

CALL FOR ABSTRACTS

Still in Our Hands

Indigenous Knowledge Systems Against Poverty and Inequality

2026 Indigenous Epistemology Seminar
29 September – 1 October 2026

Concept Note and Call for Contributions

Poverty is often described as a natural condition of the poor. That description is false. Inequality is produced by decisions, institutions, and histories. It is measured as a gap. Inequity is something sharper. It is the gap that is unjust, avoidable, and sustained. What human action has made, human action can unmake. This conviction animates the 2026 Indigenous Epistemology Seminar.

Africa's poverty is not a story of empty hands. Its communities hold deep and enduring systems of knowledge. Colonial conquest disrupted them. It seized land, suppressed languages, and dismissed that knowledge as primitive. The deprivation that followed was not mere inequality. It was inequity. It was manufactured, not inherited.

The seminar therefore reads poverty through two grammars. The first is the grammar of (in)equality. The second is the grammar of (in)equity. Equality offers each the same. Equity asks what fairness requires when starting points differ. To grant Indigenous and Western knowledge a merely formal equality is not enough. Equal standing conferred on unequal terms reproduces the original injustice. Equity demands recognition, redress, and the return of authority to those who were dispossessed. Justice here is not only a matter of redistribution. It is also a matter of recognition.

Indigenous Knowledge Systems

Indigenous knowledge systems are not relics of the past. They are living and dynamic ways of knowing. They carry their own epistemologies, methods, and standards of proof. They shape agriculture and food sovereignty. They inform healing, nutrition, and public health. They steward water, soil, and biodiversity. They order governance, law, and the resolution of conflict. They hold language, cosmology, and ethics together. For centuries they have sustained African communities. They remain a working technology of survival. They are, in themselves, a strategy against poverty. They secure food, health, ecological balance, and social cohesion. Yet dominant knowledge orders have pushed them to the margins. This marginalisation is not neutral. It is itself a form of inequity.

The university is not a neutral observer in this history. It has too often been an instrument of epistemic exclusion. It trained generations to regard Indigenous knowledge as pre-modern. It is now called to a different task. It must recognise Indigenous knowledge as legitimate scholarship. It must build rigorous methods for its study. It must transform curricula that still centre a single tradition. It must prepare postgraduate researchers who can work with communities ethically. The instruments of the university are powerful. Its teaching, research, innovation, and partnerships decide who counts as a knower. These instruments can entrench inequity or dismantle it. The seminar asks the academy to choose the second path. It asks the university to move from extraction to co-production. It asks it to study not communities, but with them.

Indigenous knowledge lives in communities, not in archives. It is held by elders and healers, by farmers and artisans, by women and the young. Communities are not empty vessels awaiting development. They are the authors and custodians of knowledge. Engagement with them therefore carries obligations. It requires consent, reciprocity, and the fair sharing of benefit. Research must return value to its source. The transmission of knowledge across generations is fragile. It must be protected, resourced, and honoured. The partnership between university and community is the crucible of this work. It is where Indigenous knowledge can be sustained and mobilised against poverty. Responsibility for this work does not rest with governments alone. It resides in our scholarship, our service, and the communities closest to deprivation. The means to confront poverty are not absent. They are present, capable, and still in our hands.

Streams for Contributions

- Indigenous economies, food systems, and sustainable livelihoods
- Knowledge, dispossession, and the making of inequality
- Epistemic justice, equity, and benefit-sharing
- Indigenous governance, ecology, and climate (in)equity
- Indigenous health knowledge, healing, and well-being
- Gender, African feminisms, and Indigenous knowledge
- Curriculum transformation and Indigenous knowledge in higher education
- University - community partnerships and the co-production of knowledge
- Language, education, and the intergenerational transmission of knowledge
- Decolonising the university and the research relationship

Invitation and Format

The School invites scholars, researchers, postgraduate students, practitioners, and knowledge-holders to contribute. Contributions may take the form of individual presentations or panel discussions. Each session allows thirty minutes for the presentation and fifteen minutes for engagement with the audience. The seminar will be held in a hybrid format, with delegates attending either in person or online.

Submission of Abstracts

Interested speakers should submit an abstract of 500 words by **18 August 2026**. Abstracts should be sent to Dr Tonny Matjila at showcase@unisa.ac.za