced by experience in other countries of the region — Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Niger and the Central African Republic — with literacy and agricultural management programs. By far the most success in the rapid acquisition of new skills and mobilization of local knowledge in related efforts of institutional development have been recorded in circumstances of durable transfer of authority and resources into local hands. In fact, programs based on participatory design of the knowledge systems and local language tools required to effectively manage new economic activity and political jurisdiction seem to provide an ideal medium for “inventorying” and articulating related indigenous knowledge — because they create an environment in which it is clear (or at least clearer) that the cultural treasures exhumed and deployed will serve local interests and remain under local control. And, under these circumstances, literacy training itself turns out to be an excellent medium for mobilizing local knowledge, because it provides an opportunity and tool for “renaming” development and for reconfiguring the details of its implementation.

This proved true, for example, in a series of experiments with the local management of rural enterprise in which the authors took part: in central Niger in the late 1960s, again in

Burkina Faso in the 1970s, in northern Cameroon in the 1980s and among the livestock herders of the Central African Republic in the early 1990s. The Cameroonian case involved the creation of an entire accounting system in the Massa language, whereas the Central African Republic experience was based on training Fulani herders already literate in religious Arabic script in the Romanized transcription of their own language. The literate training itself took as little as three or four weeks of intensive instruction developed with — and monitored by — the local population; but the follow-up period of actual assumption of new powers and management responsibilities was critical and more prolonged.

Who controls the knowledge?

Similar conclusions could be drawn from the experience with participatory agricultural experimentation and extension work undertaken in Mali on the heels of the literacy evaluation described above. There the incentive for local participants was the chance to take charge of agricultural experimentation themselves, while both learning the new skills required and assessing the store of local knowledge relevant to the endeavor. No small part of the motivation sprang from

the opportunity to “turn the tables” on traditional agricultural extension work — where resources, methods and paradigms remained under the strict control of government agents and were devoted to producing products and procedures in official experimental stations for top-down dissemination to farmers. Local authorities were very responsive when invited – and enabled – to draw up the experimental designs themselves and name people who would undergo related training. Significantly, though, the undertaking was eventually undermined by the firm opposition of the official agricultural extension services to this kind of contestation and decentralization of their rights and privileges.

Articulating and expressing local knowledge, as these examples illustrate, is therefore much more than an “epistemological” and cultural undertaking. It is hedged about by questions of power and the “terms of trade” between local and central societies that are simply reconfirmed — in another particular sphere — by recent concerns for the copyright and patent protection of indigenous pharmaceutical or botanical lore. Devising strategies that mediate these conflicts and weave creative transfer of authority and resource into reconstruction of local knowledge is the true challenge.

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