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Exploring *ukuthunywa* as African methodology: Decolonial research and ethical considerations

Nombulelo Tholithemba Shange
University of the Free State, South Africa
#Corresponding Author: tholithemba.shange@gmail.com
Wits-HuMEL

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Abstract

Western scholars have long viewed themselves as the sole custodians of African experiences, ideals, history, culture, and knowledge. The #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall protests in 2015 and 2016 brought the issue of decolonising knowledge systems to the forefront, encouraging decolonial discourse more suited to the African context. Today, there is a rise in African intellectuals, practices, and solutions, especially in academia, but not much is being done to reimagine and decolonise methodology. This article theorises on African methodologies, which are often overlooked in decolonial discourse. Despite increasing awareness of African indigenous knowledge to address social challenges, these solutions are often accompanied by Western epistemological pedagogies. *Ukuthunywa,* an important method of passing down useful skills that one still finds in African households today, is theorised in this article. This term loosely translates to 'being sent to run errands'. The inspiration for this theorising came from a PhD ethnographic study on African healers called Mountain Doctors.

Keywords: methodology, *ukuthunywa*, African knowledge, decolonial, research

Introduction

There have been many calls for decolonial approaches to social life. Many of these calls come from within higher education, but they encourage decolonial consideration beyond the academy. These calls are to reimagine, reconstruct and decolonise colonial spaces like schools, places of work, communities, healthcare systems, and many more. But, even in academic spaces, these calls for decolonisation have many limitations. In the South African context, the #RhodesMustFall #FeesMustFall Fallist protests of 2015 and 2016 pushed many institutions to rethink their curriculum. This was as students questioned the validity and usefulness of highly Western curriculum delivered in South African higher education (Langa, 2017). Though much of this academic and scholarly decolonial work is being done, there is still a disconnect, and the truly decolonised spaces the Fallist students envisioned and fought for are still missing. Reasons for

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this may include economic issues, bureaucracies that at times stall progress, capacity issues linked to workload, and still ongoing distrust of African knowledge despite the calls for more decolonial approaches. All of these and many other challenges might be important hindrances to consider when looking at limits to decolonial approaches, both inside and outside of academia. I also argue that we are limited by a kind of epistemological and pedagogical slavery, where decolonial scholars and institutions use conflicting Western systems of knowledge in producing and sharing African or indigenous knowledge (Frediani, 2020).

There is a reliance on Western methodologies for knowledge production, a reliance on Western schooling systems for how society engages with and uses the knowledge, and even a reliance on inaccessible Western systems like universities, libraries and museums for how knowledge is stored and preserved (Makoni, 2010). Instead, there should be exploration on coupling the production of African knowledge and curriculum changes with methods that better complement it. The disruption of these Western methods is not without its challenges. These methods are imposed and seen as objective scientific truth. Research that does not comply with its standards runs the risk of being viewed as unscientific and unreliable (Wa Thiong'o, 1987; Sithole, 2005). The skills of those who acquire knowledge and skills outside of Western methods are not recognised. This creates challenges in the exploration and implementation of the kind of methods I want to discuss in this article.

This article explores a method which draws on discussions related to pre-colonial educations in Africa. Some of these strategies, like rite-of-passage initiation schools, though pre-colonial, still have a lot of relevance today (Seroto, 2011). The discussion will pull from a common Zulu practice, which is also found in other African cultures. The practice of *ukuthunywa* loosely translates to 'being sent to run errands'. This is usually done as a way of balancing chores and dividing labour in the household. It can also represent an important sign of respect and service from children or young adults towards the elders who raised them. Embedded in many of these activities are important skills that are likely to have been passed down from grandparents to parents to children. Generally, the sender/parent/educator has power over the one who is being sent, but as the one being sent grows up and becomes more empowered, they start to wield more and more of the power. The act of *ukuthunywa* becomes more about being in service to one's family and community, especially the older they get. There is a plurality in the learning the one who is sent acquires. They gain important skills for their own survival and betterment, while also having the communal ethical code on the importance of giving back and supporting one's own community. Through my theorising of the concept, I will show how it can be used as an important methodology for creating knowledge and an equally important pedagogy for sharing knowledge and skills.

Rational behind *ukuthunywa* theorising

It is important to briefly explain the rationale for the discussion on *ukuthunywa* in this article. This theorising is informed in part by my experiences growing up in a predominantly black Zulu community in Kwa Mashu, KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) in South Africa. The realisation of the importance

of this practice is based on 2021 and 2022 PhD fieldwork experiences for a thesis titled, 'Identity and environmental harmony as practised by Table Mountain Doctors: A struggle over land and African healing systems'. The study was an ethnographic one, where I spent roughly five months in the field. Mountain Doctors can easily be spotted mostly in and around the Cape Town city centre, and are also scattered in different parts of the city's suburbs. Mountain Doctors are also spread out all over the Western Cape, mostly occupying natural spaces like caves, mountains, veld and so on. Mountain Doctors also refer to themselves as 'Rastas', 'Khoi', 'San', 'Sakmanne', and other names. They mostly wear brown hessian sacks. They walk barefoot and grow their hair long as an indication of their African pride. They wear brown hessian material as a symbol of their rejection of material wealth and name themselves after this material, the sackcloth. The sackcloth is also significant in the Rastafarian and Christian religions, which are two of the many pluralistic, sometimes conflicting identities Mountain Doctors draw on (Settler, 2018). The cloth also symbolises their complete devotion to and unity with nature and is similar to the biblical story of Jacob in Genesis 37: 32–36, as well as also representing mourning. Jacob mourns what he believes is the death of his son Joseph by wearing sackcloth.

I first met the Mountain Doctors in 2015, when I lived in Cape Town. I had moved there for an internship after struggling to find work closer to home in KZN. I met them when I was going through some health challenges and a particular difficult time as a young adult who was now responsible for myself. The stresses of the new challenging work environment and the financial burdens of trying to survive in the most expensive city in South Africa on a tiny R2,500 (139 USD) research internship salary overwhelmed me. I started to experience varying health challenges. I turned to Mountain Doctors for medicine and a connection grew out of these interactions. I maintained contact with them in different ways over the years, until the fieldwork and beyond.

Like Jacob in The Bible, the Mountain Doctors similarly mourn the colonial erasure that led to the loss of their Khoi and San culture, language, history, land and sense of self (Bam, 2021). This community is made up mostly of coloured and black youth who have 'escaped' from modern life due to their struggles in finding employment or educational opportunities. They also run from the poverty, crime and drug influences which they face in the communities they come from. They partly live off the land, and sell medicines and herbs for income. Most of these medicines are sold in city centres and more densely populated towns (Hunter, 2016). Most of the medicine sold in Cape Town comes from Table Mountain, and some of it from as far afield as the Eastern Cape and Northern Cape. The medicine is sold very cheaply because the main objective is not profit, but healing. The medicine typically includes wild ginger and garlic, red carrots, buchu, weed (marijuana), African potato and many other medicinal tree roots, bark, leaves, and even rocks. Much of the Mountain Doctors' knowledge of ecology and herbs is a revitalisation of Khoi and San practices rooted in African spiritual cosmology that suggests there is interconnectedness between people, ancestors, spiritual beings and ecology (Shange, 2024).

While conducting fieldwork, I realised that the way this group engages with indigenous knowledge is more than just engaging with the 'content', namely nature/plants as an objective external source. There is an Africanness embedded in how they share and produce the

knowledge with me as a researcher and with each other, especially the newer Mountain Doctors who are yet to learn the sackcloth way. This is the method which I will theorise on, which I have labelled *ukuthunywa*. The word is borrowed from Zulu, meaning to run errands, to assist or be in service to something or someone else. In some ways, the Mountain Doctors are the ones who sent me on the errand to do this study on them. This is because they wanted a different narrative of who they are portrayed in society. Those I encountered narrated the challenges they had/have when it comes to popular acceptance and understanding of who they are. Many researchers they have historically worked with were more concerned with the herbs and not these cultural dimensions and exclusions that bothered Mountain Doctors. *Bangithuma* (they sent me) to explore these and other challenges that they encounter and to share more about their experiences. *Ukuthunywa* became an important tool for initiating the study and for sharing the information. The manner in which *ukuthunywa* is used by Mountain Doctors is particularly important when they share less commonly known or sacred knowledge, or knowledge constructed through dreams and visions (Shange, 2024).

Identifying and activating *ukuthunywa* during the fieldwork

Many African cultural groups believe dreams and visions are important messages from their ancestors (Mbiti 1997). Some believe these dreams and visions are answers to their prayers or communication from God, ancestors, or other spiritual beings. They are able to construct knowledge and everyday experiences through interpreting these visions, testing and applying them in their lives (Chilisa, 2012). The interpretation, application and testing of dream is done in ways that are quite similar to how we come up with a hypothesis in research, construct the appropriate methodology and produce scientific findings. Mountain Doctors also believe that dreams are important messages from their ancestors. This way of constructing and sharing knowledge created some challenges earlier on in the fieldwork, as my approach was that of Western methodology. I mostly regarded tangible documenting and recording like formal interviews, capturing pictures, videos, artefacts, and various other elements that form part of social life and might be important for the study. These reinforce the researcher's 'outsiderness' and can potentially perpetuate some of the power imbalances the researcher brings to the field of study (Mann and Stewart, 1997).

The active participation required in the *ukuthunywa* approach in part addresses the power imbalance between the researcher and participants. This approach at times leads to brief moments where both researcher and participants briefly forget the research process and focus on just doing social life together. The power dynamics are forgotten, even if only temporarily; the researcher's power and privilege are relinquished. During those moments genuine bonds are created and knowledge of the research field is developed a lot more organically than it would be if the process only revolved around recording observations and discussions. While documenting is also important on some level for the Mountain Doctors, what is most important is learning through experiences. One must learn through varying levels of participation and through the 'learner' also influencing the creation of the knowledge whilst consuming it. The same expectation

was placed on me, too; being framed as a learner further helped to reduce the power imbalance where the researcher is seen or sees themselves as 'all-knowing' and more important because of institutional affiliation (Shange, 2024).

This relabelling from researcher to learner or novice meant slowing down certain research processes. The focus was more on getting to know people on a human level and not only as participants to extract data from. Instead of engaging in processes like interviews, which some were not comfortable doing until they knew me better, I had to just focus on getting to know people. Caution had to be adopted in doing things like observations, which are considered rude or more like spying in many African contexts (Keane, 2021). I had to focus more on just being, existing amongst them, and participating in various elements of social life, even when they had little or nothing to do with the study. At first this caused concern, as I worried my documenting was not strong or detailed enough. There were moments where I did start to do the documenting and was often caught off guard when I realised in many instances that I already knew the answers to some of the questions. I already knew the spiritual, social, and medical uses for certain herbs, their indigenous names, other commonly known names, where they are found, and many other things. This is because in many instances I had already engaged in foraging these herbs with the Mountain Doctors or I had worked with them in the city selling the herbs. I had lived experiences where we did not find the herbs in locations where we hoped we would find them because of changes in weather patterns or because other groups had been there before us. These experiences were better engraved in my memory than observations or interviews would have been (Shange, 2024).

Ukuthunywa as a return to African interconnected ways of knowing

It was during this process where I started to note the challenges in using Western methods to document African knowledge. One of the main challenges is, African knowledge is often constructed in non-discipline-specific ways (Ramose, 2005). This can clash with the Western temptation to box or cluster knowledge into subjects that do not interconnect. When having certain experiences around the foraging of a single herb, it would be clear that many disciplines are active in that singular event. There is geography and ecology involved in the knowledge of where to find a specific herb and why it is found in that area. There is knowledge on sustainability which is sometimes linked to spirituality and religion. This might be evident when certain rituals are performed that ensure that the herbs are collected in sustainable ways or that they leave signs that show that other Mountain Doctors have recently been in the area. This often means considering a different location to source the herbs, to avoid depleting a specific plant in that area. There is knowledge of biology and anthropology when engaging with the many uses of a herb for healing daily or regular applications, its spiritual usefulness, and so on. Many other disciplines and discourse might be active in a single event around the foraging, selling and using of a single herb. *Ukuthunywa* allows one to collectively engage with those pluralistic disciplines that are active in a single event/process, while Western epistemology and methodology tend to

encourage one to separate disciplines, even when it is difficult or ill-advised to do so (LenkaBula, 2007).

It is hard to pinpoint when exactly in the research process I became *isitithunywa* (the one who is sent/called to learn). This is because I already had a relationship with some Mountain Doctors, while I was meeting others for the first time. Those I knew trusted me almost immediately and the process of transitioning into isitithunywa happened quickly, often in a few days. The groups I met for the first time took longer to transfer this trust, especially when I met them alone; the trust came more easily when I was introduced by other Mountain Doctors. Different encounters like rituals, herb harvests or traveling from one location to another would last for long periods, at times an entire week. Constantly being in close proximity to each other for long periods helped in creating fast bonds. The vulnerability that the covid lockdown caused also helped in this relationship building, as we all wanted to take care of one another. In some cases, the end of a week-long herb harvest saw the isitithunywa role transferred by the end of the process. No matter how close we became, there was still the understanding that I would eventually leave. I was not there for extended periods like other Mountain Doctor apprentices and, as such, my isitithunywa role remained limited. I was often asked to stay out of dangerous herb harvests, more for my own safety, but also at times to protect the location, especially in instances where it was privately own farms or places that have herbs that carry a more sacred status to the Mountain Doctors (Shange, 2024). Ukuthunywa in the household is similar in some ways, the individual's roles and responsibilities evolve as they grow and change. New roles are given, while others are withdrawn, these shifts are informed by those who are custodians of the knowledge. The growth, evolution and even prohibitions are all part of the learning. Similar to my fieldwork experience, the child or adolescent will not be in the home for forever, they will eventually leave and when they do, it is important that they are ready to tackle the new environment and changes.

Challenges in applying Western Methodology to study African Indigenous Knowledge

The conflict in trying to apply Western methodologies to study indigenous knowledge also revolves around ethics. Moyra Keane (2021) critiques the manner in which ethics fails to see the world as interdependent, while more applicable Afrocentric worldviews like *ubuntu*[1] are cognisant of this interconnectedness and even encourage it. This is not to say that ethical standards should be disregarded; instead, this article raises the dangers of blindly following Western cultural bias. The South African San Institute (SASI) raises similar concerns and provides criteria for research. They have developed ethical guidelines that are simple and easily comprehensible, not veiled in complex academic jargon and traditions. SASI simply requires the researcher to respect the community, cultural religious practices, the environment, history, and

[1] The main *ubuntu* premise is an African philosophy on personhood. The main tenant of it is; *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, loosely translated to 'I am because we are' or 'I am because you are' (Ramose, 2005).

the individuals they encounter. They also require honesty and transparency, and researchers are encouraged not to veil information on the research process and goals in complex and confusing academic language, but instead present it in easy and clear to understand ways (South African San Institute, 2007).

SASI requires that the participants inform the study and what the researcher should explore; this is perhaps one of the biggest contradictions. Most higher education ethics processes require the scholar to fully develop a research proposal, methodology, research design, and so on before entering the research field. While this is an important practice to ensure that the researcher does not cause any harm, it also leaves very little room for the participants to steer the study in what they believe is the right direction. The participants steer the study by guiding the researcher to do research that advances them. This is done in similar ways to what I will suggest in *ukuthunywa* theorising. Methods here become just as important as something like language issues. As a researcher, one technically does not go into a Xhosa-speaking community and communicate with them in Pedi, you must engage with them in their language or similar languages they can better understand and relate to. The same should be true for research methods, the participants should actively participate in constructing them in ways that benefit them first, and the scholarship is secondary. Additionally, the researcher's contribution to the methodology should not be confusing and alienating. SASI regards these guidelines as an important step towards justice and fairness within research. Doing this also ensures that another important goal is met; that is, the research should be done in caring ways that align with communities' real-world experiences (South African San Institute, 2007).

Trapping African knowledge in Western epistemological systems

African knowledge recently suffered a big loss when a fire ripped through arguably one of the most important African Studies libraries on the continent. This fire in Cape Town in April 2021 spread to the University of Cape Town and destroyed parts of the African Studies library. Over 70,000 items were lost. These included published print collections, films in DVD format, administrative records, manuscripts, archives, and government publications from South Africa and across the continent (Kirkwood, et al., 2023). The news of the fire shook decolonial scholars in Africa and across the world. It threatened an already underrepresented knowledge system and negatively impacted some of the progress that has been made. Much of what was lost in the fire is work that will never be recovered. In Africa, knowledge is traditionally communally produced, shared, and owned (Khupe and Keane, 2017). Western systems encourage the containment and individual ownership of knowledge, which makes it challenging to reconstruct what was lost in the fire. This presents an even bigger problem when it comes to reproducing African knowledge because a lot of practices have already been lost. Some indigenous knowledge systems are barely accessible thanks to the colonial history that viewed African knowledge as inferior and went out of its way to actively erase African knowledge and the cultural processes that produced it (Sindane, 2020). The fire undid the progress that had been made in revitalising African ideals through recorded scholarship, art, and many other destroyed records. *Ukuthunywa* as a process

rooted in sharing and communal ownership is important because it ensures accessibility. The familial and community bonds shared during this process ensure that it is more than just knowledges and skills that are being shared. Important ethics rooted in care and services are also transferred, these are significant for the continuation of the practice of *ukuthunywa*. This in part frees knowledge from the Western neoliberal trappings that make it inaccessible to the masses who are the true custodians of this knowledge (Shange, 2024). Many other virtues are shared, as the one being sent/taught experiences an array of individual and collective experiences and histories during the process.

Despite all the positive strides that have been made to give African knowledge greater prominence, something is still missing because it is still far from where it needs to be on the continent and in the world. Often Western ideals are still invoked to deal with the challenges faced by the African continent, even when local solutions make more sense. There are many things we can draw from to make sense of why the progress is slow. One such argument could be around the missing, undervalued African Renaissance. If Africans are not united in their own efforts and are still divided by colonial borders, then the world will not see Africa's strength and capabilities (Nkrumah, 1963). One could also argue that while African ideals are gaining prominence, they are often only invoked as an 'alternative' or afterthought. Arguably, even with *umhlonyane*, it was only from the desperation caused by the covid pandemic that people turned to it. This African herb helped many in Africa during the pandemic, especially during the major waves that overwhelmed and threatened to cripple healthcare systems. The scientific name for *umhlonyane* is *Artemisia afra*; also commonly known as African wormwood (Laplante, 2015). It was also the herb Madagascar's President Andry Rajoelina named when he alleged that Africans had the cure for covid in 2020. The news was met with shock throughout the globe and the announcement was quickly declared unscientific because it had not been tested and verified. Moreover, the World Health Organisation warned against its use (Loussouf, 2020). Despite these warnings, many South Africans still rushed to use *umhlonyane* and other herbs (Feni and Khoza, 2020).

Many leaders remained sceptical of this herb rather than investing in exploring its potential benefits in the fight against covid. Traditional healers in South Africa also repeatedly expressed their concerns over being left out of important public health discussions and decisions around the fight against covid. They insisted they had valuable knowledge, but were not consulted or offered a seat at the table during important discussions (Langa, 2020), even as the world dealt with one of the most important public health challenges requiring unified, representative solutions. African-led science and solutions were still not good enough to recognise. Perhaps one of the reasons for this is society's thinking around the usefulness of something like *umhlonyane.* Our thinking was still clouded by Western understandings of testing and falsifying

in order to produce what is considered valid knowledge. A *sangoma*[2] -led approach, rooted in *ukuthunywa* approaches might have used different methods to come to a similar conclusion.

Knowledge sharing when it comes to herbs, nature and ecological significances linked to cultural religion is often shared through *ukuthunywa* in different African contexts. This is one of the many lessons the Mountain Docotrs envoked *ukuthunywa* for. During my research experience, this is how Mountain Doctors would teach me about certain herbs and their healing and spiritual significance. I participated in the harvesting of the herbs and rituals linked to the harvest. I would be taught the kind of environment the herb/s can be found in, when to harvest it, and when not to take it for sustainability and other reasons. At the market, I would also observe and gradually participate in the interaction with the broader community and clients, especially as my knowledge of the herbs became stronger. With every experience I would learn more and more about the usefulness of different herbs, rather than relying on documenting alone, which was important, but not the only way of learning. During the pandemic, people used similar *ukuthunywa* informed tenets for educating each other about the perceived benefits of herbs like *umhlonyane*. Many would pull from personal stories about how they believed the herb helped them, how they came to learn of it, where they acquired it, and what its benefits are. People were in service to each other, ensuring those around them and beyond knew how cheap and accessible *umhlonyane* was. This was also significant given that South African private healthcare is expensive and inaccessible, and public healthcare is often overwhelmed and also somewhat inaccessible (Ramose and Sethuntsa, 2020). These methods are even more disregarded in Western systems than the object (e.g., *umhlonyane*) or knowledge being explored. Therefore, new or old African methods must be explored to ensure that this knowledge is advanced instead of threatened.

Reimagining African epistemology

There is an important method of passing down useful skills that one still finds in African households today. Zulu people refer to it as *ukuthunywa/thuma* – the Sotho, Pedi and Tswana have a similar practice and call it *roma*, which means 'send', or *go roma* loosely translated as 'to send'. As children, many often hated it, because it took them away from their games, watching TV, or general leisure time. The English translation of 'being sent/asked to run errands' does not adequately represent what it means, but is an important start for understanding this practice. Beyond simply running errands, there is an important element of being in service, of caring and sharing that is embedded within *ukuthunywa.* This notion of being in service has important similarities with the African philosophy of *ubuntu*, as Ramose (2005) writes:

> *Ubuntu* is the root of African philosophy. The being of an African in the universe is inseparably anchored upon *ubuntu*. Similarly, the African tree of knowledge stems from *ubuntu* with which it is connected indivisibly. *Ubuntu* then is the wellspring flowing with

[2] A *sangoma* (singular) or *izangoma* (plural) is one example of the kinds of African healers that exist in South Africa. They rely on plant medicine and rituals for healing. Their powers and knowledge they possess come from ancestors (Nkabinde & Morgan 2006).

> African ontology and epistemology. If these latter are the bases of philosophy, then African philosophy has long been established through *ubuntu*. Our point of departure is that *ubuntu* may be seen as the basis of African philosophy. Apart from a linguistic analysis of *ubuntu*, a persuasive philosophical argument can be made that there is a 'family atmosphere', that is, a kind of philosophical affinity and kinship among and between the indigenous people of Africa. No doubt there will be variations within this broad philosophical 'family atmosphere'. But the blood circulating through the 'family' members is the same in its basics. In this sense, *ubuntu* is the basis of African philosophy. (Ramose, 2005: 83–84)

The caring that is embedded in *ukuthunywa* and rooted in *ubuntu* ideals is evident when it is activated by younger family members to take care of the elders from whom these various skills once came. This is done to lighten the elders' load, while also continuing the tradition of collectively creating and sharing useful knowledge and skills. This practice is not without its challenges; colonialism, apartheid, and the rise of neoliberalism in South Africa and the continent as a whole have in different ways threatened *ukuthunywa* practices. The migrant labour system took parents far away from home and weakened the important transfer of skills that parents or neighbours might have possessed and historically shared with others. The labour system and other apartheid disruptions to the African family structure also led to children taking on more tasks in the home, often domestic labour and not a diverse set of important skills (Murray, 1981). The older children, in particular, often had to pick between things like taking care of younger siblings and their own formal education or later work or other important personal developmental opportunities. Today, in many ways, families are still faced with these challenges despite Apartheid being over. Despite these challenges, this practice still has a greater historical tradition as an important epistemological tool for producing and sharing knowledge. Even when it came to storing and preserving knowledge in the historical and contemporary setting, it was done in such a way that it was still easily accessible. It would be stored as rock art, songs and performances, everyday crafts, and practices. And contrary to Western beliefs that Africans never wrote or documented, for cultures such as the Egyptians, Khoi, San, Ashanti and many others, knowledge was even stored as written inscriptions (Djait, 1995; Jacobson and Noli, 2018).

The problem burdening African writing and documenting is not that Africans never wrote. The issue is the narrow Western views of what counts as written inscription and what does not (Djait,1995). While oral traditions were more prominent in African traditions, history, and knowledge, it does not mean other forms of communicating and knowledge-sharing like writing did not exist. This is a reductionist view that paints Africans in oppressive colonial ways and perpetuates the view that knowledge and history did not exist before Western settlers arrived. Oral traditions are not an absence of skills, they are methods in their own right. Oral traditions have as much importance as other forms of documenting or written sources (Ngara, 2007; Vansina, 1995). The idea of a written source is ambiguous and broad. If the most important thing about writing is to communicate a certain message and sounds through codes, then things like

rock art are important forms of written sources. Rock art communicates important historical, spiritual, astronomical, geographical, ecological, and other information. Additionally, African inscriptions were not adequately studied and examined in the way that Western or Asian text usually is/was. One of the few exceptions is Egyptian hieroglyphs. There is very little other exploration of precolonial African ways of recording and written sources (Djait, 1995).

In the precolonial context, African knowledge was frequently produced and shared as a collective and built into day-to-day practices. They were not crafted as separate experiences in the way that mainstream education and research is done (Seroto, 2011; Shange 2021a). This method of learning and knowledge production is still evident in different parts of African social life. Many African households prescribe roles to children at a very early age, in gradual steps, through this practice of *ukuthunywa.* For example, children initially just have to watch while the grown-ups or older children perform certain tasks; as time goes on, children are expected to take on more and more responsibilities in general. Children participate in the domestic work, the family trade or even in helping neighbours and other community members with their craft. The older they get and the more skilled they become, the more responsibilities they are given. These responsibilities might include teaching others in similar ways, first through observation and later through gradual participation. Similar examples of this practice can also be found in the Shona people in Zimbabwe, where a child is seen as the whole community or village's responsibility. This means the whole community is responsible for raising and educating a child in various ways. All children are seen as apprentices and their more skilled educators teach them different crafts and skills (Ngara, 2007).

Even in examples of precolonial education like initiation schools, far greater emphasis was placed on more practical learning or the idea of *ukuthunywa.* These initiation schools would occur periodically over an individual's lifespan. They often marked certain rites of passage and important knowledge or lessons were passed on. Various age groups would attend the initiation schools, often for several months, based on age, gender and other social identifiers. These schools were often far away from the community or family and the students would return ready to apply the knowledge they had gained at the initiation school. After some time, they would attend again to learn different lessons or to build on the previous teachings. At times, the schools would also be used to carry out medical procedures and rituals, like circumcision for boys in Xhosa culture. Different cultural groups have different frequency preferences when it comes to how often the schools should take place and how long they should last (Krige, 1938; Seroto, 2011). Even the knowledge *izangoma*[3] have is acquired in similar ways. They go to initiation school when they get the calling to be healers. This calling usually comes in the form of dreams and visions. These come from their ancestors, then they go to initiation school. The training often happens in the home or the practice of a more experienced healer or teacher, or it happens in a communally shared space, often in nature. Unlike the rite of passage schools, in initiation schools, there is no age for the calling. This process can last anything from serval months to a few years,

[3] *izangoma* (plural) is one example of the kinds of African healers that exist in South Africa.

depending on the methods of the teacher and on what the *thwasa* (apprentice healer) is called to learn (Mpono, 2007). *Izangoma* are sent to learn by their ancestors, through their calling. Just like in the household in their developmental years, they learn through a process of gradual participation, acquiring more and more responsibilities the more they learn and master previous tasks and ideologies. The new *thwasa* learns from a combination of the older or more experienced *amathwasa*[4] and the lead sangoma/teacher (Thornton, 2017). Once again, this process mimics the way *ukuthunywa* is used in the household, those that are slightly more experienced teach the novice, sometimes with the support of the far more experienced parent, grandparent, relative or expert within the community. Upon completing their training, *izangoma* have a duty to use what they have learnt in service of the community.

Some challenges arise in the rejection or the disruption of methods like *ukuthunywa* and the move towards purely Western mainstream methods. Students are almost exclusively taught in theoretical ways, separate from their everyday experiences. At times, this makes it difficult to understand and value the knowledge and its place in society. Simultaneously, these simpler ways of producing and sharing knowledge are questioned or presented as inferior. This is often because they do not mimic the sometimes unnecessarily overly complex Western methods which are presented as objective and scientific truth (Shange, 2021b). Knowledge goes from being communally owned to being owned by an individual researcher or institution because this is what is promoted by Western pedagogies, methodologies and society as a whole (Young, 2005). This limits who has access to the information and even who has the right to use it.

At times, even the communities from which the knowledge originally came are limited by copyright laws and other regulations constraining them from engaging fully with their indigenous knowledge (Bannister and Solomon, 2009). One example of this is the criminalising of weed (marijuana), an important herb used for several reasons, including recreational, and religious purposes. An African healer might use it to get into a trance to get visions or communicate with ancestors. Others use it for health reasons, with increasing research confirming what African cultural groups have long known about weed's incredible healing properties (Duvail, 2019). And even though more research is becoming available on the usefulness of weed, different African indigenous groups long familiar with it are left out in its mainstreaming and research discoveries. We now know the health benefits or ecologically sustainable uses linked to weed, where biodegradable goods like clothes, packaging, and many other things can be made using weed or hemp. Weed was first labelled a drug in 1925, which led to its global prohibition (Duvail, 2019). This move created challenges for communities who relied on weed for various reasons. Their cultural practices were deemed as criminal actions. The more recent decriminalising and deeper exploration of weed in South Africa and across the global still sees indigenous communities barred from using weed. Lengthy, expensive bureaucratic processes are often required to get a licence to use or sell the herb. Many people of colour globally still get arrested for weed possession despite the move to decriminalise it (Duvail, 2019).

[4] Plural form of *thwasa* (apprentice healer).

The adoption and possible mainstreaming of methods like *ukuthunywa* has the potential to restore sidelined African practices, while putting knowledge that belongs to indigenous groups back in their hands and freeing it from Western administrative and bureaucratic systems. This theorising on *ukuthunywa* is important because it illustrates just one of the ways that Africans construct and share knowledge. Often when doing decolonial research, scholars run into difficulties. This is because they still use Western tools to explore African phenomena; this creates a disconnect, especially because of the often narrow definitions of what constitutes reliable, scientific research. Decolonial scholars must often mould and manipulate their work to fit into Western methodological standards, usually at the expense of the African phenomena they are unpacking (Bam, 2021; Shange, 2024). This is also a challenge I constantly had to navigate during my research process, especially in my fieldwork. It was one of the seemingly smaller university ethics requirements that caused the greatest threat to the study. This was the issue of the consent form.

Ukuthunywa methodology and ethics in practice

The university template for the consent form that participants were expected to sign seemed more concerned with legalities and university codes than ensuring that research participants were protected. The concern with legalities is a direction many institutions are increasingly adopting in their ethical consideration processes (Keane, 2021). The form had 12 questions that I had to fill out, some of which were repetitive and asked deep methodological questions. Other questions dealt with details about my supervisor or the institution, and not the actual study. I was also expected to translate these answers into Xhosa and Afrikaans. I was able to challenge the Afrikaans on account of not being able to speak the language and it would not make sense for me to try interviewing someone who speaks a language I do not understand. Without the Afrikaans, my consent form still sat at 10 pages long. It was hard enough gaining people's trust, at times after days or weeks of informal flexible interaction, I would bring out this huge stack of papers usually in preparation for the more formal recorded interviews. It caused a lot of fear, and a small handful dropped out of the study because they were not comfortable signing something they had not read, even when I took the time to explain everything page by page. Others told me stories of professionals, researchers or politicians who have come to their communities in the past asking them to sign similar-looking documents with the promise of developing their neighbourhoods with schools, jobs, or clinics. When they would come back it would be to erect developments or industries they do not agree with, which would bring more problems to the community. Other times it would be to evict them of their land (Akolgo-Azupogo, et al., 2021). They would be powerless to resist because they would be shown their grandparents' signatures on these documents, or consent from illiterate family or community members who would not have been able to provide informed consent (Shange, 2024).

This kind of history is quite well known in South Africa. So, when research approaches use these tactics, it raises questions about the very ethics or scientific reliability of these methods. Some of the methodological questions, for example, were hard to answer without complex

academic jargon that ethics committees require, but which simultaneously alienate the participants. Scientific methods and things like ethics are not universal blanket approaches, they must be utilised within the context for which they are intended, which is what I am attempting with *ukuthunywa* methodological theorising. I remedied this challenge by doing what I had been taught to do growing up when I was in this kind of situation, in need of help from a neighbour or a stranger, and that was:

- *Ukuzithoba*, loosely translating to humbling myself. I could not do this with the long consent form which in part required me to list a long education background and research expertise. This I had to present to communities and people who fought for and deserved similar rights, but had been deprived of them. This ends up coming across as bragging, not an introduction. This goes against *ukuzithoba*. *Ukuzithoba* also includes greeting and enquiring about the person or family's general state, which includes their health state, especially in the covid context in which the study was being carried out. One must be willing to engage a long time and deeply in this first step and it is considered rude and suspicious to provide quick responses. Things like humour and active listening are important, they allow you to probe further on certain things. The participant will do the same and one must offer the information they are enquiring about.
- Secondly, the researcher/s must introduce themselves. Unlike the university mandated consent form, this has little to do with my research study or qualifications. After sharing my name, I share where I am from, who my parents are, and even give reference to siblings. Informal conversation about my family may also be appropriate at this stage, especially if there is intriguing cultural history or commonalities to share. The introduction is less about me as the individual and more about the external collective context I belong to.
- I had to *bika*, which loosely translates to stating my case or intentions. It is only here where I would get into my research and why I am there. I had designed a shorter one-page consent form which exclusively had information about the research and my research goals. At this step I can also introduce my qualifications; many would be reading the form while I explain things in more detail. Otherwise, they would have finished reading it and would be signing before I was even done explaining everything or why they needed to sign.
- When access has been granted and the researcher returns to the field to conduct their fieldwork or interviews, they must once again be ready to be of service to the participants. They must avoid treating this process like a transaction with brief, strict timeframes for the interactions. While some time allocation is important for the continuity of the work and to strike a balance between not overstaying your welcome and not leaving prematurely, flexibility is essential. Linked to this, is communicating with the participants and understanding what works best for them instead of single-handedly making decisions. Just as the participants determine the main research theme, they also determine how their theme should be explored and important considerations or case

> studies the researcher should bring into the overall publication, project or thesis (South African San Institute, 2007). As already mentioned, for me this looked like being immersed into the Mountain Doctor way of life as an almost apprentice. I worked with them in the market as much as possible, engaged in rituals, songs, dances, and other cultural practices, I became involved in hikes to find and harvest herbs and many other things. *Bangithuma* 'they sent me' to firstly learn about them and their practices before we could even do interviews. Even though I had not planned it this way, most of my interviews took place in the last few weeks of the fieldwork. Most of the experience was made up of the practice-driven learning that is key in *ukuthunywa*. This also helped me ask more advanced questions when I finally did do the interviews. This provided a richness and depth in the findings because I had already experienced many of the basics I thought I would ask about. This led me to other discoveries or questions that were far more interesting to engage with in the interviews.

Even though the first three steps are divided, they are interconnected. The first two steps form an important part of African greetings that have social and psychological significance (Egblewogbe, 1990; Wójtowicz, 2021). The Zulu greeting *sawubona*, for instance, translates as 'we see you', which at its core instils a sense of self. The plural prefix *sa* (we) is used even by an individual and has *ubuntu* connotations to it. The *sa* shows the communalism embedded in African understandings of the self. It can represent the family or community one belongs to, even if they are not physically there, as well as one's ancestors, which many Africans believe are with them all the time. Engaging the participants in their language or closely related language is important so that veiled codes can be communicated adequately (Blumer, 1986). These steps help in part to address the power imbalance between researcher and participants. This introduction is a lengthy process, it is not the conventional quick greeting or introduction. Taking the time to slow down and engage someone for this period of time is an important way to build trust and means the participants are more likely to agree to participate. When they refuse, one must still express gratitude; in some cases, those who refused would reach out days later having changed their minds. This was because their refusal did not lead to me rushing to move onto the next thing, especially when they wanted to engage me further or their children were intrigued or asking me a lot of questions. This is because, while securing an interview is important, the process is less transactional and is more focused on your own and the other person's humanity, which is enriched by the interaction, even if you did not get your desired response.

Limitations in the application of *ukuthunywa*

Some of the limitations of applying *ukuthunywa* have been discussed throughout the paper in different ways. These include the rigid 'universal' principles often applied to doing research in universities and different structures. This and similar decolonial methods might struggle to find meaning and acceptance in modern day structures (Keane, 2021). Another limitation is a flaw in the ideology itself. If the individual who has been sent to run the errand/research fails, they may

disappoint their community and potentially be alienated by the community. I experienced this challenge in part when I was dealing with institutions like museums, libraries, and spaces where archives are held. Many Mountain Doctors believed I should have boycotted these structures because they are contributors to the oppression of Black and indigenous people. They pleaded with local museums, in particular, to release the human remains that are still kept in their Archaeology and other research units. Many museums locally and globally still hold onto human remains violently collected during different waves of colonialism across the world. Affected indigenous groups across the world found this practice unethical, problematic and dehumanising (Lans, 2021). The Mountain Doctors believed engaging with such structures would taint the work that had been done, but this step was an important part of the academic rigour needed in the research. This point was debated for months and after some time, the Mountain Doctors who I worked the most closely with finally agreed; but not all of them did.

Another limitation was that the reciprocity required for the successful application of *ubuntu*-rooted *ukuthunywa* is not always possible, especially in the funding-scarce climate research takes place in today. Impactful knowledge sharing and initiatives with participants can be time consuming and costly. In the case of this study, reciprocity only took place after the study was concluded. Support was provided to Mountain Doctors to enable them to attend my graduation celebration in KZN. One of the things that frequently came up during the fieldwork was the Mountain Doctors' desire to connect with other healers and African traditionalists, like some of those located in KZN. This had not been possible for a number of reasons, particularly the distance and lack of local ties. It was therefore important to ensure that the graduation ceremony became a space of cultural exchanging of ideas and connecting with different important cultural and academic stakeholders. The unintended benefit of this interaction was that the Mountain Doctors gained new clients and were able to continue connecting with them and different cultural stakeholders long after the graduation ceremony. While this is a strength, it also possesses limitations because a gesture of this nature will not always be possible.

Mountain Doctors during my graduation celebration, interacting with guests and sharing knowledge of their culture and experiences

Conclusion

Western institutions like the market or academic systems disincentivise practices like *ukuthunywa;* even in families the practices have become less about skills transfer. However, as academics and scholars, we have a greater responsibility through decolonial discourse to explore and revitalise methods like *ukuthunywa,* both in research and teaching strategies. *Ukuthunywa* ensures that knowledge and skills are active, live, constantly being transferred or engaged in in different ways. It also provides an important opportunity to build on African pedagogy and epistemology. One major difference between this way of learning and Western systems of learning and knowledge production is that the process is communal in its ownership and freely shared with students or those willing to learn, rather than storing potentially lifesaving knowledge in libraries, buildings, and online platforms that limit access to the public who might not be able to afford tuition or journal fees. This traps the knowledge that decolonial scholars attempt to free through exploration. Libraries and different ways of storing knowledge are still very useful. It is not being suggested that they be disregarded; instead, they should become more accessible in similar ways to how knowledge produced through *ukuthunywa* is accessible and actively spread.

This article has theorised *ukuthunywa*. Examples of this system still exist today through various rites of passage practiced by different cultural groups. These impart valuable knowledge the individual or group needs in order to be able to better navigate the next stage of their lives. The article concludes by discussing practical ways researchers can use *ukuthunywa* methodology. This discussion was juxtaposed with the challenges to adopting methodologies like *ukuthunywa,* where I also discussed how I was able to navigate some of these challenges in the case of my PhD research. The main challenges of Western scholarship are when it presents itself as the only

useful science or way of knowing. This is a threat to new or old methodologies, especially when they do not have agreeable Western origins. This means the developing and academic recording and exploring of African methods is critical. This provides students and educators with a source to draw on, especially when the scientific validity of their methods is questioned or rejected entirely.

Author Biography

Nombulelo Tholithemba Shange is a sociology lecturer at the University of the Free State, where she obtained a PhD in Anthropology. She also holds a Master's in Sociology from Rhodes University. Her research focus includes indigenous knowledge systems, African indigenous churches, environmental justice, gender, and race discourse.

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