

## **APPRECIATING INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGES: OPENING SPACES FOR LEARNING AND UNLEARNING**

Bernard Y. Guri and David Fletcher

“The Eurocentric canons of humanities have not demonstrated relevance ... [we need] a nourishing and revolutionary space in schools and universities that mobilizes the Indigenous humanities as a core way of knowing and creating positive identities.” Dr. Marie Battiste<sup>i</sup>

It has been our honour to introduce an appreciation for local and indigenous knowledges (LIK) into courses at the Coady International Institute over the past 10 years. LIK are important and critical for the contributions they can make to achieving sustainable development goals in this time of environmental crisis, and as a human rights issue articulated in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. More importantly, LIK have an inherent value in respecting the knowledges of millions of the world’s peoples who have maintained their lifeways and resisted assimilation into dominant, conventional knowledge systems. We were not the first or only staff members to bring such an orientation to the Coady, but we have had the privilege to build LIK into the core of a number of courses. Putting priority on LIK has had a profound impact on Coady participants and has taken us on an inspiring journey of learning and unlearning.

We are David Fletcher and Bernard Y. Guri, both Western-educated, community development practitioners and educators who have been working with civil society organizations and universities since the 1980s. David is of Afro-Guyanese and Scottish-Canadian descent and has lived and worked much of his career with organizations on the African continent. Bernard Yangmaadome Guri is of the Dagara ethno-linguistic group of Upper West Region, Ghana, and is the founder of the Centre for Indigenous Knowledge and Organizational Development<sup>ii</sup> in Ghana. Both of us have been inspired by work in the revitalization of Indigenous Knowledges on the African continent; in Mi’kma’ki, the ancestral lands and unceded traditional territory of the Mi’kmaw<sup>iii</sup> Nation; and by the work of communities and academics around the world.

### **Early Learning Contributions**

We met in Ghana in 2006 and had exciting discussions about the importance of culture in development, a major area of interest for both of us. Our first collaborative effort was a self-directed study tour of Mi’kmaq

communities in 2008. This was Bern's first visit to Canada so driving through the forested lands and along the rugged coastlines of rural Nova Scotia was an education in itself. The magic of the study tour was meeting with Mi'kmaq Elders and activists and learning about their history and continuing struggle for rights, social and economic development and cultural revitalization. Memories of an introduction to two-eyed seeing<sup>iv</sup> from Elder Dr. Albert Marshall in his home, and intimate sharing of struggles for renewing an Aboriginal justice system with Ella Paul were highly influential.

Bern returned to work in Ghana and continued developing and implementing programs that centred on African Indigenous Knowledges. These included programs to acknowledge and privilege the roles of traditional chiefs in local governance, the traditional wisdom of Queen Mothers in HIV/AIDS care and reducing stigma, the importance of Indigenous institutions in accessible restorative justice, and research on traditional healing practices. Bern networked with others across the African continent as part of the COMPAS Network for Endogenous Development<sup>v</sup> and interacted with network members from Asia, Latin America and Eastern Europe. He contributed to numerous publications during this time.<sup>vi</sup>

David, as a new faculty member of the Coady, participated in activities designed to expose participants to indigenous knowledges framed in the conceptual space of popular education as introduced by Dr. Wilf Bean and others. David invited Mi'kmaq Elders as guest speakers into classrooms, and became the escort for Coady Diploma participants to the Millbrook First Nation Powwow<sup>vii</sup> in August each year. This field trip, one of the first for participants within the five-month *Diploma Program in Development Leadership*, often had a deep impact on them. There was a brief orientation to First Nations people and a discussion of protocols prior to the experience, but it was introduced primarily as a cultural celebration. Participants, on average a cohort of 45 participants from 20 countries of the global South, visited the Millbrook Cultural & Heritage Centre, then

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<sup>i</sup> Battiste, M. (2016) *Visioning a Mi'kmaw Humanities: indigenizing the academy*. Sydney, N.S.: CBU Press. p. 12.

<sup>ii</sup> CIKOD's website: [www.cikodghana.org](http://www.cikodghana.org)

<sup>iii</sup> Use of the terms Mi'kmaq and Mi'kmaw: the word Mi'kmaq (ending in q) is a noun that means the people; Mi'kmaq is the plural form of the singular word 'Mi'kmaw; because it is plural, the word Mi'kmaq always refers to more than one Mi'kmaw person or to the entire nation.

<sup>iv</sup> Two-eyed seeing is a concept promoted by Mi'kmaw Elder Dr. Albert Marshall to appreciate the best of both Western science and Mi'kmaw Indigenous science.

<sup>v</sup> COMPAS website: [www.compasafricanetwork.wixsite.com/compas4ed](http://www.compasafricanetwork.wixsite.com/compas4ed)

<sup>vi</sup> Guri, B. (2012, 2013). *Community well-being in Ghana: an African perspective*, *Indigenous institutions and contemporary development in Ghana: potentials and challenges* (2013), *Sacred groves versus gold mines: biocultural community protocols in Ghana* (2012).

<sup>vii</sup> [www.facebook.com/2019MillbrookPowwow](http://www.facebook.com/2019MillbrookPowwow)