

Transcript: Into the Kn/own/ - Into the Kn/own/

Host: Emily Tsui

Guests: Dagmar Schäfer, historian and sinologist
Annapurna Mamidipudi, sociologist and historian

INTRO

Emily: Welcome to *Into the Kn/own/*; in this podcast series we invite you to view knowledge and its ownership in a new light and take you behind the scenes of some case studies from the volume "Ownership of Knowledge". I'm your host, Emily Tsui.

Emily: A handweaver in Kerala, India threads intricate patterns into fabrics to be sold at markets. In Berlin, Germany, a dancer wakes at sunrise to rehearse for a theater performance. And in Beijing, China, a historian puts the finishing touches to the manuscript of her latest book.

Believe it or not, reflecting on everyday scenes like these can help us to shed light on a wider social pattern around knowledge and its ownership.

Emily: In our modern globalized world, academics such as historians have a claim to their knowledge, and to sharing it, through words. By writing it in books and articles, for example, and through their teaching. But dancers and handweavers don't necessarily have the same rights to their knowledge. A fabric pattern or a style of dance can be *converted* into words to be patented by law. And when that happens—often by someone who does not practice that skill or

knowledge, such as a corporation—these artists, practitioners, and artisans may no longer be able to use their knowledge, or share it with others.

As sociologist and historian of technology Annapurna Mamidipudi, puts quite simply:

Annapurna: You go and take away somebody's knowledge and you own it. You know, that's literally, yeah, a problem.

Emily: So how did this come to be?

Emily: The authors of the open-access volume *Ownership of Knowledge: Beyond Intellectual Property* believe that this dynamic stems from a norm in Western society through which knowledge and its ownership is seen as something that happens mainly through *words*. Think of history books, certificates, or patents.

As Dagmar Schäfer sinologist and historian of technology explains:

Dagmar: So if somebody comes and writes it down in a patent, then the person who was able to reformulate for instance, uh, a dyer's knowledge into a patent, into a chemical formula, this person would *own* this knowledge and we would think of that as absolutely natural because the formula is basically the more acknowledged way of abstracting the knowledge of the dyer. But in fact, the one who actually knows, owns, and performs the knowledge is the dyer. So why is he not involved into that patent, for instance?

Emily: Annapurna and Dagmar believe that the focus on knowledge and its ownership through words is misguided. And it stems from two widely-held assumptions in Western society. On the one hand, "science" or "research" as expressed through words

tends to be viewed as the dominant form of *knowledge*. And on the other, "law," such as intellectual property, also expressed through words, has come to be viewed as the dominant form of *ownership*.

And this creates the illusion that "knowing" and "owning" are *two separate things*.

Annapurna: A lot of people talk about different ways of knowing and different ways of owning, but what we propose is that you can't actually split them up.

Emily: What they argue is that knowing and owning *mutually condition* each other: What you can *know* influences what you can *own*. And what you can *own* influences what you can *know*.

Take for example those hands that weave the threads into intricate patterns of fabric. Without words, the weaver can put their knowledge into practice and share it with others to learn and "own" that knowledge for themselves. But if a corporation converts that pattern into words as a patent, the handweaver may no longer be permitted to produce it. Not only is the ownership of that knowledge taken away from the handweaver, along with their livelihoods, but the *inherent bodily knowledge* of how to create that unique pattern can be *suppressed* or even *lost* entirely.

And consider the knowledge of a dance. Using their body, a dancer can perform their knowledge and can share it with students who can then "own" that knowledge of how to perform the dance themselves. Once that dance is owned in words, through a

certificate, it restricts who may learn, pass on, and in turn "own" that knowledge.

Emily: So as it stands, if someone is practicing knowledge not through words but through, say, the performance through their body or in the use of an object, this can lead to disenfranchisement. Because by translating their knowledge into words, it separates the knowledge from its ownership.

Dagmar: We have a society, a modern society, probably also a liberal democratic approach to society that says laws are there to protect knowledge and laws are there to protect the people who, make knowledge, but some knowledge, for instance, should also be free and all people should have the same right. But these laws or these approaches also don't see that other societies own knowledge in different ways, and rather try to translate these, um, ways of owning knowledge into our ownership system. And thus in each case a certain imbalance is created because the translation is never perfect.

Emily: So to better understand and address this wider problem, we need to explore forms of knowledge and ownership *beyond* words. To consciously challenge our preconceptions about knowing and owning. And to recognize the myriad ways of seeing and enacting knowledge and its ownership across cultures, societies, and time periods.

Emily: The stories of the handweaver and the dancer that we shared earlier are cases of what Annapurna and Dagmar call "kn/own/ables." They show how knowing and owning mutually condition each other.

Through identifying such "kn/own/ables" we see how knowledge and its ownership happen not only through

naming but also *performance* and *use*. That means it happens not only through *words* but also through *bodies* and *objects*.

Through the *kn/own/able* framework Annapurna and Dagmar hope to spark further discussion, empower academics, artisans, and practitioners and instigate social change around the unity of knowledge and ownership.

Annapurna: I think what this book offers is a way of thinking about ownership where that hierarchy is not already in play. It's a very, very small first step.

OUTRO

If you'd like to delve deeper into this subject, make yourself a cup of tea, snuggle up on your couch and dip into Dagmar Schäfer's and Annapurna Mamidipudi's chapters "Ownership of Knowledge: Introduction" and "Excavations of Knowledge Ownership: Theoretical Chapter" in the volume "Ownership of Knowledge. Beyond Intellectual Property."

It's Open Access and completely free - you can find the link to the book in each episode description.

If you find any "*kn/own/ables*" in your research or everyday life that might change the way we think about out how to know and own - get in touch! You'll find our details in the episode description.

This podcast is produced by the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science. To learn more about Knowledge Ownership and the History of Science follow us Social Media and give us a thumbs up on your favorite podcast app. See you next time!