

Aang Serian:

a venture into intercultural education

Aang Serian, which means 'House of Peace' in the Maasai language, is an independent non-profit organisation founded in 1999 by young people in Arusha, Tanzania. Aang Serian runs several programmes, three of which deal with intercultural education. The central principles of these programmes are: student-centred learning; developing critical thinking; learning from community elders; and combining theory and practice.



The prevailing approach to education in Tanzania is one that describes indigenous knowledge and traditional skills as undesirable remnants of the past that can be 'educated out' of people. Thus, formal education is undermining cultural diversity. While accepting that the time has come to abandon harmful customs such as female genital mutilation, Aang Serian fights for other aspects of traditional African culture to be taught in schools alongside conventional curriculum subjects.

A new kind of secondary school

The Noonkodin Secondary School in the Maasai village of Eluwai is a co-educational rural secondary school built and run by Aang Serian. In 2006 the school started a pilot programme in which the conventional secondary school curriculum is complemented by intercultural education. Whereas training youth for desk jobs in town is the primary goal of the conventional curriculum, Aang Serian stimulates students to find new ways to make village life more sustainable. In its first year, Noonkodin had 36 students; two years later it has 180 pupils aged between 14 and 26, many of whom are primary school leavers wanting to further their studies.

The school started with three themes to complement the conventional curriculum subjects: Indigenous Societies, Environment, and Integrated Health Care. The aim is to empower young people to document and research indigenous knowledge of their own society, especially on the above themes, by interviewing elders of their home communities. Especially the modules on society and

environment have been successful. Among others, students have created a short documentary film about the impact of climate change on the Maasai people and their environment, incorporating indigenous knowledge about the sun,

Criticism comes from church leaders who insist that 'tradition' and 'custom' are a waste of time

moon, stars and weather. Aang Serian is now seeking funds to repeat the project with young people from the Hadzabe community, Tanzania's last remaining hunter-gatherers.

The module on Integrated Health Care has not yet been taught, as was planned, because both staff and pupils felt that the national examination results would be adversely affected by taking too much time away from national curriculum subjects. However, some pupils had the opportunity to participate in a vacation research project on medicinal plants, planned and implemented by an American volunteer in July 2007. A similar project is planned for the summer of 2008, under the guidance of students from University College Utrecht (Netherlands) doing an internship at Noonkodin. A second group of students conducted a similar research project on the topic of indigenous approaches to conflict resolution and governance.

Pre-primary education

In addition to its secondary education, Aang Serian assisted the Olomayani Women's Group in Eluwai village to start a pre-primary education project incorporating indigenous knowledge. This initiative has

now evolved into a full-scale pre-primary school for 40 children aged between 4 and 7, whose timetable includes cultural, environmental and moral/spiritual education. The head teacher, Tipilit Leindoi, is pioneering a new method for

teaching mother-tongue literacy in the Maasai language before exposing the children to written Swahili. There are plans to extend the same approach to the Hadzabe, with the assistance of Oreteti Cultural Discovery and the Hadza Survival Indigenous Network.

Media for mainstreaming

In another part of the intercultural education programme, 18 unemployed youths from three villages documented their research on video. Aang Serian staff are now re-editing the videos produced by the young people in order to create a more polished product that can be shared with international audiences. The UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs is currently considering a proposal to create similar documentary films on the subject of traditional systems of health care. This UN-proposal also includes the creation of medicinal tree nurseries in secondary schools.

There are plans to develop the intercultural education course into a four-year programme, with the fourth year being focused on applications of indigenous knowledge - e.g. marketing of handicrafts and music, development of traditional

health products and services, and especially cultural tourism - and accredited either within or outside the country as a certificate or diploma course. This course could be taken alongside the Certificate of Secondary Education Examinations, as at Noonkodin, or could stand alone, e.g. at vocational training colleges, to provide a qualification that would equip students for a career in cultural tourism.

Another opportunity for gradually mainstreaming intercultural education is taking place in collaboration with Gibb's Farm (a tourist lodge in Karatu). All staff receive training in an effort to create 'a sense of place' and 'a sense of history'. For this purpose, Gibb's Farm has recently employed a Maasai traditional healer.

Problems and successes

One of the biggest problems at Noonkodin School is that it is difficult to devote enough time to the intercultural programme, due to government



Pupils in the Noonkodin Secondary School.

timetabling requirements and the centrally administered curriculum. In addition, some members of staff, particularly the older ones who grew up during the colonial era, have remained unconvinced of the significance and relevance of indigenous knowledge to modern life. In the community, church leaders are insisting that *'tradition' and 'custom' are a waste of time and that Aang Serian would have been better off teaching the students the Word of God or at least providing them with skills that are useful in the job market.*

The greatest successes are the students themselves: the bright 18-year-old Maasai warrior whose dream is to become a doctor so that he can learn the best way to combine traditional and biomedical systems of health care; and the 16-year-old

Chagga girl who is now helping out as an assistant tour guide after rediscovering the traditions of her grandfather's generation. Yet there are more quantifiable successes too: the traditional knowledge captured on digital videotape just in time before the elders pass away, the documentaries that share it with a wider audience, and the emerging courses that could provide a framework for Indigenous Peoples around the world to document and record their heritage.

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Interacting worldviews in intercultural education

Spiritual

Young people are being helped to rediscover their own culture, including its spiritual aspects.

Social

Young people are empowered by interviewing elders in their home communities.

Material

Education and vocational training are provided for rural people and primary school leavers.