

Reflections on the significance of Indigenous knowledge research and storytelling

'*Olinga*', meaning someone has come home, is a local word often said in my village on the island of Lembata in eastern Indonesia. Villagers welcome the newly arrived person by shaking hands or embracing each other, often with tears of joy. The word '*olinga*' implies a sense of longing for the return of someone close to the community. When the person longed for finally comes home, the first word coming out of peoples' lips would be '*olinga*', demonstrating a deep sense of emotional and spiritual connection and kinship with not only the living but also the spirits.

Indigenous knowledge can refer to forms of human communication and interaction, as I was immediately reminded on my return to the community in which I grew up. The term 'Indigenous knowledge' has a variety of definitions, depending on the context in which it is used. It can refer to the unique knowledge of local communities in relation to making a living in a particular context such as agriculture. Indigenous knowledge can also be defined as a body of knowledge produced by a group of people who live in close contact with nature for generations and the way that local lore embodies traditional environmental knowledge.

In this article I aim to express some of the wider components of Indigenous knowledge than simply a term that refers to a community's relation to nature, agriculture and the environment.

The generic term 'indigenous' may not be the preferred term for all traditional communities (in Indonesian: *masyarakat adat*). Some may prefer other terms such as tribes, first people/nations, aboriginals, ethnic groups, or terms such as hunter, nomads, peasants, and hill or mountain people. In the Lamaholot society of Lembata and Adonara in eastern Indonesia, where my research has been conducted, the generic terms often used to distinguish ethnic groups are: '*orang gunung*' or '*ata kiwan*' (mountain people) and '*orang pantai*' or '*ata wata*' (coastal people). Fundamental to Indigenous knowledge in my birth-place is the recognition of the community as a group rather than a set of individuals, and the importance placed on storytelling in the community.

For my homecoming in late December 2023, I was welcomed with the word '*olinga*' as I entered the village and walked through the streets. This in itself was an immediate expression of kinship and spiritual connection with all members of the community, and of the importance of my presence there. During my short visit I noticed an increased interest in Indigenous knowledge of local traditional food and healing practices. This interest, I suspect, is partly inspired by an Indigenous knowledge research project I collaboratively conducted in my village community in Lembata in 2022. During this research local stories were shared in relation to common concerns about the increasing lack of locally-produced food staples, such as rice and corn.

The Indigenous knowledge research project that I conducted involved local research assistants to carry out the field research and the involvement of several Australian researchers from a range of disciplines. Even though I was not physically present during the research due to COVID-19 related travel restrictions, my presence was spiritually felt by the community; they acknowledged my invisible presence in the village during the research, as demonstrated by their words in local language—'*na kepai tite nawa*' (in Indonesian: *dia masih ingat kita*)—literally translated 'he/she still remembers us'. The local verb '*kepai*' (remember) carries a profound spiritual meaning of the relationship between people, the land, and the spirits. Growing up in our agrarian community we were always told by our parents and grandparents to never forget, but rather to *kepai* (remember) the *lewu enay/j* (community land) or *lewotana* (Indonesian: *kampung halaman*). Etimologically, *lewu/o* means village/community, and *enay/j* or *tana* means land. So *lewuenay/j* or *lewotana* literally means 'village or community of land', highlighting the importance of land as the source of livelihood for the community, or land as the epicentre of all agricultural rituals.

My recent visit home was filled with mixed feelings. I was excited to be home and the long yearning to come home was finally realised. There was also a deeply felt sadness that some elderly research participants had passed away. My homecoming was in a sense an opportunity to pay respect to them. During my visit, I was truly proud of the growing awareness of the importance of the conservation of the natural environment such as rivers, many of which are in danger of drying out completely due to a number of factors.

The head of the village even invited me to return soon and facilitate conversations with the villagers about some of the pressing environmental issues to help manage

them and avoid deeper crises in the community such as complete loss of clean water, malnutrition and stunted growth among children and even starvation. I left my home village with a renewed optimism that the local appreciation of their own knowledge and practices will continue to grow and their spiritual relationship with nature will be preserved. I sensed a collective interest in the community to reclaim the seemingly 'lost appetite' for local food staples such as corn, cassava, nuts, and all types of local rice.

The 2022 Lembata research project explored Indigenous knowledge and practices relating to traditional food and healing, applying storytelling (locally called *Tobe Tutu*) as a methodology. This *Tobe Tutu* is similar to ethnographic methodology—that is, qualitative and iterative—to engage with a group, community, population or society to describe everyday life and practices and to interpret cultural meanings, patterns and systems, which emphasise an 'insider's point of view'.

I will not present and analyse all the results of the research here, but rather reflect on why, and how, Indigenous knowledge research, particularly storytelling, is important.

Indigenous knowledge research and decolonisation

Indigenous Māori scholar, Professor Linda Tuhiwai Smith, provides a significant perspective on Indigenous knowledge research methodology in her seminal work, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. Smith argues that traditional research approaches often perpetuate colonial power dynamics and contribute to the marginalisation of Indigenous voices and knowledge. In her work, Smith emphasises the critical need to recognise and decolonise the research process itself. She advocates for research approaches that are rooted in Indigenous paradigms, acknowledging the diverse ways of knowing, being, and doing within Indigenous communities. For Smith, Indigenous knowledge research involves a commitment to community involvement, cultural sensitivity, collaborative and respectful partnerships, and especially the restoration of agency to Indigenous peoples in the research process. Her perspective underscores the transformative potential of research that respects and incorporates Indigenous epistemologies, contributing to the broader goals of decolonisation, empowerment, and the revitalisation of Indigenous knowledge systems.

Moreover Smith emphasises the significance of reflexivity in research, urging researchers to reflect on their own positionality and the impact of their work on Indigenous communities. Smith encourages scholars to be mindful of the ethical implications of their research and stresses the importance of reciprocity, ensuring that the benefits of research are mutual and contribute positively to Indigenous wellbeing.

Indigenous knowledge research has several meanings; one of them is a journey home or ‘coming home’.

‘Coming home’ is about being together and sharing stories about a common home. Indigenous knowledge research enables us to share our stories, memories, and vision. When we collectively engage in this process of storytelling, *Tobe Tutu*, there is a sense of being home, and being re-connected with place and time, and to each other. ‘Coming home’ is a call to remember the cultural traditions of our ancestors and a call to maintain our relationships. ‘Coming home’ is also an opportunity to pay respect to the ancestors and show appreciation of their knowledge and further strengthen our sense of belonging to our shared knowledge and practices. The idea of ‘home’, as an Indigenous researcher, is thus when I feel a sense of ownership of the stories, when I feel close to my cultural roots, and when I feel strongly connected to the place of the living and the spirits. My collaborative Indigenous knowledge research enables me to get back to a place spiritually and physically; it allows me to reconnect with my origins with renewed appreciation and respect. It is an opportunity to come home and celebrate our rich traditions.

Indigenous knowledge research also plays an important role in understanding and addressing various issues related to local traditions and environment. It helps bridge the gap between traditional and contemporary ways of understanding the world; it helps document and transmit traditional knowledge and practices from one generation to another. It helps preserve and revitalise local cultures. This cultural preservation is vital for maintaining cultural diversity and ensuring that traditional knowledges and practices are maintained, and are not in danger of extinction over time. During my recent visit to Lembata, I noticed people talking more about the importance of respecting and preserving some of the local cultural symbols such as traditional songs and dance, woven fabrics, and rituals. In 2022, the local government of Lembata held a peace ritual throughout the island including in the

village where my collaborative Indigenous knowledge research was conducted. The then regent of Lembata, Dr Thomas Ola Langoday, said that the cultural exploration activities in Lembata were a symbol of peace and unity that need to be preserved, as reflected in the crafted name of *Sare Dame* ritual which literally means to reconcile with the past and place, and with one another.

Indigenous knowledge often contains valuable insights into sustainable resource management and environmental stewardship such as water management. For millennia, Indigenous communities around the world have lived in harmony with their natural environments, and their knowledge and practices can offer important lessons on how to manage natural resources, such as rivers and forests. Indigenous knowledge systems also often include a deep understanding of medicinal plants and traditional healing practices. This knowledge can contribute to the development of new pharmaceuticals and healthcare practices, offering alternative and holistic approaches to health. For example, a traditional healer in Lembata, a woman aged in her late 50s, is known in the community to have practised traditional healing for many years. Often she is asked to advise medical doctors and nurses how to treat patients with certain illness.

Indigenous knowledge research acknowledges that Indigenous peoples are often the best stewards of their lands and resources. This means that they can effectively provide valuable insights into local ecosystems, climate patterns, and sustainable practices. Indigenous knowledge often includes insights into how to adapt to environmental changes, including climate change. Integrating this knowledge into climate adaptation strategies can be critical for building resilience in Indigenous communities and beyond. Acknowledging and respecting Indigenous perspectives promotes social justice and supports efforts to address issues such as land rights, cultural appropriation, and unequal access to resources and opportunities. Indigenous knowledge research can promote respectful engagement and ensures that research benefits Indigenous communities, rather than simply exploiting their knowledge.

Tobe Tutu: a methodological contribution to Indigenous knowledge research

My collaborative Indigenous knowledge research in Lembata in 2022 made an original contribution to the ongoing discourse on Indigenous knowledge research,

and methodologies it can use, in its prioritising of *Tobe Tutu* (to sit around and tell/share stories).

In line with Smith's decolonising research methodologies, my collaborative Indigenous knowledge research specifically applied a form of local storytelling, *Tobe Tutu*, which requires respectful dialogue, two-way communication, and careful listening. Our approach to *Tobe Tutu* as a local practice of storytelling foregrounds the desire of local peoples to tell their own stories freely without pressure and for their own purposes, as also suggested by Smith in her book. *Tobe Tutu* is more than just stories being told or shared, but also about what is not shared in public, such as situations where a story would bring shame to the family or if the specific knowledge is restricted by ritual, gender or seniority. *Tobe Tutu* therefore includes both sharing and silence, which are equally important in Indigenous survivance, as explained by scholars June Mary Rubis and Noah Theriault.

When people in my village sit together to share stories, their whole body becomes closer to the land and each other, and they are expected to be respectful of each other and of the stories shared. The questions of who joins, who talks and who listens, and who contributes to sitting and sharing stories—often involving local beverages and food—are determined by kinship relation in the community. The English term of 'storytelling' does not always carry a sacred dimension. But in the local storytelling practice of *Tobe Tutu*, stories shared are sacred and therefore respected. Researchers can tap into this wealth of knowledge by engaging with storytellers. Indigenous storytelling is deeply rooted in the culture and worldview of the community. It respects the unique ways in which knowledge is framed and understood within that culture.

Storytelling research methodologies prioritise community participation. Researchers work collaboratively with Indigenous communities, often involving elders and traditional knowledge holders. This fosters trust, ensures that research questions are culturally sensitive, and allows for the co-creation of knowledge. Indigenous stories often provide a holistic understanding of phenomena. They connect diverse elements of knowledge, such as ecological relationships, spirituality, and social practices, which may be overlooked in conventional research methods. This holistic perspective is crucial for addressing complex issues such as environmental conservation and sustainable development.

Storytelling can be a therapeutic process, allowing Indigenous people to reclaim and heal from historical trauma, discrimination, and cultural suppression. Researchers

need to be aware of the potential emotional and spiritual aspects of storytelling and prioritise the wellbeing of the storytellers and the community. Indigenous stories are a form of intellectual property, and researchers must seek permission and guidance from communities before using them in research. Proper protocols, consent, and ethical considerations are essential to ensure respectful engagement. Indigenous storytelling can also be a tool for decolonisation in research.

Indeed, Indigenous knowledge research has gone through a complex journey, marked by both collaboration and conflict. With the arrival of western colonial powers, such as in Indonesia in the 16th century, Indigenous knowledge often faced suppression, marginalisation, and appropriation. In recent times, there is an increasing recognition of the importance of Indigenous knowledge in fields such as environmental science, medicine, and sustainable development. Ongoing efforts have been initiated to establish partnerships between Indigenous communities and researchers, such as through the University of Melbourne's Indigenous Knowledge Institute, Melbourne-Indonesia Research Partnership Program, KONEKSI, and PRIME, emphasising respect for traditional knowledge systems built up through human activities for survival and sustainable development.

My *Tobe Tutu* research in Lembata has two profound benefits. First, it fosters empathy and compassion, promoting mutual respect and understanding. Second, it preserves cultural heritage, through which local traditions and wisdom are passed down from one generation to the next. With the increasing recognition of these benefits, I think, there is a growing likelihood for this *Tobe Tutu* research to receive support, leading to innovations in ways to promote cultural literacy and sensitivity through ongoing education, and to increase a sense of respect and appreciation of Indigenous knowledge and spirituality. By investing in this research, we may open the door to a wealth of potential applications that can improve our natural and social environments worldwide.

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Image: Women in a village in Lembata, 2022. Credit: Used with permission from Tarsisius Uru Apelabi SE, MM.