

The Custody, Preservation and Dissemination of Indigenous Knowledge within the Ndebele Community in Zimbabwe: A Case Study of Gonye Area in Tohwe, Nkayi District

Njabulo B. Khumalo

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6474-408X>
National University of Science and
Technology, Zimbabwe
njabulobass@gmail.com

Cynthia Nsindane

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5938-7543>
National University of Science and
Technology, Zimbabwe
cynthiansindane@gmail.com

Silibaziso V. Khumalo

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6385-938X>
National University of Science and
Technology, Zimbabwe
viriniasilibaziso@gmail.com

Abstract

The continued existence of indigenous knowledge is one mystery which boggles the mind, as for years, most communities in Africa had no means of documenting indigenous knowledge. However, indigenous knowledge has not faded or been extinct—regardless of the absence of strategies and means to document it. Yesteryear African communities may not have had records or paper and ink to document indigenous knowledge, but they have, for a long time had the means to document, disseminate, and preserve their indigenous knowledge. The Ndebele community in Zimbabwe is one such community, which has had indigenous knowledge passed down from one generation to another without modern technology. This article seeks to establish how the Ndebele people in Zimbabwe have been able to pass down indigenous knowledge from one generation to another, and how specific indigenous knowledge, which was meant for a certain group of people within the community was kept as a secret within that specific group. Face-to-face interviews were held with Ndebele elders and custodians of culture. A purposive sample was used to select research participants.



Keywords: custodian; documenting; generation; indigenous knowledge; modern technology

Introduction

Indigenous knowledge (IK) has become a topical issue in research and development, as communities seek solutions to developmental problems from local indigenous knowledge systems. IK is the systematic body of knowledge acquired by local indigenous people through the accumulation of experiences, informal experiences and intimate understanding of the environment in a given culture (Warren, Slikkerveer, and Brokensha 1995). Developmental initiatives from other contexts, which have been imposed, have failed in the context of Africa. Thus, development practitioners and organisations have been calling for the application of IK in African development initiatives. Kaya and Seleti (2013, 33) state that the wealth of knowledge that elders and other knowledge holders in African local communities still possess, demonstrates the vibrant intellectualism to which African researchers and intellectuals should turn. To Gorjestani (2000) IK is used at local level by communities as a basis for making decisions pertaining to food security, human and animal health, education, natural resources management, and other vital activities. Because this kind of knowledge is indigenous, its origins, custody, preservation, and dissemination differs from that of conventional knowledge. Sithole (2006, 2) highlights that IK is disseminated and preserved through various family histories, taboos, symbols, myths/legends, rituals, sounds/dances, festivals, proverbs, poetry, literature, *izibongo* (“praise poetry”) *inganekwane* (“folk stories”), drama, theatre, role plays, folklore, and other systems.

According to Dangwa (2007), IK is a complex body of knowledge, skills, and technology— common to a particular geographical community. For Matsika (2012, 209–210) IK is the traditional and local knowledge that exists and is developed through the experiences of the local community in the process of managing the conditions or context that challenge the people’s everyday life. Grenier (1998) further elucidates that IK is the unique, traditional and local knowledge existing within, and developed around specific conditions of women and men indigenous of a particular geographic area. IK is socially desirable, economically affordable, is a sustainable resource, and poses minimum risk to rural farmers (Sithole 2006).

IK may have ancient origins, but is relevant in the day-to-day lives of the people and continues to evolve, and is highly validated in the context of community/local use (Horak 2005). Thus, the custody and dissemination of IK is critical even in modern African communities. IK has in the past, been transmitted from one generation to the other. However, as the younger generations has embraced western knowledge and civilisation, they see no relevance in IK. To put it in the words of Twarog (2004, 64), “African youths no longer feel proud of their heritage and way of life, considering it to be old-fashioned, and thus have little incentive to be recipients of the IK held by the

elders.” Abandoning IK creates a generational gap in the community, as elders no longer pass it on to their children and grandchildren (Guedes and Sampalo 2004, 31). Indigenous knowledge, passed down through the oral tradition or cultural practices, has rarely been recorded, and is as such, at the risk of being extinct for future generations (Mundy and Compton 1991).

Characteristics of Indigenous Knowledge

Indigenous knowledge originates from a number of sources—as such, no single person or group of people in the community can claim to possess all indigenous knowledge. Stilltoe (2002, 9, as quoted by Ezeanya 2015, 4) states that “IK is also informed continually by external intelligence, its distribution is fragmentary, no one person, authority or social group knows it all and it exists nowhere in totality, there is no grand repository”. According to Heyd (1995), IK can be explicit, expressed in the lore or advice, passed on from generation to generation, or may be implicit and embodied in specific cultural practices. IK is influenced by innovations emerging from within the system, as well as those adopted from other indigenous systems and the national and international agricultural systems (Warren and Cashman 1988). Jaya (2006) also highlights that IK is generated, developed and used by people in a certain area, but is not limited to indigenous peoples, and can include knowledge obtained from elsewhere that has been internalised by the local people through local processes of learning, testing, and adaptation. This means that indigenous people generate and also import IK, which is learned, tested and adapted to local conditions and context. Capp (1997) highlights that IK is generally transmitted orally, experientially, and is not recorded, but is learned through hands-on experience, and is not taught in an abstract context. IK may be dismissed for its non-conformity with scientific testing methodologies, but Arewa (1998) argues that in the African context, knowledge is seen as cumulative; and is formed out of our everyday experiences.

Ajani, Mgbenka, and Okeke (2013, 24) note that IK is a set of knowledge, which is influenced by the past generations’ observations and experiments and has an inherent connection to one’s surroundings and environment. Moreover, indigenous knowledge is transferable and provides relationships that connect people directly to the environments and the changes that occur within it (Woodley 1991). Stilltoe (2002) (as quoted by Ezeanya 2015, 4), further argues that IK is inculcated in individuals from birth and influences how they interact with their environments.

Problem Statement

Academics and development practitioners are continually calling for the documentation of IK, using modern western documentation systems. However, African communities, especially rural communities, have continued to generate, preserve and disseminate IK, which is more contextualised and accessible to them than modern western knowledge.

Purpose of the Study

This study sought to establish the origins of IK and how communities have preserved and disseminated such knowledge in Gonye area in Nkayi, Zimbabwe. The study also aimed at casting the spotlight on the methods used by indigenous African people to preserve, share and disseminate IK.

Methodology

This study was conducted in an area called Gonye in Nkayi district. The study adopted a qualitative research methodology and a case study research design. Furthermore, purposive sampling was used as the researchers sought respondents who were knowledgeable in IK systems. Face-to-face interviews were held with 12 respondents who included the village head, the headman, six village elders (three females and three males), a former traditional healer, a local farmer, as well as two young people who were born and bred in the community. The researchers were not able to interview the chief, who was engaged at the time the study was conducted.

Findings and Discussion

The following sub-sections present the findings of the study gathered through face-to-face interviews.

Accumulation of Indigenous Knowledge

Indigenous knowledge is accumulated in different ways: spiritual, experiential, observation, experimentation and “importation.” The respondents highlighted that some indigenous knowledge is inherent in spirituality, where traditional healers and spirit mediums received instructions and guidance from ancestral spirits or the spirit world. The former traditional healer highlighted that “our ancestors guide us and so traditional healers are guided on which herbs, trees or shrubs to use for certain ailments and or diseases. These healers are also guided on how to prepare the medicine and administer it.”

It also emerged in this study that some indigenous knowledge is gained through the people’s daily interactions with their surroundings. The respondents highlighted that having lived in an environment for a long period of time has made them perceptive of certain insignia, conditions, and occurrences, which are familiar to that particular place. The village head highlighted that

we have been around for some years and we now know signs which show that there will be too much rains, colds, heatwaves and sicknesses. Animals around us also behave in ways which are signs of certain things like droughts and deaths, inter alia.

Thus, the study showed that having lived in a particular environment for long periods of time makes people aware of their surrounding; and this in the process, generates indigenous knowledge. One village elder highlighted that

unlike urban people who have technology, we have our brains and senses to use to sense and dictate things and that has sharpened our senses and brains. We do not have laboratories and all the machines they use, but our brains and senses are very sharp because we have no machine to rely on for survival.

It also emerged during the study that indigenous knowledge is gained—for instance, in cases where people were doing the same things over and over again until they observed familiar patterns. The village head also highlighted that “even mistakes are necessary agents for generating indigenous knowledge. Some of the indigenous knowledge originated from mistakes.”

This study also established that indigenous knowledge is gained through observations. To put it in the words of one community elder “some indigenous knowledge came about through observation. People just observe things and then confirm or refute these theories over time or years.” Yet another community elder also stated that “doing the same things over and over again makes one to realise certain patterns and occurrences which can only come with being accustomed to doing those particular things over the years.” The community elder further highlighted that “no one can know our environment, our ecosystem than us the local people. We know our animals, our vegetation, people and weather and we have observed these things over many years.”

This study further established that some indigenous knowledge was imported and learned from other communities. These respondents emphasised that some cuisines, medicines, and knowledge on farming were learned from other communities. One community elder highlighted that

people visit relatives and go to other places where they share indigenous knowledge with relatives and other people in other communities and this is some kind of cross-pollination where knowledge is shared among communities.” These respondents highlighted they had learnt a lot from other communities and they had also shared knowledge with people in other communities.

The researchers also established through participants’ responses that the accumulation of indigenous knowledge is also a result of trial and error. The respondents highlighted that human beings are curious and will, therefore, always experiment with different things; and in the process generate knowledge. The former traditional healer highlighted that

some medicinal solutions and inventions came as a result of the curiosity by people who just experimented with different things until they found solutions for problems faced by

the community. In this community, people are using such things as donkey milk and cannabis to cure asthma and this resulted from people who just wanted to find out how donkey milk can be used by human beings.

These respondents also highlighted that they believe that everything found in their environment was created by God for a specific reason. One community elder highlighted that

God created everything for a purpose and it is up to us human beings to find out the use of each and every organism, tree, herb, shrub and anything else. Solutions to problems and challenges faced by humanity are embedded in God's creation and we have to explore and experiment until we figure out what nature has to offer us.

Custody of Indigenous Knowledge

This study also sought to determine who the custodians of IK were in the community under study. The findings generally showed that IK is not in the custody of one person or a few people, as different people were custodians of different IK systems.

Community Elders

This study established that elders in the community were a reservoir of indigenous knowledge, which they had accumulated over years of experiencing and learning from elders. One community elder highlighted that

in our community, elders know a lot of things with regards to our culture, traditions, the environment, health, marriage inter alia. Before meteorological services forecast weather conditions, some elders in our community would have predicted how the weather will be like and in most cases they predictions are correct.

Another community elder highlighted that

some of us have lived in this community for more than seventy five years and that surely shows that we are connected to this environment and it has become part of us. The knowledge that we have was passed on to us by our parents, grandparents, great grandparents and community elders, we have also experienced a lot of things and that surely has made us knowledgeable.

These respondents highlighted that they disseminated indigenous knowledge to their communities in a number of ways. The respondents further highlighted that some youths in the community, who were studying in tertiary institutions were consulting them and documenting some indigenous knowledge practices and knowledge for their dissertations, thesis and other types of research. It also emerged that these elders were disseminating some knowledge during community meetings or gatherings such as funerals, weddings, traditional ceremonies and other forms of gatherings. They also

highlighted that in most cases they were given an opportunity to share their knowledge on different aspects of life with the younger generations.

Chiefs and Headmen

This study also established that community leaders such as chiefs, village heads, and headmen were custodians of indigenous knowledge. The village headmen highlighted that

chiefs, village heads and headmen have always been custodians of culture, traditions and indigenous knowledge. You will realise that some members of our community are migrating to other areas and villages and new people are coming into this community, however, chiefs and village heads are here to stay and thus they are custodians of indigenous knowledge. These chiefs are moving libraries of our indigenous knowledge.

This study also established that chiefs also knew elders in their communities who were knowledgeable in certain aspects of life, and thus would consult them or even refer people to them. One village head highlighted that

no one person can know everything about our indigenous knowledge as there are different experts in different things, so what we do as leaders is to consult different experts on issues which need their knowledge. Our community has herbs, shrubs, trees and other things which are very useful for health and medicinal purposes.

These community leaders disseminate indigenous knowledge to ensure that members of the community preserve and conserve nature, which is at the heart of health and wellbeing.

Traditional Healers

This study also established that traditional healers are also key custodians of indigenous knowledge. Traditional healers possess knowledge on the medicinal qualities of different trees, shrubs, and herbs, which grow on their soil. It further emerged that traditional healers had attained knowledge on medicine and healing from various sources, which included parents and relatives who were traditional healers themselves. Furthermore, it emerged that some traditional healers would dream about these medicines or were taught about the potency of these medicines during their apprenticeship years by other senior traditional healers. Most of the respondents highlighted that traditional healing is a gift. The study also established that traditional healers have apprentices who are otherwise referred to as *amathwasa* (initiates). These apprentices are trained and taught by these traditional healers who share their knowledge of herbs, treatment methods, diseases and other related subjects relevant in traditional healing.

Parents/Guardians

Respondents also highlighted that parents were also custodians of indigenous knowledge and that they have a responsibility to share it with their children. One female community elder highlighted that every mother is supposed to share indigenous knowledge pertaining to womanhood with her daughters. There are things that a girl-child needs to be taught by her mother—and if this does not happen, the girl-child will fail to fulfil societal expectation as a woman. A mother has to teach her daughters how to prepare traditional cuisine as well as home remedies for ailments which do not require the doctor's attention. Another female community elder also highlighted that every mother has to teach her daughters how to take care of their families, how to follow hygienic methods during menstruation and pregnancy, among other things. Back in the day, there were no sanitary pads but other absorbents used by women during their periods. It was therefore, the responsibility of mothers to make their daughters aware of such absorbents. This study established that daughters learned from their mothers, through hands-on experience and by observing their mothers cooking, preparing remedies, plastering home floors and walls, preserving food and doing a whole lot of other things. One female community elder highlighted that

a daughter has to stick with her mother, observing, learning, asking and helping her in order to learn our indigenous knowledge. When such a relationship is maintained, our indigenous knowledge can never face extinction at all. Our African indigenous knowledge cements relationships and the knowledge sharing is an everyday thing.

The researchers also established that fathers were also expected to share indigenous knowledge with their children, especially, their sons. The respondents asserted that fathers were supposed to teach and encourage their sons to be providers. Some of the lessons were supposed to be about how to take care of livestock—that is, how to treat sick cattle, prepare them for sex, and help female cattle deliver their calves, how to cultivate crops and preserve food. The fathers were also supposed to teach their sons about their culture, traditions and other things. One male community elder highlighted that

women play their role when it comes to child bearing, but once the baby is born, a man has to know what to do with the umbilical code of the baby and what rituals have to be conducted to welcome the baby into the family and strengthen him or her.

Furthermore, another male community elder highlighted that

“male sexuality is a challenge for most males because many fathers do not prepare their sons for marriage. My father prepared a concoction which we call “imbiza” and it strengthened me. I have also prepared the same concoction for my sons and I know that they will do the same for their sons. That is how such indigenous knowledge is preserved

and disseminated. I learnt from my father who learnt from his father and I teach my son, who will also teach his son and so on.

The African family is best described as an extended family where uncles, aunts, grandparents, nieces, nephews and other relatives are closely knit, stay together, and provide for each other. This study established that the extended family played a role in the custody and sharing of information. Another community elder highlighted that

uncles usually do a lot of chores with their nephews. They go out each morning to shepherd our livestock and it is when they are in the bush that they share our indigenous knowledge about life. I am a father to my sons, but when it comes to some sensitive subjects about sex and other things, they always prefer consulting their uncles who then guide them.

This study also established that aunts were custodians of information, which was to be shared with their nieces in preparation for marriage. One female community elder highlighted that

together with grannies, we teach our nieces how to please their husbands in bed and that includes doing certain things which will prepare their bodies. We also teach them how to prepare for birth and other things which pertain to womanhood. They have to learn how to take care of their bodies during and after giving birth and during menstruation. Many men nowadays are weak and sickly because their wives were not taught how to handle themselves during and after menstruation and child birth, we as aunts and grandmothers stand to pass on indigenous knowledge to help our nieces take care of their families.

Dissemination of Indigenous Knowledge

The study also established that IK is being disseminated through a number of channels and means. Rural communities use gatherings and traditional ceremonies as platforms to share IK. The channels through which IK is disseminated are highlighted below.

Apprenticeship

This study established that indigenous knowledge was transmitted from one generation to another through apprenticeship. Traditional healers have apprentices with whom they share their medicinal and healing knowledge. The respondents highlighted that there are formal apprenticeship trainings, such as those administered by traditional healers and spirit mediums. One former traditional healer highlighted that “when I was a traditional healer, I had apprentices ‘amathwasa’ who worked as my assistants. I would teach them and also show them how to prepare, store and administer medicine.” This study also established that youths were apprentices in a number of community activities such as building, pottery, farming and animal husbandry, among other things.

Family and Community Gatherings

These researchers also established that indigenous knowledge was being shared and transmitted during some closed and open family gatherings. Mothers and aunts would have day-to-day indigenous knowledge-sharing sessions with their daughters and nieces—in addition to closed meetings—where female children would be taught certain things by their grandmothers, mothers, and aunts. Men were not supposed to be part of such meetings as knowledge shared was meant for females only. Grandfathers, fathers, and uncles would also share their knowledge with their grandsons, sons, and nephews during information sessions. Such sessions were held to discuss sex-related matters and to prepare boys for marriage, among other things. This study also established that families usually gather for funerals, weddings, and other family rituals. It is during such gatherings that elders get to impart indigenous knowledge to younger generations. One male community elder stated that

we know herbs which can enhance sexuality, be taken by pregnant women, and what needs to be done when a family member passes on and thus during family rituals, ceremonies, celebrations and functions, we demonstrate to the younger generation and also teach them a lot of things. During those gatherings, our relatives who live in urban areas, other communities and in neighbouring communities, usually come and that is the perfect moment to impart knowledge.

Taboos and Proverbs

The study further established that indigenous knowledge was preserved through taboos. These taboos embodied community values and were used to discourage community members from doing certain things—and were taught to children and all community members on a daily basis. People were prohibited from doing certain things, which could upset nature, because illnesses, destroy vegetation, animals and harm families. The village head further highlighted that

these taboos ensure that children respect their parents and that disasters do not befall us. Even after we are dead, these taboos will be known as they are now taught even in schools and our children know them.

Proverbs and Sayings

The study also established that IK was packaged, preserved and shared with future generations through other means such as proverbs and wise sayings. One community elder highlighted that

our forefathers were wise and thus once they made a discovery or learnt something, they would package it in a proverb which summarises the whole statement. Proverbs are being learnt in schools now and thus this wisdom will never be lost at all.

This study again established that even community members who were not educated were familiar with these proverbs and sayings, and their interpretations thereof.

Conclusion

This study established that IK is still being used extensively by rural communities as it is more accessible and contextualised to them than modern western knowledge. The researchers also established that rural communities are still custodians of IK, and have the means to disseminate it to the next generation. The extended family, family and community gatherings and rituals are key to the preservation and dissemination of IK. The researchers further established that scholars' concern that IK was facing extinction doesn't hold for the community under study. This community still finds IK relevant and applies it more than modern western knowledge.

References

- Ajani, E. N., Mgbenka, R. N. and Okeke, M. N. 2013. "Use of Indigenous Knowledge as a Strategy for Climate Change Adaptation among Farmers in sub-Saharan Africa: Implications for Policy." *Asian Journal of Agricultural Extension, Economics & Sociology* 2(1): 23–40. <https://doi.org/10.9734/AJAEES/2013/1856>.
- Arewa, S. 1998. *Opening to Spirit*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Capp, J. C., and Jorgensen, C. 1997. "Traditional Knowledge: Don't Leave the Future without it." Paper presented at the 62nd North American Wildlife and Natural Resources Conference, 14–18 March. Washington, DC.
- Dangwa, N. 2007. "Indigenous Education Systems and their Relevance for Sustainable Development: A Case of Southern Africa. *Tribe and Tribals, Special Volume 1*: 167–172.
- Ezeanya, C. 2015. "Research, Innovation and Indigenous Knowledge in Africa: In Search of Nexus." Paper presented at the CODESRIA General Assembly Conference on Creating African Futures in an Era of Global Transformations: Challenges and Prospects, 8–12 June, Dakar-Senegal.
- Gorjestani, N. 2000. *Indigenous Knowledge for Development: Opportunities and Challenges*. The World Bank: Geneva.
- Grenier, L. 1998. *Working with Indigenous Knowledge: A Guide for Researchers*. Ottawa: International Development Research Centre.
- Guedes, A. C., and Sampalo, M. J. A. 2004. "Genetic Resources and Traditional Knowledge in Brazil." In *Protecting and Promoting Indigenous Knowledge: Systems, National Experiences and International Dimensions*, edited by Twarog, S., and Kapoor, 29–32. New York and Geneva: United Nations.

- Heyd, T. 1995. "Indigenous Knowledge, Emancipation and Alienation." *Knowledge and Policy: International Journal of Knowledge Transfer and Utilization* 8(1): 63–73. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02698557>.
- Horak, M. 2005. "Adding Value to Indigenous Knowledge through Scientific Innovation." Accessed September 22, 2017. <http://www.worldbank.org/afr/ik/GRA/horak.pdf>.
- Jaya, E. 2006. "The role of University in Promoting Indigenous Knowledge Systems in Zimbabwe with Reference to Traditional Practices in Rural Areas." Paper presented at the 2nd International Appropriate Technology Conference, 12–15 July. Bulawayo, Zimbabwe.
- Kaya, H. O., and Seleti. Y. N. 2013. "African Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Relevance of Higher Education in South Africa." *The International Education Journal: Comparative Perspectives* 12(1): 30–44.
- Matsika, C. 2012. *Traditional African Education: It's Significance to Current Education Practices with Special Reference to Zimbabwe*. Gweru: Mambo Press.
- Mundy, P., and Compton, J. L. 1991. "Indigenous Communication and Indigenous Knowledge." *Development Communication Report* 74(3): 1–4.
- Sithole, J. 2006. "The Challenges faced by African Libraries and Information Centres in Documenting and Preserving Indigenous Knowledge." Paper presented at the World Library and Information Congress: 72nd IFLA General Conference and Council, 20–24 August. Seoul, Korea.
- Twarog, S. 2004. "Preserving, Protecting and Promoting Traditional Knowledge: National Actions and International Missions." In *Protecting and Promoting Indigenous Knowledge: Systems, National Experiences and International Dimensions*, edited by Twarog, S. and Kapoor, P, 61–69. New York and Geneva: United Nations.
- Warren, D. M., and K. Cashman. 1988. *Indigenous Knowledge for Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development*. London: IIED.
- Warren, M. D., Slikkerveer, L. J., and Brokensha, D. (eds.). 1995. *The Cultural Dimension of Development: Indigenous Knowledge Systems*. London: Intermediate Technology Publications.
- Woodley E. 1991. "Indigenous Ecological Knowledge Systems and Development." *Agricultural Human Values* 8:173–178.