# Chapter 1

# Binarism as a Recipe for Lukewarm Research into Indigenous Knowledge Systems in Zimbabwe

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## ABSTRACT

*The thesis of this chapter is that there is need for vigorous and robust research into Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) in Zimbabwe. It argues that such research is afflicted by binarism, an affliction that permeates the Zimbabwean academic psyche. It notes that the major stumbling block to meaningful research emanates from the effects of western forms of epistemology that have affected some Zimbabwean scholars who have come to believe that all good science comes from the west. The researcher further argues that what makes the Zimbabwean situation so gloomy is the fact that the country does not have an IKS policy, but a science, technology and innovation policy that makes reference to IKS in passing. It is this lack of commitment, the paper further asserts, that afflicts academia because there are areas where government is expected to take a lead, but in the case of Zimbabwe, this leadership is lacking.*

## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss factors that militate against research into indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) in Zimbabwe. It is premised on the realisation that no effort has been put in place by the government of Zimbabwe and its research institutions to ensure that full-bodied research into IKS also known as indigenous technical science is undertaken. The reasons for this lukewarm approach to such a rich and promising research area are not known. One can only hypothesise that the major causes of disquiet are varied but include the key one of the non-existence of a national IKS policy. What is there for Zimbabwe is just a general reference to IKS that appears to have come as a result of an afterthought that is found in the Science Technology and Innovation Policy (2012, pp 10-11). The idea behind the chapter

is that IKS should be in a separate policy, not because it is not a science, but because it is a special area that needs special attention and funding from central government. The situation is made worse by the fact that it does not have a language policy and this affects the way indigenous knowledge is perceived because most of it is passed down orally, and practically in an apprenticeship manner, not in a classroom and a laboratory between four walls and frightening equipment. The chapter ends by noting that all is not lost though since the 2013 Constitution of Zimbabwe gives scope for the protection and development of IKS as well as indigenous languages that are the main carriers of IKS. This is good in that it enables those that are interested to go ahead and work even in the absence of a legislative framework that comes in the form of a national policy as South Africa has done.

## BACKGROUND

Zimbabwe is a former British colony. Demographically, the largest number of people in the country are the indigenous people made up of a large percentage of Bantu (which means people) and the Khoisan whose numbers are significantly diminished. This gives a total of 99.7% according to the 2012 Census report (ZIMSTAT). The remaining 0.3% is made up of nationalities that are not of African ancestry. The Bantu are linguistically diverse but the major language groups are the Shona and Ndebele. Other language groups are the Kalanga, who linguistically are close to the Shona. There are also the Nambya, Tonga, Tsonga and Venda among other Bantu groups. All these people have cultures that are somehow related. For example, religiously most are practitioners of indigenous religions, although the majority also profess to be Christians. Generally the majority of these groups have also intermarried. This means that their practices have therefore informed and influenced one another. In addition to all these, the people also share certain practices such as those that relate to religion and agriculture. They also have a lot in common in the areas of herbal and medicinal practices. This means that Zimbabwe has a rich heritage that has been built over the centuries.

Zimbabwe's rich historical past is also significant. Zimbabwe is home to the Great Zimbabwe Monuments which were built by the ancestors of the Shona between AD 1270 and 1550, emerging in the southern plateau regions of Zimbabwe, around modern day Masvingo from an Iron Age agricultural community (Pikirayi, 2006, p. 31). These monuments are the biggest, but are not the only ones since they are scattered throughout southern Africa. They are found in Botswana (Domboshaba), Mozambique (Manekeni/Manyikeni) and in South Africa (Mapungubwe). If it was in other countries, these monuments would have inspired innovation and creativity. Among Zimbabweans they prove to the world that the indigenous people had in the past skills and expertise that was useful to their immediate environment. While Zimbabweans are said to be the most literate on the African continent, their failure to look back into the past as the Israelis have done is an indictment on the meaning of their literacy levels. It is unfortunate that these literacy levels have not been transformed into people's appreciation of themselves. In fact, the literacy levels have gone a long way in alienating Zimbabweans from themselves. This leads to a situation where one can say that Zimbabweans are highly educated but poorly learned. This means that they can go through a programme of study and pass any tests and examinations that are set, but after that experience, they do not come out changed – they learn nothing. What Zimbabweans should have done, and may need to do even today is to take advantage of their relatively related cultures and tap into their practices.

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