The Sixth Sense: Intuition, Embodiment, and Indigenous Knowledge Systems

Charnell Ontong King

Published online: Nov 2024

The Sixth Sense: Intuition, Embodiment, and Indigenous Knowledge Systems
Charnell Ontong King

The sensory experience has been a part of human rituals and ceremonies throughout history. Together, we experience the cultures we grow up in and around, as they shape who we are and who we become. We embody the words, sights, sounds, scents, the textures of movement and feelings of our elders through our shared experiences. This shared cultural perception is linked through generations of experience.
Hidden behind these more tangible sensory experiences, however, is the fabled sixth sense of intuition, a sense which is no less real, despite not fitting into the Eurocentric concept of sensory perception. We will explore Cape traditions and culture through a postcolonial lens, and examine the role of the senses through an experience of, and an appreciation for the heritage of place.

To navigate this exploration, we will engage with Hayakawa's ladder of abstraction (1964) by experimenting with a shared understanding of a bird: the ostrich. The ostrich has deep links with the traditional cultural practices of the Cape, through hundreds of years of cultural development to modern iterations as we see and experience them today. Through this we see how a shared meeting point on the ladder can be used as a catalyst to explore different cultures, not just of the Cape and South Africa, but globally. The exploration of intuition, embodiment, and Indigenous Knowledge Systems (DST, 2004) has the potential for global application which surpasses the bricks and mortar of the traditional classroom. We can find ways of navigating cultural differences, through identifying our similarities and shared experience as a mutual starting point, to not only demonstrate how the cultures of South Africa can be approached and explored in our global settings, but also in the application and exploration of finding and honouring the indigenous cultures and learning systems closest to you.

Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) is a theory that recognises traditional and local knowledge as formal pedagogies. They are place-based, often handed down through oral traditions, and frequently emphasise the interconnectedness of people, animals and places. (Hoppers, 2002). Although the word *indigenous* can be misused and carries certain connotations due to the Eurocentric adaptation of the word to imply *'the other'*, in the most practical sense, IKS is simply knowledge and knowledge systems unique to a particular culture (Hoppers, 2002). It is generally linked to a knowledge of place as well as culture, especially in cultures where ties to place are particularly important (Chiome, 2024).

Philosophy of Place is a collection of approaches which makes use of semiotics (the science of signs and symbols) to examine how people and cultures are affected by their surroundings, and how they, in turn, have an effect on their surroundings. By examining these surroundings, one can begin to grasp how certain cultures developed and continue to identify, based on the elements of their environment to which they have been exposed for generations (Hershock & Ames, 2019). When used incorrectly, philosophies of place can lean into dangerous tropes, such as indigenous cultures being more in touch with nature
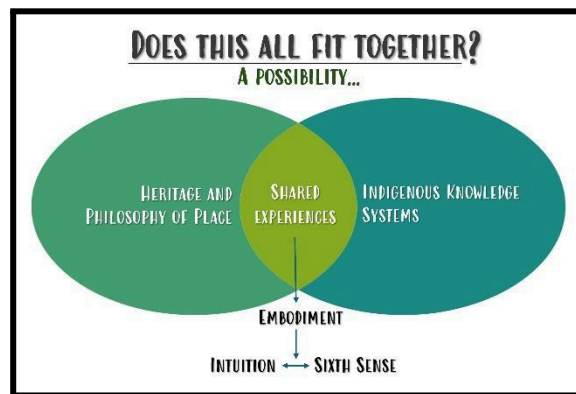
Linking the Key Concepts

(Vamanu, 2018). Such tropes are harmful even when meant with good intent (Czopp, Kay & Cheryan, 2015).

Through the use of IKS and philosophy of place, we can identify areas of intersection between cultures, where shared experience takes place.

If we want to make this intersectional approach relatable in any situation, we can make use of the ladder of abstraction, a semiotic tool in theory building that imagines different levels of focus as rungs on a ladder. The lowest level is the personal, and the highest the universal, with various levels in between (Hayakawa, 1964). It can be useful when defining overlaps in shared experiences. We will have more relatability and shared experiences when meeting lower down on the ladder. The very bottom of the ladder is ourselves, the next rung is our closest family and friends, then our nearby communities, cities, nations until, eventually, all of humanity.
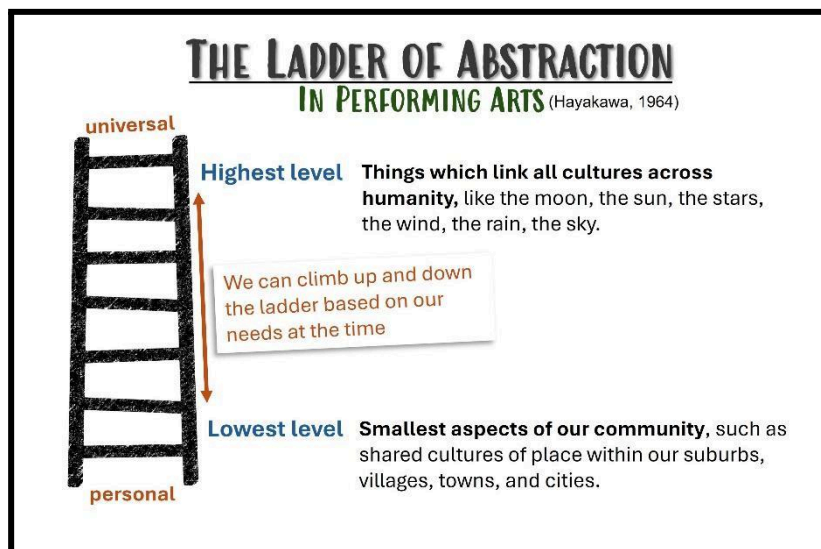
Hayakawa's Ladder of Abstraction

If we needed to consider themes which a large group of people from various places could all relate to, we would have to go relatively far up the ladder of abstraction. As the lower rungs are more personal, a suggestion would be to go as high as you need to, but as low as you

possibly can. For example, an easily unifying theme would be rain. For places that have it in abundance, it is a relatable part of daily life. For places where it is a scarcity, it is something to be cherished and revered. It is therefore a good starting point to launch into some exploration of shared culture.

On some level, every person must have shared experiences with another, no matter how remote their cultures and how far removed their circumstances (Hayakawa, 1964). The more we work with these systems and the longer we implement them in our classrooms and lives, the more we will develop our intuition surrounding shared experience and embodiment through the senses (Tantia, 2014). Until this intuition is developed, the ladder of abstraction model can serve as a guideline for implementation and becomes a placeholder for the instinctive embodiment which will come with time.

Introducing the Ostrich [(Video)](#)

An Indigenous dance, specific to a particular country or region may feature at the bottom of the ladder of abstraction, depending on the context in which it is presented. We could find a more relatable way to introduce the dance and cultural context which mitigates the othering of the indigenous dance and people, and instead starts through a shared experience. If we placed an ostrich on the ladder, we could place it somewhere in the middle. There are many people who know what an ostrich is, but there would be very few with an intimate cultural connection to this bird. To familiarise people with the ostrich, we explored through pictures, videos, movement, and imagination as we embodied the ostrich, embracing its perceived humanity in a playful setting.

In Khoe/San tradition, the ostrich was seen as a proud, strutting bird, admired for the way it walks like a person. This impression gained new meaning with urbanisation when the black and white colour of the bird was compared to men in suits, then the epitome of class and high culture (Low, 2011). The ostrich is also considered the king of the animals, and is often linked with fire and rebirth, which may have to do with the large egg's resemblance to the sun (Low, 2011). The indigenous dance which would later become known as the *Rieldans* is characterised by elaborate footwork and is meant to imitate animal, especially avian, courtship displays (Britz, 2019). Its original names in Khoe/San culture have been lost over the years, but one of the names is thought to be *Ikhapara*, a Nama word which relates to a type of hat (Nel & Meyer, 2011). It is one of the oldest traditional dance styles in Southern

A Nuwe Graskoue Trapper (dance group)
Image by ScanDanceVR- Own Work, CC BY-SA 4.0
https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=53797618

Africa, performed at times of hunt and harvest, where dancers would kick up clouds of dust with their feet around a fire (Britz, 2019). It is through these cultural dance practices that the ostrich itself was embodied.

Under apartheid laws such as the Population Registration Act, every person in South Africa was classified under three broad racial categories. These classifications were often arbitrary and based on superficial appearance (de Bruyn, 2008). Due to their generally lighter skin tone, the Khoe/San were grouped into the classification of 'coloured' (Breytenbach, 2016), rather than 'black', like the Bantu-speaking peoples, and were thus obliged to live in the same area as the mixed indigenous, settler, and former enslaved people's descendants who were largely farmers and farm workers in the Cape, under the Group Areas Act (SAHO, 2011). The traditional Khoe/San dances were then passed down through this shared culture, and known as the *Rieldans* (Breytenbach, 2016), possibly named after the Scottish *Reel* (van Wyk, 2012). As the culture evolved, the *Riel* evolved as well, with the style of clothes of the day taking on an important role, such as the use of the hat as a courtship tool, jackets to imitate the way an ostrich uses its feathers, and the brightly coloured shoes (Britz, 2019). This dance style has received far less study and academic attention than other traditional Cape dances and celebrations, such as the Cape carnival (Breytenbach, 2016).
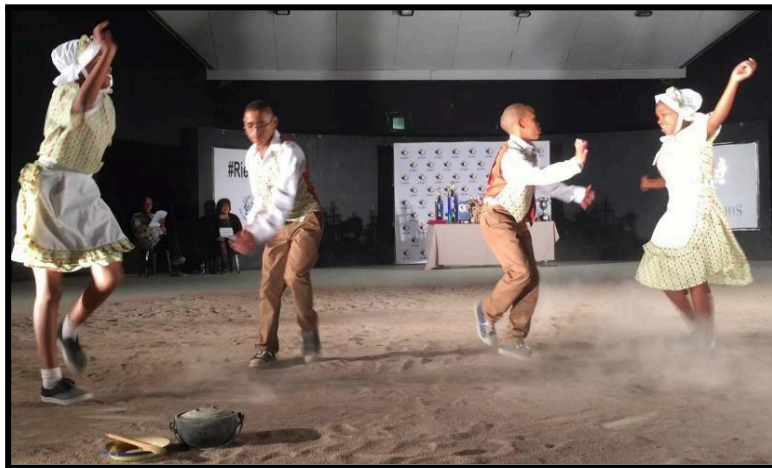
The Riel Dance (Die Rieldans) 2015 (Video)
Video by Bernard303- Own Work, CC BY-SA 4.0
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Riel_dance.webm

The songs that are sung are based on everyday life. Themes around love, loss, news, as well as some well-known traditional songs that have continued and are shared between informal gatherings, *Rieldans*, and carnival celebrations (Breytenbach, 2016). It was a way to share news with people, and in turn people would add commentary to it, build on it, perhaps share their own news (Britz, 2019). The accompaniment for the *Rieldans* has evolved since its early iterations as an indigenous dance. Modern versions of the dance are usually accompanied by string instruments such as the banjo, *trekklavier* (accordion), as well as the guitar or *ramkie.* The origins of the *ramkie* have been debated, with some people believing it was just a crude copy of the western guitar. Later research, however, has linked its possible origins to that of early Arabic string instruments (Britz, 2019). While chord progressions seem to be Western based, the tuning of the instrument itself is non-western, related to the overtone series of early instruments used by Khoe/San (Breytenbach, 2016).

The Khoe/San people are a unique part of the history of Southern Africa yet are still faced with many challenges in their efforts to preserve a set of cultures and languages which have been on the fringes of society, and in many ways still are (Chebanne, 2012). There are initiatives in place to restore the lost languages and cultural practices which were prohibited during Apartheid (Ngulube, 2012) but more awareness is still needed to emphasise that this is still a living, breathing people and culture.
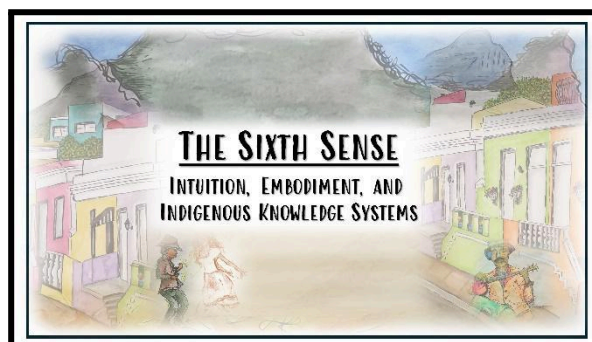
Presentation Slides (Link)

Our senses can shape the way we define culture: What we see when we look at people and their attire, the sound of the language, dialects, idiolects and music, the smells and tastes of the cuisine, the feel of the fabrics and the movements, gestures, greetings and dances. Beyond this, you will find the foundations of a culture in the community interactions, the shared understandings of our place and responsibilities in society, and the connections we hold to past, present, and future. The Cape is a unique place in terms of its history and the cultural variety of its people. The history of the Cape, like all of Africa and indeed most of the world, is forever shaped by the period of European colonial expansion that succeeded the age of exploration (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 1989), and the acknowledgement of the human impact of European colonialism and Western imperialism is essential to understanding this history (SAHO, 2020). Because of the hardships the people had to endure, it is understandable that the culture has been defined, in many ways, by struggle, but this is not *all* we see. The Cape today boasts one of the most vibrant and ethnically diverse cultures in the world and is a culture of place (Wilkinson, 2000) which transcends Western delineations of cultural affiliation such as race, language, gender or religion (Peck, 2012). The people of the Cape are reclaiming their narrative and shifting the focus from a past which shaped them to a future which they have the power to create. The power for global change lies with organisations such as this one, which are not afraid of evolving and bringing the newest approaches to responsively involve all cultures and celebrate our strength in diversity and our shared humanity.

References

Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G. & Tiffin, H. (1989) *The Empire Writes Back.* New York: Taylor & Francis.

Breytenbach, A. G. (2016) *Dance to Advance: The Rieldans, Identity and Empowerment in Williston (Northern Cape)*, Stellenbosch: University of Stellenbosch.

Britz, E. (2019) *Songs in the dust: Riel Music in the Northern and Western Cape, South Africa*, Cape Town: University of Cape Town.

Chebanne, A. (2012). 'Where are the "Skeletons" of Dead Khoisan Languages?', *Botswana Notes and Records,* 44(2012), 81-92. Available at: http://www.jstor.org/stable/43855562

Chiome, C.(2024). 'Defusing the Tensions Between Local Diversity and Globalisation: Re-Integrating IKS into Education Through Pedagogy of the Place' in E.S. Gudhlanga., C. Chirimuuta & G. Makaudze (Eds.). *Re-thinking Indigenous Knowledge Systems in the Contemporary Global Knowledge Discourse: A Multi-Disciplinary Approach.* Harare: Zimbabwe Open University.

Czopp, A.M., Kay, A.C. & Cheryan, S. (2015) 'Positive Stereotypes are Pervasive and Powerful', *Perspectives on Psychological Science,* 10(4), 451-463.

De Bruyn, P. (2008) *Frommer's South Africa.* Hoboken: Wiley.

Department of Science and Technology (2004) *Indigenous Knowledge Systems*. Pretoria: DST.

Galla, A. & Paula, D. (2016) 'Museumization', in J. Jafari & H. Xiao (Eds.) *Encyclopaedia of Tourism.* New York: Springer.

Hayakawa, S. I. (1964) *Language in thought and action.* New York: Harcourt.

Hershock, P.D. & Ames, R.T. (eds) (2019) *Philosophies of Place: An Intercultural Conversation*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Hoppers, C.A.O. (ed.) (2002) *Indigenous Knowledge and the Integration of Knowledge Systems: Towards a Philosophy of Articulation*. Claremont: New Africa Books.

Lloyd, A. B. (1977) 'Necho and the Red Sea: Some Considerations', *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, 63(1), 142–155.

Low, C. (2009) 'Birds in the life of KhoeSan; with particular reference to healing and ostriches', *Alternation,* 16(2), 64-90.

Low, C. (2011) 'Birds and KhoeSān: Linking spirits and healing with day-to-day life', *Africa,* 81(2), 295-313.

Nel, E.P. & Meyer, N. (2011). 'Kô Laat Ons Riel', *Litnet*. Available at: https://www.litnet.co.za/ko-laat-ons-riel/ (Accessed on 18 September 2024)

Ngulube, P. (2012) 'Revitalising and Preserving Endangered Indigenous Languages in South Africa Through Writing and Publishing', *South African Journal of Libraries and Information Science,* 78(1), 11-24. DOI: 10520/ECJ129282

Peck, A. (2012) *Reimagining Diversity in Post-Apartheid Observatory, Cape Town: a Discourse Analysis.* PhD Thesis. University of the Western Cape.

SAHO (2020) *The Impact of Colonialism.* Available at www.sahistory.orz.za/article/impact-colonialism (Accessed on 17 September 2024)

SAHO (2011) *Apartheid Legislation 1850's-1970's*. Available Online: https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/apartheid-legislation-1850s-1970s [Accessed 1 April 2024]

Tantia, J.F. (2014) 'Is intuition embodied? A phenomenological study of clinical intuition in somatic psychotherapy practice', *Body, Movement and Dance in Psychotherapy*, 9(4), 211-223.

Vamanu, I. (2018) 'Imagining Places: The Roles of the Place Trope in the Discursive Constructions of Indigenous Knowledge', *Poroi,* 14(1), 1-29.

Van Wyk, M.M. (2012) '(Re)claiming the Riel as Khoisan Indigenous Cultural Knowledge', *Studies of Tribes and Tribals,* 10(1), 47-56. DOI: 10.1080/0972639X.2012.11886642

Verbuyst, R. (2024) 'Sensing Indigeneity: A Sensory Ethnography of the Presence of the Past Among Newly Identifying Indigenous People in South Africa', *Critique of Anthropology, 0(0).* DOI: 101177/0308275X2412684

Wilkinson, P. (2000) 'City Profile: Cape Town'. *Cities,* 17(3), 195-205.

Charnell Ontong King attended The South African College of Music, which ignited a passion for accessible performing arts training and composition. She first experienced the Schulwerk playing in an Orff ensemble as a child, which prompted further training and master courses through Vandercook College of Music, The San Francisco Orff Course, George Mason University, Southern Methodist University, as well as summer schools and extended studies through Finland, UK, New Zealand, Canada, and the Orff Institute Salzburg. She has presented for South Africa, Finland, and the IOSFS, and facilitated professional development for community organisations and school leaders, to create a collaborative arts-based teaching environment.