Indigenous Languages as Preservers of Indigenous Knowledge in Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

The interrelationship between Indigenous languages and knowledge is both schematic and formal. It requires a high degree of generalisation and is usually steeped into the dichotomy of whether indigenous languages precede indigenous knowledge. In other words, can there be indigenous knowledge without indigenous language? This is a controversial interrelationship that usually raises more questions than answers; however, learned opinion favours a positive answer. Indigenous languages are an intangible heritage that predetermine and preserve for posterity, indigenous knowledge. Libraries should provide those with verbal fluency and political power, retentive memories and intimate knowledge of poetic forms space to document their intellect for posterity.

Keywords: Indigenous knowledge; Indigenous languages

Overview

Indigenous linguistic and knowledge development reciprocally determine each other. In fact, indigenous languages are preservers of indigenous knowledge. Languages, generally, are a ‘second symbol system’ that can reveal, affirm and preserve both tacit and explicit indigenous knowledge. For example, indigenous languages have tag-names for indigenous concepts, objects and even processes. Indigenous languages facilitate the identification and recall of indigenous knowledge. Without indigenous languages that tag-name things, it becomes difficult to deal with human experiences, intuition, thoughts, problems and past experiences - ordinarily what are human feelings, thoughts and knowledge. Indigenous languages therefore tend to put order to the genus of indigenous knowledge.

Zimbabwe is by nature, a multilingual country. It has three standard languages (and the variations of such languages) that are recognised. These are the standard variations of Shona, Ndebele and English languages. In addition to these three national standard languages (and their variations), there are other officially recognised indigenous languages that include Chewa, Kalanga, Tonga, Nambya, Shangani, Sotho, Venda and Xhosa. All these languages and many others, predetermine the potential of indigenous knowledge in Zimbabwe.

During the colonial period, the English language was the official language used in education, parliament, mass media, trade, industry and commerce. This mode of things subsisted after
independence in 1980 and slowly developed to include the use of Shona and Ndebele in some official domains, albeit to a limited extent. This has tended to undermine indigenous languages in Zimbabwe and by default, indigenous knowledge endemic to people that speak and use the various languages in the country. Similarly, the preservation of such indigenous knowledge is also not only undermined but compromised.

This paper seeks to:

- Show the relationship between indigenous languages and knowledge;
- Argue that indigenous languages precede indigenous knowledge;
- Contextualise indigenous languages in Zimbabwe and show how they predetermine the potential of indigenous knowledge; and,
- Show why it is necessary to transcend the colonial alienation of indigenous languages and knowledge.

**Indigenous Languages and Indigenous Knowledge**

Human thoughts are made public through language. As such it is through language that indigenous knowledge can be transcribed and collated. This is because language “is the primary vehicle of human communication; reflects both the personality of the individual and the culture of his society ... makes possible the growth, and transmission of human culture; the continuity of societies and the control and cohesion of social groups; provides a storage system for the collective memory of society; and, influences perception and the way we view reality” (McGarry 1981: 19).

The colonial undermining of indigenous languages implies that indigenous knowledge was also undermined. Generally, indigenous societies are perceived as largely oral in both tradition and culture. “People who are accustomed to an oral tradition can better relate to information exchanged in the way they understand” (Etebu 2009). Therefore, the undermining of indigenous languages equally undermined the transmission of indigenous knowledge. Among indigenous societies, information is stored in people’s memories and those with good memories tend “… to play a vital role in storing and transferring information, and the death of a knowledgeable person may lead to valuable information being lost” (Etebu 2009).

**Order of Precedence: Language and Knowledge**

Language has been said to be critical in the oral transmission of culture from one generation to the next (Nyathi 2011). A community’s language will usually reveals that community’s worldview and its social structure. Logically, this means that “language is always given to individuals by the community. It expresses the relationship between self and other selves. It certainly has a bearing on the development of community identity” (Nyathi 2011). One can
conclude that language and behaviour derive from the same source and therefore expressions of the same phenomenon. Language precedes knowledge and by that virtue indigenous knowledge can only be preserved through an indigenous language. This is not to undermine that “linguistic and conceptual development reciprocally determine each other” (McGarry 1981: 23). Language aids knowing, identification and recall. “When we come to deal with our experiences, our intuitions, thoughts, problems and past experiences, we find that until we put names to things, forge our experiences into words, we are not sure what we feel, think or know” (McGarry 1981: 24).

**How Indigenous Languages Predetermine the Potential of Indigenous Knowledge**

It has been argued and presumed that every developing society passes through a phase when the oral tradition was the only way of storage, transmission and dissemination of information. In order to promote memorization and recall, the corporate tradition was enshrined in poetry, rhythmic prose, myths and legends which were used as some kind of tribal encyclopaedia (McGarry 1981). To a large extent, African society has remained oral to this day. This calls for a redefinition of a library and the kind of services it should offer. Libraries should make sure that indigenous languages are preserved so that indigenous knowledge continues to develop and consumed. They should encourage and emphasize face-to-face communication by providing space for those with verbal fluency and political power, retentive memories and intimate knowledge of poetic forms to document their intellect for posterity.

The above is possible if libraries take cognisance of the major characteristics of oral societies and their indigenous languages and knowledge. That way, library services can be tailor-made around these characteristics for the preservation of indigenous knowledge through indigenous languages.
Transcending Colonial Alienation of Indigenous Languages and Knowledge

Should the English Language be the *lingua franca* in Zimbabwe? If so, how is the country proposing to account for its diverse indigenous knowledge that is only expressible in indigenous languages?

The use of the English Language in Zimbabwe was “an underlying agenda of the civilizing mission of colonialism to prepare the ground for economic exploitation…” (Viriri 2003: 1). During the colonial era, indigenous languages were viewed as obstacles that prevented colonial manoeuvres against native people. African cultural values, including languages were looked down upon as inferior to the English Language and “this meant to destroy the unity and humanity of the African people” (Viriri 2003: 1). Consequently in this context, indigenous languages and knowledge were not only undermined but seriously challenged.

The English Language continues to enjoy some degree of prominence in independent Zimbabwe. It is still the preferred language of instruction in schools because it is largely viewed as the language of political and economic power. Similarly, a pass in the English Language at Ordinary Level is considered a prerequisite for further study and/or employment. None of the indigenous languages are considered as substitutes for the English Language. Thus the English Language is considered a prestigious language above the indigenous languages (Sure and Webb...
Therefore cognitive, affective and social skills are never promoted in indigenous languages, thus inhibiting original thought and the development of indigenous knowledge through the use of indigenous languages. How then can indigenous knowledge become part of the technological and intellectual discourse outside the deliberate promotion and sustenance of indigenous languages?

### Conclusion

This paper showed the relationship between indigenous languages and knowledge. It also argued that indigenous languages precede indigenous knowledge. Further, it contextualised indigenous languages in Zimbabwe and showed how they predetermine the potential of indigenous knowledge; and, concluded by explaining why it is necessary to transcend the colonial alienation of indigenous languages and knowledge in order for libraries to play a meaningful role in a knowledge economy.
Bibliography


