Exploring Ubuntu-Based Research Methodologies in Southern African Bantu People's Embodied Movements: Ethical Considerations, Community-Based Strategies, and Philosophy

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Abstract

This paper investigates the complex overlap between Ubuntu research methodologies, the bodily expressions of Southern African Bantu communities, and the philosophical foundations of dance in comprehending cultural diversity. Drawing from ethnographic fieldwork in the Gwembe Valley Tonga community in Zambia in 2022, the author highlights the importance of Ubuntu research methodologies in encouraging cross-cultural understanding and mutual respect. The paper underscores how embodied movements within Bantu cultures capture identity, tradition, and community organisation beyond mere performance. It explores the historical and cultural context of Bantu people's embodied movements, connecting them to Ubuntu principles of interconnectedness and communal welfare. The paper discusses ethical considerations like cultural sensitivity and informed consent, along with community-based strategies rooted in Ubuntu philosophy for fostering individual and collective well-being.

Keywords: Ubuntu Philosophy, Ubuntu-based research, Bantu people, Embodied movements, Ethical considerations, Community-based strategies

Introduction

The writing explores the integration of the Ubuntu/Unhu conceptual and philosophical principles into the qualitative ethnographic research methodology carried out among the Bantu Tonga structured bodily movements during a Budima performance. It seeks deep comprehension of the ethical considerations, community-based strategies, and philosophical frameworks that should form the basis of research designs within Southern African Bantu communities.

This exploration seeks to illustrate how Ubuntu/Unhu conceptual principles can not only steer but also enhance the methodologies used, nurturing a more inclusive and culturally attuned approach to research. In the text, the author recounts his autoethnographic journey, addressing challenges in a master's program and subsequent research in the Gwembe Valley Tonga community. The primary emphasis of the author's experience lies in the complexities between African and European/Western knowledge and research methodologies.

In conventional academic research, examining human behavior is considered a science guided by ethical principles. Wiles (2012) considers obtaining informed consent, ensuring anonymity and confidentiality, and addressing risks and safety in the field among others, as aspects of ethical literacy or ethical thinking. According to Israel & Hay (2006), ethical thinking aims to encourage behaviors among researchers using qualitative methods to safeguard individuals, environments, and communities ultimately contributing to the advancement of societal well-being. Within Indigenous Bantu communities, Ubuntu embodies a relational philosophy of human existence, with its philosophical principles implicitly expressing ethical literacy in research. To engage meaningfully with Bantu communities, the researcher's ethnographic experience emphasizes the adoption of Ubuntu/Unhu principles in research, benefiting both academic knowledge and the researched community. An Ubuntu/Unhu-based ethnography aims to decolonize research by employing Indigenous Knowledge Systems grounded in the fundamental understanding of Bantu ethical and communal

concepts. Such an Indigenous knowledge systems approach is embodied in the Ubuntu/ Unhu framework and makes it applicable to the research about the Indigenous Gwembe Valley Tonga culture by adhering to local moral code rules.

Maren Kristin Seehawer (2018)'s *Decolonising Research in a Sub-Saharan Context: exploring Ubuntu as a Foundation for Research Methodology, Ethics and Agenda* sought to explore Ubuntu as a research paradigm for decolonizing research, drawing on participatory action research with South African science teachers, and aiming to develop and reflect on Ubuntu research ethics, agenda, and methodology. Shreiber and Tomm-Bonde (2015) in *Ubuntu and constructivist grounded theory: an African methodology package* explored Ubuntu values as a suitable ontology for steering qualitative constructivist grounded theory in health phenomena. This article reflects a pragmatic and appropriate ethnographic method used in preparing and entering the field and collecting materials in an Indigenous Bantu community. It emphasizes the importance of genuine and authentic engagement, discouraging pretense or superficiality commonly associated with conventional ethnography.

In a broader research context, the concept of an Ubuntu/Unhu-based research approach aligns with the fundamentals of ethical research. The focus is on cultivating trust and meaningful relationships between the researcher and the researched community. This sets the stage for an in-depth exploration of the intersection between Ubuntu/Unhu principles and qualitative ethnographic research, emphasizing the potential for a transformative and culturally sensitive research model. At this point, I hold back from attempting to define the philosophical principles of Ubuntu/Unhu. Instead, I aspire to convey its sophisticated scope through a lived experience and through inherent Indigenous Shona Karanga and Tsonga identities, relationships, cosmogony, ecologies, and tangible and intangible cultural heritage as well as their knowledge and transmission. My hope is that such a narrative provides a richer perspective for understanding the involved concepts. For the avoidance of repetition, I will just refer to Ubuntu rather than Ubuntu/Unhu.

Conceptualizing Unhu/Ubuntu: Personal Reflections

Having been born to a Shona Karanga dialect-speaking mother and a Nguni Tsonga dialect-speaking father in Mboweni village under Chief Negari in Mwenezi district, Masvingo Province in Zimbabwe, southern Africa, growing up in a patrilineal setup has been a rich cultural experience. N'waChinoto, my mother, was born to VaChinoto (Chief Negari), the royal patrilineage of the Dewa clan. Also known as Vagari, the Negari chieftaincy traces its genealogy back to the Rozvi empire, whose historical traces to Madzimbabwe (The Great Zimbabwe National Monuments) show a sense of heritage but are very controversial. These monuments were designated as a World Heritage site by UNESCO in 1986, and the country derives its name, Zimbabwe, from this significant historical site. Vagari are part of the several traditional leaderships that are recognized by the Zimbabwean constitution to uphold and maintain cultural values and communal order. They identify themselves differently with *Zvidawo* (honorific names) from Dewa Bvumavaranda, Negari, Chimame, or simply by their totem, Moyo. *Chidawo* (singular for Zvidawo) are common historical narrations of the Shona language dialects' geographic origins and current settlements. We learn from this history, which frequently indicates that the Guruuswa Shona origins can be traced back to the Great Lakes region in East-Central Africa. Zvidawo includes their spiritual developments, usually involving *Ivhu* (the land) where their *Matateguru* (ancestors) were buried. Matateguru become ancestral spirits who intercede between the living and Mwari Musikavanhu (God, the creator of humankind). Such narrations reflect cultural values and expectations, relationships with other humans along totemic lines, and ecological consciousness in the form of praise poems usually describing and likening specific animal behaviors. In Tsonga Chidawo is *Ku tlokovetsela.* Ku tlokovetsela/Chidawo narration often gives a unique clan identity, the feeling of great encouragement and cultural belonging, a show of respect for humanity and ecology, a show of remorse, and a call for peace. Whenever N'waChinoto gave that totemic narration to me, I experienced a profound sense of affirmation. It made me feel genuinely acknowledged and affirmed as a man.

The Moyo clan has variations such as VaDuma, Chirandu, and Dhewa, exhibiting complex totemic narrations that I have, until now, not figured out exactly what they mean. We were told about ChiDuma Shona linguistic variation as full of idiomatic expressions and subtext. Moyo means the heart in the Shona language dialects, yet the Chidawo narrations point to the male cattle. They still claim that there is *Moyo umwe* (one Moyo totem despite all the differences in totemic narrations). I came to wonder why my mother never bothered providing me with such finer details of her totem and left me to find it for myself. In most cases, during my teenage years, she would insist that I visit her father's homestead, *KwaSekuru,* in the nearby village for "wisdom" where I would be respected as a *Muzukuru* (their aunt's son or their sister's son or their daughter's son) depending on the person calling me. Due to my mother's birthplace, both the village and surrounding villages would call me Muzukuru. In most cases, the imagined wisdom was expressed in very abstract terms, including idioms and proverbs. I would be given different titles there. My mother's father and my mother's brothers or my mother's brothers' sons would call me either a Muzukuru or *Mukwasha* because I would be representing my father, their son-in-law. They would also jestingly accuse me of pursuing their wives because they would contextually refer to me as their husband. A special dish, usually chicken, would normally be prepared for me, *Murume wenhaka* (the husband whom they said would take over the responsibilities of my uncles if they died). I held the power to solve disputes in their families and keep family secrets. Such relationships would continue as an endless chain between other families and clans. Asking a random person on the street where they come from leads to totemic linkages that establish instant relationships. The same Muzukuru relational situation applied to my Tsonga family side as *Mzaya* or *Tukulu.*

Certain phrases would precede a statement as a warning to the listener to pay attention to the Karanga cultural context embedded and expressed in speech and not take words at face value like "*ChiKaranga chinoti…*" (Karanga cultural context as spoken language

means…) or after a statement as "*Wachihwa here Chikaranga chacho*" (did you get the Karanga culture contextual meaning of what has been said?). My Tsonga uncles would also use such language using phrases such as "*Wa xi twa xi Changana na*?" (Do you understand/have you understood the Changana language?") Such phrases were a reminder of a quick reflection of common cultural concepts and analogies. But then, I later lived to hate the ignorance reflected by my Tsonga people who often equated our language to the colonizers' English by saying *XiChangani xilungu* (Changana is English). Colonization left an embarrassing dent in my people. Failure to understand the expressed idioms would lead to phrases such as "*Apa hapana zve**munhu** apa*" (you are a useless **person** and do not belong). Everyone desired a sense of belonging.

Every black African is presumably a Munhu (in Shona language dialects) or Muntu/Munhu/Mutu in Nguni languages (depending on the dialect) found in much of the land of southern Africa to central Africa. These ethnicities have a common indigenous Bantu conceptual and philosophical grounding premised on Unhu/Ubuntu despite language differences. The term indigenous has been used by UNESCO (2019) to describe people forming their identities, values, and knowledge by interacting with their territories, be it forests or seas. Their languages are shaped by factors such as their historical migrations, physical environments, and common exchanges. Such knowledge qualifies one as having the attributes of a Munhu/Muntu (a living, "cultured", considerate, belonging person among several other attributes). Failure to exhibit such knowledge and qualities renders one a social outcast. Social outcasts are widely believed to have been cursed because of not having observed the expectations of being a Munhu/Muntu. What became apparent is that both Shona and Tsonga languages have subtexts that define their culture. I would rather say that they have a second language to communicate certain information at certain levels depending on the kind of person being communicated to.

The Moyo totem story aligns with my paternal lineage, M'nwanati. My village, Mboweni, derives its name from my Christian missionary

grandparents' uncles. They even named our local school Guiding Star because they brought "light". They journeyed together from South Africa to Zimbabwe and were granted permission by Chief Negari to settle, thus founding the Mboweni village where the predominantly Tsonga-speaking community thrives. We never succeeded in knowing what the totems for Mboweni and Maluleke meant as kids. Instead, we were told that we do not subscribe to the Shona Karanga method of totems. My totem, M'nwanati, was imagined as one mysterious aquatic animal in the far, deep oceans of the Atlantic. What became apparent was the sharing of common life principles and concepts in different languages.

As a Tsonga boy, the Karanga would usually laugh at us for eating *Homu ya Tatani* (father's cow), literally and contextually, bullfrogs. They also ate water monitors in the name of *Nhongo ruwere* (I honestly do not know how to translate that, but something like a castrated goat on a cliff). So dramatic. My father used to make fun of my mother's uncle's honorific name, Chimame, which sounded so obscene. While doing my Advanced Level studies at Lundi High School, my friend who came from Chimame village had a hard time convincing classmates that it was not what they thought it was. Nobody got offended though. Instead, they took pride in addressing themselves in those long "obscene" honorific narrations. I will not write what Chimame means because it is taboo and inappropriate to speak vulgarity in my Tsonga moral values and is against my Christian upbringing. We just appreciate our differences.

Ritual/Ceremonies

Although my Tsonga forefathers tried to convert my mother's Negari indigenous Shona Karanga religious practice of Mwari Musikavanhu and ancestral reverence into Christianity, these traditions harmoniously exist today. In fact, in times of challenges, such as drought, both Karanga and Tsonga cultures switch between traditions for solutions. KwaSekuru observed *Mutoro* or *Doro remvura* "ritual", by asking Mwari

Musikavanhu, through the ancestral spirits for rain. I have reservations about using the term "ritual" due to the varied circumstances and contentious debates surrounding its definition. Ceremony, too, has its problems because of the English language. Nevertheless, I will employ the terms in describing my situation, acknowledging the possibility that multiple interpretations could be valid. They would also practice a ritual they called *Kudzora mweya mumusha* (returning the spirit of the dead to the family). We did not understand or differentiate between the two rituals, which were mostly referred to as *Mutambo WeChiKaranga* (Karanga ceremony or ritual) *Doro reChiKaranga* (beer for ChiKaranga), Doro remvura or *Bira*.

Whether it was Doro remvura, Kudzora mweya mumusha, or Bira rituals, the signature rhythmic sound of Ngoma (indigenous Karanga musical drum/s) was key. The drumming would be accompanied by specific song texts depending on the ceremony/ritual purpose and timing of the event proceedings. The Ngoma rhythms excited listeners to dance, but wait, the families or community members involved did not dance. I mean, how can dancing be explained in this context where the Karanga refer to their rituals/ ceremonies as *Mutambo* (a play, a ritual, a ceremony, a sporting activity, a wedding, a party) or complicatedly as Doro (beer)? I do not know how I can convey this, but dancing does not match this experience. Let me say that they would perform structured bodily movements and gestures to the rhythms of the Ngoma sounds, songs, and clapping. The movements are also associated with symbolic objects and substances like snuff and ceremonial beer, which symbolize the interaction between visible and invisible beings (Rutsate, 2010). Whilst these bodily movements reflect instances of, probably, the music sounds, the terms referring to the explicit body action during these functions point to *Kutamba* or *Kudzana*. By Kutamba we get back again to the concept of Mutambo (ceremony). In the context of "dancing" they might be described as "dancing a ceremony", which does not make much sense using the English language because the ceremonies have specific names and contexts such as Mhande or Bira. The movements include mainly

the lower part of the body, emphasizing mainly the feet stamping the ground. For Rutsate (2010), the interplay between physical and spiritual beings nurtured through the Mhande represents a lived reality referred to as "ChiKaranga" by the Karanga people. They actualize their cosmological understanding through the mentioned rituals or ceremonies and manifest in the characteristics of their bodily movements.

Ubuntu Conceptual Framework and Methodology

This *epistemological* and or *ontological* narrative reflects an angle through which we can understand the common philosophical concept of life binding the several Bantu ethnic tribes from Southern Africa. Epistemology, ontology, and philosophy are terms I may use, but there exist significant overlaps among them that often go unaddressed. I use these terms from an academic standpoint, recognizing that they encompass a language with its own set of expectations and intricacies. For example, Seale (1999) addresses the discipline of philosophy as having its own divisions and suggests a shift from skepticism to a constructive approach by exploring different areas such as mind-body issues, mind philosophy, language, society, ethics, and science. Epistemology and ontologies, too, have challenges in terms of the justification of the knowledge basis and verification of reality, respectively. Bantu African forms of knowledge are discredited frequently due to the dominance of Western and European academic frameworks used to universally explain phenomena. In the Ubuntu case, there could be a thin or no line of difference between epistemology and ontology. Considering Ubuntu in ontological, epistemological, and philosophical terms is like placing an idea in a box or being compelled to think outside of it, even when such confinement may not be necessary. We refer to it as Ubuntu, drawing from the various linguistic variations within Bantu ethnicities. I was surprised to meet a Buganda friend from Uganda in Central Africa, in Europe, confirming Ubuntu variation- Obuntu. Bakka, et al. (2024, p.3.) drew parallels between Bedo Dano (a broad and

profound Acholi communal concept in Northern Uganda that directly translates to the state of being human) and Ubuntu.

Ubuntu/Unhu, with Obuntu added, is a traditional African ethic deeply rooted in Africa's inclusive heritage (Gathogo, 2019). It aligns with the definition of intangible cultural heritage by the UNESCO Convention, which includes practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, and skills, along with associated instruments, objects, artefacts, and cultural spaces that communities, groups, and sometimes individuals identify as integral to their cultural heritage (Article 2, 2003). At this moment, I am acknowledging the UNESCO Convention and its politics of defining intangible cultural heritage, which involves, among other complex, diverse cultural perspectives. For instance, rituals and ceremonies carry unique meanings across cultures, affecting how they are recognized and valued as intangible cultural heritage. Such definitions, as the UNESCO one on intangible cultural heritage, at least help us to present a window through which we and potential researchers can and need to understand these Bantu phenomena.

Expressed as "Munhu munhu navanhu" in Shona language dialects and "Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu" in Nguni dialects (I am because we are), Ubuntu confirms the interactive conduct of Bantu/ Vanhu (the Bantu people) towards each other. The phrase can vary significantly across dialects, but the concept remains the same. Ubuntu's core hypothesis is the interconnectedness of a person's identity and existence within a community that encompasses the living, ancestors, and future generations. Defining Ubuntu presents challenges due to its unique and expansive nature. Defining things seems to be incompatible with the premise of the Bantu knowledge system. Do we even need to define Ubuntu after all? A precise definition may detach Ubuntu from its original context, while a broader approach may dilute its specificity (Wilson, 2008, as cited in Watson, 2012). The scope of Ubuntu then aids in interpreting the ontological and epistemological complexities within indigenous Bantu cultures. Mandova and Chingombe (2013) think Ubuntu embodies virtues like

mutual social responsibility, trust, sharing, unselfishness, and respect for others. Hapanyenwi-Chemhuru and Shizha (2012) suggested that it also involves qualities such as a welcoming attitude, camaraderie selflessness, kindness, thoughtfulness, fairness, responsibility, honesty, justice, trustworthiness, diligence, and moral uprightness. I mean, who defines an academic concept like that? We are often told that our research topic or our discussion is too broad. Therefore, I submit that Ubuntu can be understood as the life of a black African Bantu and anyone else who subscribes to its principles.

This segment constitutes my methodology. I opt not to provide a subtitle for it, as I view the methodology as an integral component of an Ubuntu conceptual framework. Embodying Ubuntu influenced this article to consider a qualitative autoethnographic methodology and approach to explain my ethnographic experience in the Gwembe Valley Tonga. It is a methodological choice within a methodology to position ourselves in research. Such positioning should form a window for other researchers and research methodologies to be considerate of Ubuntu ethical principles. Autoethnography involves the production of deeply personal narratives (autobiographic) that influence the researcher's own experiences (ethnographic) to enhance the understanding of cultural phenomena through critical self-reflexive discourse (Spry, 2001). Bethlehem Tekola (2023a) appreciates autoethnography for its emphasis on personal experiences and its accessibility to non-academic readers. She emphasizes the significance of maintaining openness, humility, and respect when acknowledging the expertise derived from individuals' lived experiences in research. Such attributes resonate with Ubuntu ethics. Autoethnography, therefore, made much sense in the consideration and application of Ubuntu principles in my ethnographic research within the Bantu Tonga community. In an interesting development, Symbiotic Autoethnography (2023) expands on the concept of "symbiosis" in autoethnography, highlighting the deep interdependence and interconnectedness among various attributes, including temporality, the researcher's consistent presence, interesting storytelling, interpretative analysis, and reflexivity. This

approach is described as providing a versatile and interdisciplinary methodological tool that can adapt to the dynamics of various personal experiences within specific professional, cultural, and socio-political contexts. My complex individual experiences as a Bantu, along with the recognition of the inherent interdependence and interconnectedness in autoethnography, come together to form an Ubuntu-based symbiotic autoethnography.

A Choreomundus Experience

Doing my Erasmus Mundus Choreomundus master's in dance Practice, Knowledge, and Heritage was a mixed experience. Choreomundus is an international dance research program offered by four universities spanning across Europe: the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) in Norway, the University of Szeged (SZTE) in Hungary, the University of Clermont Auvergne (UCA) in France, and the University of Roehampton (UR) in England. This program explores dance and diverse movement systems, considering them as expressions of intangible cultural heritage within broader fields, such as ethnochoreology, anthropology, dance, and heritage studies.

Doing my undergraduate studies in ethnomusicology opened me up to how early European and Western ethnomusicologists had misrepresented much of indigenous African concepts, undermined Indigenous knowledge systems, and claimed authority over our knowledge simply because they claimed to have stayed in our communities. It is an overwhelmingly distressing academic and colonial legacy for many Black African scholars, one that we are actively working to rectify. I am an unapologetic Black African and cannot be seen to be thinking otherwise. Black is not being racist either because it partly describes the Bantu. *Murungu/Muchena* in the Shona Karanga language, refers to white people. Murungu cannot be a Munhu/Muntu. Muntu/Munhu/Mutu is simply a Black person, hence U-nhu/Bu-ntu. My ethnomusicology background in my undergraduate led me to choose an ethnographic research plan among the Tonga of Zambia

over global options provided by Choreomundus. This decision was a commitment to cultural sensitivity and the Ubuntu viewpoint, ensuring collective, inclusive research that values the perspectives, knowledge, and experiences of the communities regarding their cultural heritages. However, that viewpoint faced significant opposition for being perceived as lacking originality and independent thinking.

Our African predecessors in the same program had used the same Ubuntu philosophies and positioning, and I guess it was becoming monotonous. "This Ubhuntu, Ubhuntu, Ubhuntu thing is not making sense at all." The negative energy was apparent in the comments and sentiments of some supervisors. In fact, the Ubuntu concept was credited to a South African theologian, Desmond Tutu, as its proponent, disesteeming its use to explain the common Bantu cultural heritage. I was discouraged from citing our African Choreomundus predecessors' published works because they were said to be not yet authorities. Autoethnographic approaches were also discouraged. I lost confidence and self-esteem. The feeling of spending 30 minutes on PowerPoint presenting my already-in-doubt research topic and concepts, often missing the choice of relevant English terminology, even to my fellow students in the same program, was demoralizing.

The Zambian Gwembe Valley Tonga Wee Cultural Heritage: *Kuzyana* Budima for Ecological Sustainability

This was the title of my qualitative research conducted in Africa, closer to home. It aimed to explore the holistic and interpretive approach vital for exploring Tonga cultural behaviour, particularly focusing on embodied intangible cultural conduct through structured bodily movements. The decision to go to Zambia was due to the Choreomundus program's restrictions for conducting research in my home country, prompting a pursuit of relevant research and education driven by African Bantu instincts. Stressing the conducting of studies that influence informed foundational Bantu cultural heritage knowledge and positioning to benefit communities, the objective

was to align with the fundamental principles and intangible cultural heritage of the Bantu Tonga Wee. I was, and still am, at home despite the colonial boundaries that separated Zimbabwe and Zambia. The Tonga are part of the Bantu ethnicity. The Tonga community crosses both Zimbabwe and Zambia along the Zambezi River valley, separated by the Kariba Dam construction in the 1950s. We grew up with the legends of the Nyami Nyami, the Zambezi River's male snake god, which raised my curiosity. The term "Gwembe" is associated with Tonga culture, revealing adaptations to the environment and ancestral sites in the Zambezi Valley.

According to Chikozho, Mubaya and Mawere (2015), the paradox in human nature arises as individuals tend to trust religion, rooted in faith, over systematic understanding grounded in empirical evidence like quantitative approaches. Quantitative methods are valuable for statistical analysis, but a prior understanding of fundamental concepts characterized by beliefs, as in Budima ceremony participation and correlational studies on religious beliefs and social behaviours, is crucial. Exploring these narratives from an informed insider position yields valuable ethical research insights into how the Bantu understand their place in the world. For example, the term "Tonga" is employed to define the cultural identity of those people living in the Zambezi River valley, but there is a recurring use of repetitive phrasings, such as "The Tonga people" or the "Bantu people." Such consciousness in research among Bantu communities reflects the need to pay attention to dialectal accuracy and cultural thoughtfulness. This approach aimed to emphasize the positive aspects while avoiding the perpetuation of helicopter research (Haelewaters et al., 2021) and its harmful narratives, stereotypes, or misinterpretations. Such an approach is aligned with a natural Bantu African stance that has consistently been my priority throughout my Choreomundus experience.

The term "dance" does not exist in the Bantu vocabulary. At least this is one of the widely agreed concepts in the Choreomundus program whose project to produce various terms for dance in different cultures is currently underway. African academics in the fields of anthropology,

ethnomusicology, and other studies frequently classify the "dance and music" of their cultures as musical arts due to their intricately intertwined and inseparable nature. Whilst ethno-choreological studies seek to understand structured human movements as a standalone discipline, I had to consider an integrated approach, which Santamaria (2018) referred to as an "ethnochoreomusicological". This presented additional challenges in the representation of research, leading me to opt for an indigenous term, "Kuzyana" which specifically represents the corporeal experience during the Budima ceremony. Despite Kuzyana not being a common word used to describe their structured movements, the elicitation and explicitation interview techniques led to the rephrasing of my topic, using indigenous terms that the researched communities can easily identify with, but I still feel the techniques made my respondents uncomfortable. English lacked terms for my field tones, so I used the indigenous language for Tonga engagement, ensuring cultural sensitivity. However, the pressure to be culturally sensitive and cautious not to misrepresent cultural heritage narratives, especially among academic peers, posed challenges.

Because we are looking at complex cultural aspects, considering "dance" is missing the forest for trees. The Budima, just like all other Bantu performing arts practices, is an integral part of the Bantu belief system. The major components of such performing arts practices reveal the relationships that exist between their cosmogony, the land where their ancestors' bodies lie, rivers, flora and fauna, and everything in their ecosystems. This cosmogonic setting forms the core for recognizing the performance of Budima as an embodied Tonga heritage performing arts practice that can be traced through the structured bodily movements in *Kuzyana* Budima. The term performing arts has been used by Nzewi (1997) to encompass the holistic and functional essence of African music, embracing a diverse range of expressions such as music and musicking, embodied structured movements, drama, poetry, and other cultural components that collectively constitute African cultural heritage. Agawu (2007) posits that ritual, storytelling, embodied movements, vocalization, and percussion, often inspired by a shared

sense of unity and an imagined presence of others, reflect the belief that an activity's significance derives from its participatory structure's boundaries. The focus lies on community involvement, knowledge transmission, and the effective impact of these practices, surpassing discussions, and debates regarding the terminology of "ritual". I have adopted the use of performing arts too, for now, to try explaining these cultural heritage practices. Ubuntu therefore expressed as the lifelong experience of the Bantu can be very taxing for an outsider researcher. For ethical research, Bethlehem Tekola (2023b) advocates for researchers to acknowledge that they may not be the most qualified persons to undertake or lead certain research projects in academia. In this way, we aim to decolonize research by respecting Indigenous researchers' narratives.

This video shows a Budima performance as an intangible cultural heritage of the Dengeza Gwembe Valley Tonga of Zambia.

Video 1. Dengeza Tonga Budima performance, Video by the author.
https://youtu.be/QvmbeoXjY2Y

Getting into the field

I used ethnography as a research method in my field study because it was flexible and adaptable to changes. My approach included participating, sharing information, observing, and interpreting field materials over

almost two months. It was important for me to demonstrate ethical qualities like the local community's values to make my stay in the Gwembe Valley smoother as both an outsider and insider. I refer to my ethnographic approach in the Gwembe Valley among the Tonga as Ubuntu/Unhu-based.

The video shows the researcher involved in Budima rituals and instrument practice during Budima performance break.

Video 2. Budima ritual participation. Video by the author.
https://youtu.be/COpaCLVw20E

According to Seehawer (2018), in adhering to local ethics protocol, researchers ensure that their work aligns with the ethical standards and guidelines of the specific community they are studying. This involved the use of inclusive and respectful gestures concerning the values, beliefs, and cultural norms of the Gwembe Valley Tonga participants in the research design and methodology. It also involves employing field materials collection methods that build on the epistemologies of the Dengeza Tonga community using approaches that are compatible with their ways of knowing, understanding, and interpreting their Gwembe Valley habitat. This included reflecting on the basics of the Ubuntu/Unhu philosophical concept and the use of local knowledge systems, traditional practices, and the Tonga culturally compatible methods of field materials collection. Such a consideration helped me to ensure a more meaningful and contextually relevant research process.

Entering the field, I presented myself as a considerate Zimbabwean neighbor and researcher. Initially, I approached the district political leadership as a sign of respect, who introduced me to the traditional leadership and the community for approval. Seeking approval signified recognition of Sinazongwe's political structures and the traditional authority of the Dengeza community, demonstrating my commitment to cooperation. This approach aligns with Ubuntu/Unhu values, emphasizing the interconnectedness of Bantu cultural heritage, compassion, and the promotion of harmonious communities. Tutu (2004) as cited in Muwanga-Zake (2009, p. 417) identified Ubuntu-based research with participative research paradigms in stating that 'we are bound with others.' The acknowledgement from both political and traditional leadership reassured me of my safety during the research. Despite minor cultural differences, especially in behavior and presentation, people from the Sinazongwe community, where I spent a significant amount of time, approached me to inquire about my origin. Some members of the Zambian national security services were briefed about my intentions. Approaching the Sinazongwe community from an Ubuntu/Unhu perspective allowed me to establish strong relationships based on trust and respect, facilitating effortless information gathering. The Dengeza community, in turn, demonstrated hospitality and reciprocity by welcoming me into their community.

The Bantu systems of knowledge are orally transmitted across generations in various forms and methods. Such knowledge forms part of their valued heritage, which cannot easily be shared with outsiders. Initially, I had interview questions which did not matter much because my initial research topic kept changing. My contact person, a respected elder fluent in English, played a vital role as a bridge between me and the local Tonga-speaking community. Engaging in extensive discussions with my gatekeeper, we explored common Bantu cultural knowledge, family matters, national and local politics, beliefs, and their connection to the environment. These discussions were crucial for quickly engaging myself in understanding how the Tonga express their performing arts through bodily movements. Initiating conversations

and sharing reflections on common Bantu cultural phenomena from my ethnic background helped build trust and facilitated the collection of valuable information. Knowledge sharing as an Ubuntu/Unhu principle became a more effective method than other tools, such as interviews, which may be intimidating and exclusive. On certain matters beyond his knowledge, my gatekeeper would take me to the eldest community members who had a better cultural memory to clarify certain things. In most cases, I would be recording audio that would be translated after the visits. I avoided taking videos during discussions to avoid raising suspicion among the community members, which would negatively affect the quality of my ethnography.

The Ubuntu/Unhu axiom of *Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (a person is a person among other persons) is a complex metaphorical statement. The Bantu cultural complexity is expressed through various forms of art, storytelling, and other means. They use idioms, proverbs, and other figurative languages, which play a crucial role in cultural values and knowledge transmission. Holistic Bantu knowledge-sharing swiftly revealed complex Tonga cultural interconnections. Emphasizing knowledge-sharing was crucial for transparently articulating research objectives without arousing suspicion. Notably, consent forms from District Offices were never signed or returned. For the Tonga and other Bantu communities, issues of data safeguarding, privacy or consent enshrined in the European Union (EU)'s General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (Voigt & Von Dem Bussche, 2017) are foreign and not of particular concern. Presenting myself as a neighboring Zimbabwean son and researcher, community members freely shared information. The gatekeeper would conduct follow-up visits to the elderly in my absence, addressing sensitive matters. Visits to the elderly often involved offering modest amounts of money as a courtesy for their knowledge in alignment with Ubuntu principles, displaying respect for their insights and reinforcing appreciation for their contributions.

The Dengeza community expressed a keen interest in my research on understanding their performing arts for ecological sustainability.

The Tonga community has been extensively studied, primarily focusing on their dependence on adaptations to the ecological habitat of the Zambezi River valley (Siwila, 2015). Their cosmogonical perspectives are intricately connected with their environment and are expressed through performances. The exploration of these manifestations of cosmogony and ecological adaptation in their performing arts, along with efforts to promote their heritage in policymaking, implementation, and sustainability, became a compelling area of interest for them. The study evaluated the potential of integrating Indigenous ecological knowledge from Kuzyana Budima into modern conservation practices and called for policy changes, receiving positive engagement. Using an ecological sustainability agenda meant that the research was honest, and a mutual social responsibility held to benefit and empower the Dengeza community, aligning with their goals and aspirations. This raised a thoughtful ecological knowledge base through the unfamiliar dimension of their structured bodily movements. This contrasts with previous research experiences in this community such as that of Elizabeth Colson (1960), *The Social Organisation of the Gwembe Tonga* which focussed on descriptive accounts such as of the physical geography, population dynamics, and trade. Because of their trust in my research intentions, my gatekeeper organized a social Budima performance in Dengeza. The full attendance of the ceremony was a welcoming gesture which provided insights into the social stratification of their community. Ubuntu-based ethnography facilitated straightforward photography, video filming, and field observation. In line with Geertz's (1973, p.10) concept of "thick description", my ethnographic experience, dealing with intricate conceptual structures, aids in interpreting Tonga cultural phenomena.

Conclusion

This paper explored Ubuntu-based authoethnography as a pragmatic approach in ethnographic research among the Tonga of Zambia, emphasizing ethical considerations and cultural integration. The

Ubuntu/Unhu conceptual framework includes virtues that can be integrated with other research methodologies, providing a solid foundation for the African Bantu ethnochoreomusicological research design. Ubuntu/Unhu principles in research foster a more culturally inclusive and transformative research model. The paper acknowledges the challenges of defining Ubuntu precisely and suggests that its scope aids in interpreting ontological and epistemological complexities within indigenous Bantu cultures. It tunnels into the author's autoethnographic reflections and experiences within the Shona Karanga and Nguni Tsonga communities, highlighting the interconnectedness of indigenous knowledge and practices. The text highlights the complexities of merging African and European/Western knowledge and research methodologies. Drawing from the author's Choreomundus master's program experience, it illuminates challenges for African scholars in applying Ubuntu-based research principles and indigenous knowledge in academia within African cultures. The broader research context aligns the Ubuntu/Unhu-based approach with ethical research fundamentals, focusing on building trust and meaningful relationships between researchers and the researched community. Ubuntu framework aims to decolonize research by incorporating Indigenous Knowledge Systems and adhering to local morals and the positive outcomes of the research such as promoting ecological sustainability and community empowerment.

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