

# Intercultural education in a Tanzanian secondary school

Gemma Burford and Lesikar Ole Ngila

The Tanzanian NGO *Aang Serian* is developing a pilot intercultural education programme for a rural secondary school in Monduli District. Its aim is to empower young people to document and research the indigenous knowledge of their own societies. The programme intends to sustain biological and cultural diversity, on the one hand, and to bridge the 'generation gap' that often arises from formal education, on the other. The model described in this article could also be applied in adult education, or at the upper-primary school level, and has the potential for transfer to other indigenous communities, both in East Africa and elsewhere.



Form 1 student Judith Malaki shows off her photograph of local medicinal trees.

Elizabeth Barbush

In traditional Maasai society, education was almost exclusively the responsibility of parents and older siblings. In formal education, this responsibility has been taken out of their hands and given to professional teachers from other ethnic groups, often enhancing the 'generation gap' as well as the out-migration of young Maasai to urban areas. These negative consequences was what led the Aang Serian leaders to seek a positive intervention that would develop the self-esteem, cultural identity and practical skills of youth at the village level. This they felt could offer a feasible alternative to urban migration, a journey that often ends in unemployment or in low-status, poorly paid jobs as domestic servants or watchmen.

The Maasai in Tanzania are at a crossroads, with challenges such as drought, livestock diseases and land alienation threatening to destroy their traditional way of life. Education that combines the best of the indigenous with the best of the modern may be the only way to ensure the long-term sustainability and adaptation of their pastoralist culture.

## Noonkondin Secondary School

Today the Noonkondin Secondary School is located in the predominantly Maasai village of Eluwai in the Monduli District. Most of the 36 students are aged between 15 and 17, although there is a significant number of mature students

returning to full-time education. Before this school was opened, there were no opportunities for post-primary education in the entire ward, consisting of four villages with a total population of over 10,000. Primary school leavers were forced to move to Monduli town if they wanted to further their studies.

This increased the migration problem, as very few of the youth were keen to return to the villages once they had left. It was felt that a village secondary school emphasising the indigenous knowledge approach, and offering a structured co-curricular programme in parallel to the national curriculum, would be a more attractive option for students than a community college in the town.

## Intercultural education

Aang Serian, or 'House of Peace' in Maasai language, is an independent non-profit organisation founded in March 1999 by us - a group of diverse young people in Arusha, North Tanzania, working with schools, colleges and community groups. We dare to believe that: *'by refusing to be labelled underdeveloped we can build our self-esteem'; by 'rediscovering our traditions we can build our identity; by 'using skills and knowledge of our ancestors we can build our economy'; and by 'promoting dialogues between ethnic groups, we can build a peaceful society.'*

The four central principles of the

inter-cultural education programme are: student-centred learning; developing critical thinking; learning from community elders; and combining theory and practice. Its aim is to empower young people to document and research the indigenous knowledge of their own societies by interviewing elders in their home communities, with a particular focus on traditional environmental and health-related knowledge. The programme has a dual function of sustaining biological and cultural diversity, on the one hand, and helping to bridge the generation gap that often arises from formal education, on the other.

## Urban pilot phase

During the pilot phase, we developed the initial Aang Serian Foundation Certificate programme in Indigenous Knowledge for use in an urban 'tutorial college' setting by young people aged 16-25. It was offered free of charge to young people who were already enrolled in an educational programme of English and/or computer literacy, as an optional extra that would help them to explore their identity and to find new opportunities for self-employment as artisans or in the cultural tourism sector.

Each participant was required to complete a workbook of questions, by interviewing parents or other elders of their particular ethnic group, and to discuss the responses in multi-cultural





Maasai herd boy with cattle. Students interview their parents or other community elders and discuss the responses in multi-cultural seminars at school.

seminars conducted weekly in the classroom. While the programme was well received by the youth who participated in it, and some were successful in boosting their income by leading cultural tours for expatriates, there was some concern that locating it in an urban area would exacerbate rather than reduce the problem of rural-urban migration.

In 2002 a plot of land was donated by community leaders in the Maasai village of Eluwai for a 'community college'. This school would offer the indigenous knowledge programme alongside basic literacy and numeracy classes, short vocational courses, such as livestock management, sustainable agriculture and bee-keeping, as well as English and Swahili language tuition. Through discussions with local leaders at the village, ward and district levels, the concept was further developed to encompass the full national secondary curriculum.

### Foundation module

To adapt the initial indigenous knowledge foundation module of the pilot phase to a rural setting, it was felt that two components needed further emphasis: environment and health. These sections were removed from the basic course and developed into two separate, full-year modules. The four remaining sections - history; language and oral literature; daily life in tradi-

tional societies; and rituals and ceremonies - were extensively revised. This created a detailed co-curricular programme to be taught over a period of 26 weeks.

Practical activities such as building a traditional house, making tools and utensils, cooking, story-telling and singing complete the 38 weeks of a normal academic year. In 2006, we will run this revised foundation module for first year students for the first time.

### Environment and Society

The 12-month environment and society module has three major elements: traditional environmental knowledge and research methods, which are part of the ethnobiology course, and ecology and conservation. The environment and society module was launched in January 2005, and is intended to be taken by second year students after successful completion of the foundation module. We have introduced a 'pre-form 1' year to bridge the gap between Swahili-medium primary and English-medium secondary education. This means that the environment and society course is taken by students in form 1, alongside the first year of the national secondary curriculum.

The course begins with a structured 12-week programme of community research, similar in style to the foundation module, focusing on traditional environmental knowledge. Wherever

possible, students are encouraged to compare knowledge across three generations - their grandparents, their parents, and their peers - and to track environmental changes occurring in the lifetime of each generation. This is followed by an eight-week section on research methods, adapted from the MSc course in Ethnobiology offered at the University of Kent at Canterbury, United Kingdom (Box 1).

### Cultural domain analysis

Cultural domain analysis is the study of how systems are classified by the local population. Free-listing and ranking are commonly used methodologies. Free-listing, or asking community members to list items in a named category, such as 'edible animals' or 'medicinal plants', is one of the tools used which can be used to identify the most prominent organisms encountered. Ranking is a tool for comparing plants or animals along different dimensions, depending on the research question: which plant provides the best treatment for malaria? which fruit is the tastiest?

On successful completion of the ethnobiology sections, students move on to the third section of the environment & society course, ecology and conservation. This part of the course aims to relate global environmental problems such as deforestation, overgrazing, soil erosion and pollution to the students' life experiences, through classroom discussions, field trips and practical activities.

### Integrated health care

The integrated healthcare programme will be launched in 2006 for third year (form 2) students. It builds on the two previous modules by creating a framework for students to conduct their own research in the field of rural health care. It encourages students to compare the advantages and disadvantages of both traditional and biomedical

#### Box 1 Topics included in the course on ethnobiology research methods, adapted from MSC course Ethnobiology University of Kent (UK)

- Week 1: Introduction to the aims of ethnobiology research
- Week 2: Sampling techniques
- Week 3: Semi-structured interviews
- Week 4: Practical research methods: community maps, seasonal calendars, historical timelines and forest trails
- Week 5: Cultural domain analysis (1): free-listing
- Week 6: Cultural domain analysis (2): ranking
- Week 7: Ethnobotanical specimen collection
- Week 8: Research ethics and project planning

(modern) health care, and introduces the concept of evidence-based integration in an attempt to combine the advantages of both systems.

A discussion of general concepts of health, illness and healing is followed by a free-listing exercise to identify common and serious illnesses in local communities. There are sessions on traditional health practitioners and ritual contexts of healing, a practical class on medicinal plant identification, and a discussion of particular categories of health problems - such as digestive disorders, respiratory problems and skin conditions. The aim is to determine the utilisation of traditional and biomedical health care by different generations, as well as to document traditional treatment approaches in detail.

The formal programme concludes with a discussion of medicinal plant conservation and the dynamic nature of ethnobotanical knowledge. Students will also have the opportunity to participate in community-based research projects as with the environment & society module.

### Home-school connection

The students enjoy participating in the programme, and a few have taken the initiative to ask for extra classes on the subject of traditional medicine. Their major concern is accreditation: the modules are not a recognised part of the national secondary curriculum and are classed as co-curricular activities. This problem still has to be resolved.

The concept of intercultural education has also been well received at the village and district levels of government, and in particular, by the parents of students taking part in the programme. Some parents are now represented on the school's Board of Governors. Community elders have commented that the modular indigenous knowledge programme provides a way for them to remain involved in their children's education. Maintaining a strong connection between home and school enables them to feel that they still have an active role to play, and that their children are not entirely 'lost' to them.

### Ethnic differences discussed

One of the advantages of the Aang Serian model is that it is not culture-specific. The focus is on empowering students to document and research their own culture, rather than teaching them about Maasai culture or that of any other ethnic group. In this way the sensitive topic of inter-ethnic differences can be safely discussed in an atmosphere of mutual respect. Thus,

the preservation of cultural and linguistic diversity, and perhaps ultimately biological diversity, can be separated from the troublesome politics of tribalism and ethnic superiority.

This model has the potential to be adapted for use almost anywhere in Africa, provided that indigenous knowledge has not yet disappeared altogether, and that young people still maintain some connection to the land and to older generations.

### Challenges

We are planning to develop similar co-curricular activities about integrated livestock management in 2007. This programme, aimed particularly at the Maasai and other East African pastoralist groups, intends to document and preserve ethnoveterinary knowledge relating to the appropriate feeding and treatment of livestock, specifically cattle, sheep, goats and chickens. We also aim to offer more vocational courses in subjects such as sustainable agriculture, appropriate technology and rural economics, to complement the indigenous knowledge programme.

The greatest challenge encountered so far in implementing the programme, predictably enough, is a lack of funds. No substantial grant funding has yet been secured, except for the construction of buildings, and the school remains largely reliant on the generosity of individuals - particularly those in the UK, USA and Australia as well as contributions from the students themselves.

### Intercultural education network

In the Regional Report for Africa prepared for the Third Meeting of the Ad Hoc Inter-Sessional Working Group on Article 8(j) of the Convention on Biological Diversity, the Aang Serian approach was cited as a potential model for 'appropriate education and training for indigenous and local communities that can enable sustainable development while being compatible with their traditions' (UNEP, 2003).

This recognition is based on increasing international awareness of the fact that the loss of languages, the disappearance of traditional cultures, and the extinction of species are all interrelated (Maffi, 2001). Intergovernmental organisations, such as the World Bank,



Form 1 student George Oltira, a Maasai warrior, taking photographs as part of an Environment and Society Project.

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the Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity, UNESCO and the FAO (Food and Agriculture Organisation), are increasingly realising the urgent need to develop multidisciplinary approaches to the preservation of linguistic, cultural and biological diversity.

Yet there is a remarkable lack of creative approaches to education aiming to address these problems at their roots. The Aang Serian model has great potential to change the future of rural secondary education, both in our small village in Tanzania and elsewhere in Africa. We are very keen to hear from other individuals and organisations active in educational reform and curriculum development in Africa and elsewhere, and to launch an **International Network on Intercultural Education** for exchange of experiences, curricula and reading materials. Our curricula are freely available to non-profit organisations in Africa, provided that adequate acknowledgement is given.

### References

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Aang Serian,  
P.O. Box 13732,  
Arusha, Tanzania  
Tel. +255 745 744992  
E-mail: enolengila@yahoo.co.uk  
[www.aangserian.org.uk](http://www.aangserian.org.uk)

