



# *Indigenous research is a journey*

## *An interview with Bagele Chilisa*

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Bagele Chilisa is a Professor at the University of Botswana where she teaches research methods and evaluation courses. Her recent books include *Educational Research: Towards Sustainable Development*, *Research Methods for Adult Educators in Africa*, and *Indigenous Research Methodologies*. *Indigenous Research Methodologies* is the first textbook that situates research in a larger, historical, cultural and global context and draws on Indigenous knowledge from the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Africa, and Asia. Her research focuses on the development of research methodologies that are relevant, context specific and appropriate in African contexts and other culturally complex communities. She writes about and practices research methodologies that make visible the voices of those who continue to suffer oppression and discrimination on the basis of sex, race/ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, or social class. Bagele Chilisa can be contacted c/o CHILISAB@mopipi.ub.bw

The interviewers were Cheryl White and David Denborough.

In this interview, Bagele Chilisa, introduces key themes relating to Indigenous research methodologies and the ways in which Indigenous scholars are transforming understandings of research and knowledge creation. Professor Chilisa also offers messages of support to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars.

**Keywords:** *Indigenous research methodologies, decolonising practice, Indigenous ethics, knowledge systems.*

**Cheryl:** *Bagele, we love your book, Indigenous Research Methodologies! In fact, when I came across it, I couldn't put it down, and this is not a common experience for me in relation to research texts! It is already inspiring and challenging us ... so firstly, than you for your book ...*

**Bagele:** That is beautiful. Thank you for inviting me to talk to you, to get to know you. I'm very thankful. Let me start with a story of myself.

I was born in a very small village in Botswana. The nearest school was over a hundred kilometres away. My father decided I should go to school, however, so I stayed far away from home with my uncle who was a teacher until I finished primary school. I was lucky then, because my father wanted me to continue my education at a good school. He sent me to a public Catholic school and it was there that I learned how to pray. In our village there was no church, but at this school we all had to pray and to be baptised. When you were baptised in this Roman Catholic denomination, you were given a new name, a Christian name. During the school holidays, I told my father that I was going to be baptised and I asked my parents to give me an English Christian name. That was when my father told me, 'The name I gave you, Bagele, is the name we shall always know you by'. He explained that this name located me in a network of relationships and histories and that if my name was changed it would start a chain of other changes of names and would require the community to figure out new relationships with him and with me.

At the time that we were growing up, there was also a skin lightening cream that women and men were applying to their faces so that they could be lighter. I remember my father warning me, 'I'm sending you to school but you must come back with the same skin colour. Should I see any change in your skin colour, I will not allow you to enter the gates of my compound.'

**David:** *I have read that these were some of the ways in which your father first introduced you to concepts of decolonisation ...*

Yes. While my father didn't call it decolonisation, as I ventured into university and studied the history of colonisation and the continuing colonisation that is currently occurring, I realised then that my father had always been against Africans losing their identity. He was always against one adopting everything that is white and replacing everything that is African.

Replacing my name for a Christian name would have been to replace what was known, what was cultural, what was African. To replace my name would have been to replace my identity as it was known and seen and recognised by my parents. From those early days I became aware and resistant to the renaming of colonisation. This does not only involve the renaming of people, but also renaming of places. Zimbabwe, for example, was named Rhodesia, after Cecil John Rhodes. Rhodes was a person who wanted to build a very big empire from Cape Town to Cairo, so a whole nation was named Rhodesia, after this one man. At that time, Botswana was called Bechuanaland Protectorate. But were we really being protected? Was this really protection or was this all about control?

When I was at university, Zimbabwe was struggling to gain independence, South Africa too, Namibia too. In those days, all the literature we were reading at university was Western literature, but sometimes our professors would make us critique

the ways in which the whole history of Africa was being related to us through these texts.

After the independence struggles were successful, we realised that we had decolonised the land but we had not decolonised the mind. If the resources of the land are decolonised, are now ours, but the mind is still colonised, then there is a problem. How can we decolonise our minds, our ways of knowing, our ways of conceptualising reality? How can we best decolonise Western conceptions of reality so that we are able to see our reality in the way that our reality works for us?

**David:** *These different ways of conceptualising reality ... are these what you refer to in the book 'Indigenous Research Methodologies' as different 'knowledge systems'?*

Yes, I talk of two knowledge systems. There is one knowledge system that is academic and informed by Western disciplines. This is the knowledge system that shapes mainstream research proposals. But then there is a different knowledge system, a different way of seeing reality, that resonates with the researched. This is the reality that we live at home, the way we relate to the land, the way we are connected to the environment. This non-academic knowledge system of the researched has survived despite the best efforts of colonisation to devalue it.

Many of us are now interested in generating research on the basis of the knowledge systems of the researched, on the basis of Indigenous systems of knowledge. For instance, we now have a project in South Africa which we call Eziko, which means 'around the fireplace'. This project involves developing an Eziko model of doing research based on African ways of seeing reality, African values, African systems of knowledge. We are articulating methods of research based on our conception of the cosmos and the environment. The ways in which we understand our connections with the environment shape our knowledge system. And so, our knowledge system, our reality, is relational in different ways than academic knowledge systems. In the Eziko project in South Africa students are trying to conceptualise how research is different when we use an 'around the fireplace' approach.

**David:** *Acknowledging the existence of different systems of knowledge, and the validity of different systems of knowledge, and therefore demonstrating the necessity of Indigenous research methods is a profound challenge to Western scholarship ... it also sounds like a journey of discovery ...?*

In our culture you cannot know others before you know yourself. And yet we have been so colonised to know others and to ignore knowing ourselves. We know so much about Western philosophy, Western this, Western that, but we know so little about our own Indigenous knowledge. In fact, often we don't even recognise our ways of knowing as legitimate knowledge. As a way of promoting this concept of 'us and the cosmos', and knowing self before you know others, we encourage students to start their research by writing in a poetic way, a statement about themselves. Significantly, this opening statement connects them to the land in the way it's seen by the community. Here in Botswana we are connected to land through the family, because in our culture every family, every person, has a particular totem. This totem has some significance in the life of the people. For instance, my totem is a crocodile and in my statement I talk about the crocodile as queen of the waters. Our totems teach us that there has to be something that we are good at and that

we have to take up that particular talent and run with it. Our people have been told they can't achieve, they can't do this, they can't do that. In trying to free ourselves from these consequences of colonisation, our connection with the environment is our last and first resort. We go back to our totems, we return to and talk with our relations with the environment and see what we can draw from this. Drawing from our totems and relations with environment encourages us to restore the confidence that we have lost. Due to colonisation we have lost confidence in ourselves, we have lost confidence in what we know. Even when we identify what we know culturally, we are not confident that it stands out as knowledge. So starting any research with a statement about ourselves, our totems, our connections to family and to the land is part of what we call the decolonisation of the mind.

*David: This is clearly a profound project. At the same time, it seems to me you're also challenging and deconstructing Western research models, and demonstrating and articulating how there are other ways of understanding concepts like validity or reliability. You are proposing entirely different ways of viewing all the concepts drawn from an academic Western knowledge base. You are articulating different forms of research and knowledge creation. Is this a second part of this project of decolonising the mind?*

Yes. Because diverse methods of research, methods of understanding and analysis, are already there in our respective Indigenous cultures. It's now for us to recognise them, to name them, and articulate them in a language that others can understand.

For instance, there are various Afrocentric scholars who have proposed African ways of understanding what in Western research is called 'validity' or 'reliability'. Ruth Reviere (2001) proposed an African-centred procedure informed by the five canons of ukweli, utlulivu, uhaki, ujamaa and kujitooa:

Ukweli is loosely translated from the original Swahili as "truth." For the purposes of this article, it refers to the groundedness of research in the experiences of the community being researched. The experiences of community members become the ultimate authority in determining what is true and therefore become the final arbiter of the validity of research about their lives.

Utlulivu is loosely translated from the original Swahili as "justice." It requires that the researcher actively avoid creating, exaggerating, or sustaining divisions between or within communities but rather strive to create harmonious relationships between and within these groups.

Uhaki is loosely translated from the original Swahili as "harmony." It requires a research procedure that is fair to all participants, especially to those being researched, and one whose applications are mindful of the welfare of all the participants.

Ujamaa is loosely translated from the original Swahili as "community." It requires that the researcher reject the researcher/participant separation and not presume to be "the well from which spring theory and practice, whole and well-formed," but that theory and practice should be informed by the actual and aspired interests of the community.

Kujitooa is loosely translated from the original Swahili as "commitment." It requires that the researcher emphasize considerations of how knowledge is structured and used over the need for dispassion and objectivity. (p.725)

While coming to know ourselves, we are also coming to know and articulate Indigenous ways of knowing and Indigenous forms of research and research ethics.

*David: That's fantastic. We've just got one further question if that's okay. We'd love to hear any message you might want to offer to Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and/or Maori participants who may be just starting off on their 'research journey'. And secondly, any message you might have for non-Indigenous participants who are considering the significance of Indigenous research methodologies.*

My first message to other Indigenous researchers is that research is not a difficult task, it is a journey. And you can start any journey with very small steps. Just start the journey at wherever you are now. Perhaps you are a social worker and at the moment you use certain instruments to diagnose or intervene in whatever social issues the community is facing. Ask yourself whether these instruments or interventions are cultural sensitive to those you are meeting with. I remember one psychiatrist who came to Botswana and told me he was using a certain instrument with patients who came to his practice. He said, 'I realise that if I use this instrument then almost everybody in Botswana is crazy!' So he stopped practicing in such a way.

Research starts with observations that you make as you go about your practice. Start small and ask yourself, 'what can I do to make a small change?' What you think of as a small change at first might become the beginning of other changes. This could be the beginning of your own journey into decolonising and indigenising research. All journeys take small steps. First you may decolonise or indigenise the instrument or practice. That is a beginning. But as you go on, you may come up with your own research framework based on the cultural understandings of your people.

And as you proceed on this journey, you have to know one thing. You have to know yourself before you can know others. You have to know the culture of your community, the culture of your people. We must think for ourselves, write for ourselves, research for ourselves, as others do for themselves. As Indigenous peoples around the world, we are at a stage where we are being challenged to think for ourselves, to use our own thinking models, and then to write these up in a language that we can communicate with other international scholars.

I am excited about this. I am happy also that the little stone that I threw reached you there on the other side of the world, and that you see yourself continuing this journey that all Indigenous scholars are engaging in or are invited to engage in. Let's make this a big success! Five years from now, let's see more of the methods that you articulate.

For non-Indigenous scholars, we thank you for taking the interest. What we are doing as Indigenous research scholars is encouraged and informed by critiques that some non-Indigenous scholars have made of Western research. Their research has given us courage. So as we continue this journey, we don't see you as outsiders. You are outsiders in the sense that you may not be Indigenous people, but you are insiders in as far as we are looking

at the same issues: issues of social justice, issues of human rights. Our space in discussing these issues of social justice, human rights and research from the perspectives of Indigenous peoples, is larger than yours because we experience it. Your space may be smaller, because you are seeing from outside, but all the same, we appreciate that you may see what we may not see. We may be blinded by some things because we are from inside. Looking from outside, you may also help us to see beyond.

**David:** *These messages will be very significant to all who read them. Thank you so much Professor Chilisa.*

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