

Resituating indigenous languages and identities as outlined in the new constitution of Zimbabwe: a historical analysis

Lawton Hikwa (PhD)
Dean: National University of Science and
Technology, Zimbabwe

Abstract

Pre-colonial and post-colonial Zimbabwe maintained the exogenous English language as the official language while at the same time recognising and including Shona and Ndebele as the main indigenous languages at the exclusion of many other languages. This exclusion of other indigenous languages and identities has been a source of controversy due to varied historical interpretations and analysis. The dominance of Shona and Ndebele in addition to the exogenous English language intensely divided the nation along linguistic lines. Linguistic hegemony, while largely attributable to the dominance of a foreign language such as English, equally applies to the pronounced dominance of Shona and Ndebele as indigenous languages and identities in Zimbabwe. The recognition and inclusion of other indigenous languages and identities in addition to Shona and Ndebele are counter-hegemonic. Based on the recently enacted Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No. 20) Act 2013, this article makes an historical analysis of and resituates indigenous languages and identities in Zimbabwe. It outlines the recognition and inclusion of indigenous languages

in the founding provisions of the Constitution; culture; and, the preservation of traditional knowledge as espoused in the national objectives of the same Constitution. Further, language and culture are analysed as fundamental human rights and freedoms. The role of independent commissions as supporters of democracy is also interrogated in the context of resituating languages and identities in the new Constitution. The article also discusses how libraries are a link between generations within languages and identities because they store, index and allow for the retrieval of information that is referenced accordingly. Finally, the article highlights the role of traditional leaders and how their recognition and inclusion in the Constitution resituates indigenous languages and identities in Zimbabwe.

Key words: indigenous languages, indigenous identities, Zimbabwe, Traditional Leaders; traditional knowledge

Introduction

The constitution-making process in Zimbabwe was led by a Select Committee of Parliament on the New Constitution (COPAC). The process was driven by the Global Political Agreement (GPA) that was signed in September 2008 by the

Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) led by Robert Mugabe, and the two formations of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), namely, the MDC-T led by Morgan Tsvangirai, and the MDC-N led by Welshman Ncube (Global Political Agreement 2008). These were the parties that were represented in Parliament after the 2008 harmonised elections (Dzinesa 2012). The GPA was brokered by the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and it ended the election dispute of 2007 between Tsvangirai and Mugabe, leading to the formation of an inclusive government that came into place in February 2009 (Dzinesa 2012).

The Republic of Zimbabwe (formerly Southern Rhodesia), is a landlocked country located in southern Africa, between the Zambezi, in the north and Limpopo, in the south rivers. It borders with South Africa to the

south, Botswana to the southwest, Zambia to the northwest and Mozambique to the east. Historically, the country was a site of many prominent kingdoms and empires, as well as a major route for migration and trade. Zimbabwe was first demarcated by Cecil John Rhodes' British South Africa Company (BSAC) in the 1890s before becoming a self-governing colony of Southern Rhodesia in 1923. In 1965 the white minority government unilaterally declared independence from Britain. The unrecognised state endured international isolation and civil war between the government and Black Nationalist forces. This resulted in a peace agreement and independence in April 1980.

Zimbabwe is an ethnically diverse country with 16 official languages (20 working languages, according to some sources) (Constitution of Zimbabwe Amended (No. 20) Act, 2013).

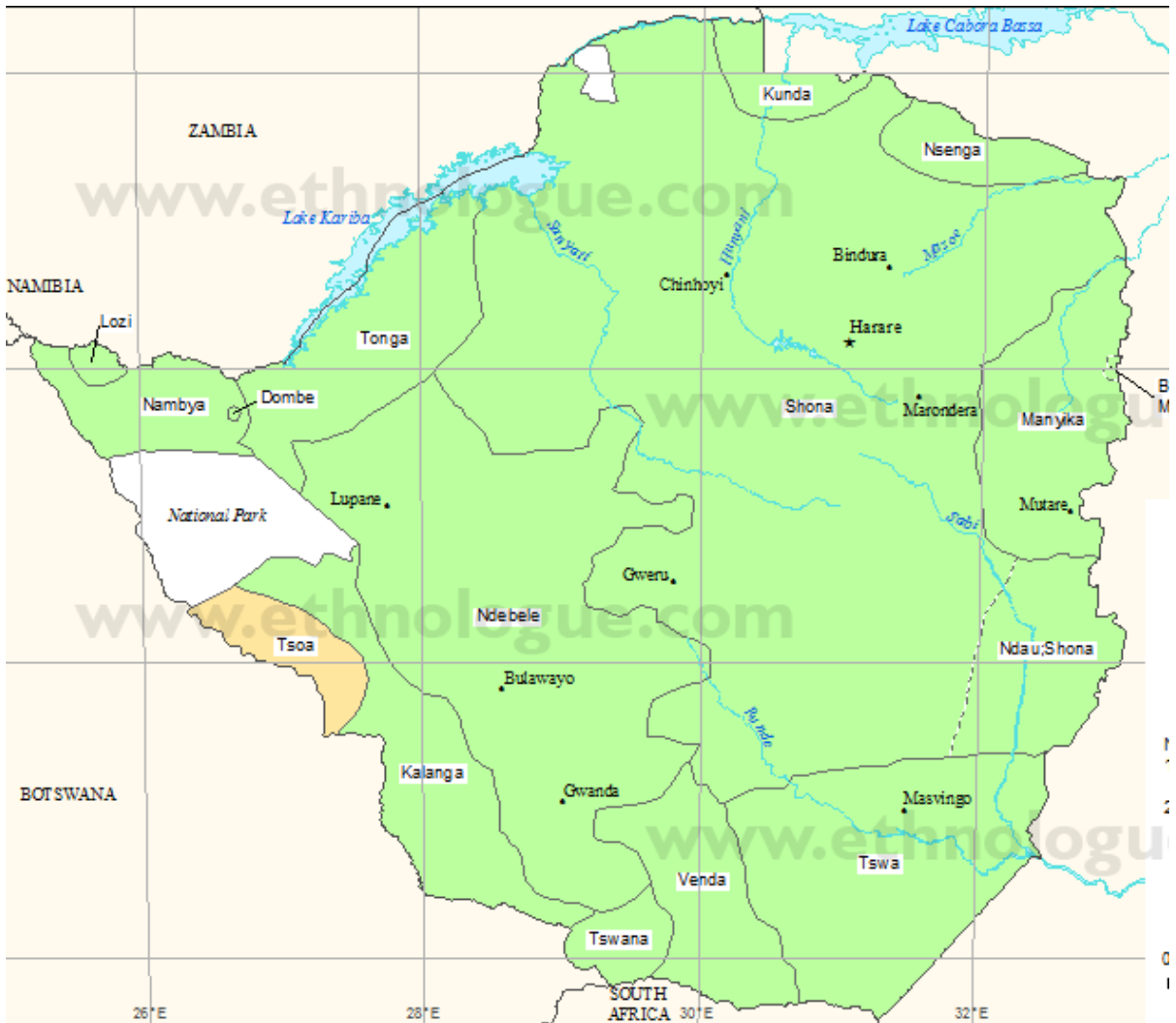


Figure 1: Language Map of Zimbabwe (Reproduced with permission from www.Imp.ucla.edu)

The Constitution of Zimbabwe Amended (No. 20) Act 2013 recognises the importance of languages in its Founding Provisions. The officially recognised languages of Zimbabwe are Chewa, Chibarwe, English, Kalanga, Koisan, Nambya, Nda u, Ndebele, Shangani,

Shona, sign language, Sotho, Tonga, Tswana, Venda and Xhosa (Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No. 20) Act 2013). Further, the Constitution states that “an Act of Parliament may prescribe other languages as officially recognised languages and may prescribe languages of

record” (Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No. 20) Act 2013: 17). State, institutions and agencies of government are compelled to ensure that all the officially recognised languages are treated equitably and to consider the language preferences of those affected by governmental measures or communications. Overall, “the State must promote and advance the use of all languages used in Zimbabwe, including sign language, and must create conditions for the development of those languages” (Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No.20) Act 2013: 17).

Further and as one of the National Objectives, the fostering of fundamental rights and freedoms is enshrined in the Constitution. Also included here is Culture, and specifically that the State and other “institutions and agencies of government are compelled to promote and preserve cultural values and practices which enhance the dignity, wellbeing and equality of Zimbabweans” (Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No.20) Act 2013:19). Citizens are also are compelled to endeavour to preserve and protect the country’s heritage. The State and its institutions and agencies must also adopt measures that ensure “due respect for the dignity of traditional institutions” (Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No.20) Act 2013:19). In regard to the preservation of traditional knowledge, it

is outlined that the State should “preserve, protect and promote indigenous knowledge systems, including knowledge of medicinal and other properties of animal and plant life possessed by local communities and people” (Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No.20) Act 2013: 23).

In the declaration of rights, the Constitution charges the State and its institutions and agencies; and, every individual and juristic persons to respect, protect, promote and fulfil the rights and freedoms set out in the supreme law (Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No.20) Act 2013).

Purpose of the study

Based on the recently enacted Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No. 20) Act, 2013, the article is an historical analysis that attempts to resituate indigenous languages and identities in Zimbabwe. Specifically, the article outlines: -

- the recognition and inclusion of indigenous languages in the founding provisions of the Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No. 20) 2013;
- the recognition and inclusion of culture; and,
- the preservation of traditional knowledge as espoused in the

national objectives of the same Constitution.

In addition, language and culture are analysed as fundamental human rights and freedoms. The role of independent commissions as supporters of democracy is also interrogated in the context of resituating languages and identities in the new Constitution. Finally, the article highlights the role of traditional leaders and how their recognition and inclusion in the Constitution resituates indigenous languages and identities in Zimbabwe.

Statement of the problem

Pre-colonial and post-colonial Zimbabwe maintained the exogenous English language as the official language while at the same time recognising and including Shona and Ndebele as the main indigenous languages at the exclusion of many other languages. This exclusion of other indigenous languages and identities has been a source of controversy due to varied historical interpretations and analysis. The dominance of Shona and Ndebele languages in addition to the exogenous English language intensely divided the nation along linguistic lines. Linguistic hegemony, while largely attributable to the dominance of a foreign language such as English, equally applies to the pronounced dominance of Shona

and Ndebele as indigenous languages and identities in Zimbabwe. The recognition and inclusion of other indigenous languages and identities in addition to Shona and Ndebele are counter-hegemonic.

Sources of information

The selection of information depends on what one wants to know and what part of a specific field of subject one has decided to study. Any study will involve an examination of some published (and even unpublished) key material relevant to the subject. For the purpose of this article a number of sources were consulted.

The Constitution

The Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No. 20) Act, 2013 was the primary source of information for this analysis. This was because it was the direct outcome of events that resulted in its enactment;

Commissioned Studies

A commissioned study on the Zimbabwe Constitutional process was consulted. In this instance the Zimbabwe's Constitutional Reform Process: Challenges and prospects report by Gwinyayi A. Dzinesa provided the necessary data and the writer did not have to repeat the exercise; and,

Monographs

Printed monographs are secondary source material for information which in general provides what would be standard reference. Concerning the particular subject of this article, there was virtually nothing written in standard reference books about resituating indigenous languages and identities as outlined in the New Constitution of Zimbabwe. Monographs that are cited in this article are useful when discussing the general principles that apply to relevant topics in the subject under study, for example, the political economy of information.

Theoretical framework and review of related literature

The article is conceptually derived from Section 6 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No. 20) Act, 2013 which recognises and guarantees the official status of sixteen languages. This links very well with several studies that sought to resituate indigenous languages and identities into correct historical and cultural contexts (Chimhundu 1993;

Chimhundu *et al.* 1998; Maseko and Ndlovu 2013; Mkanganwi 1992; Ngara 1991; Satyo 1992; Sow *et al.* 1979; and Viriri 2003).

Below is a model (cf. Figure 2) depicting language problems in Africa. The problems presented are also linked to educational policies and governance. Mazrui and Mazrui (1998) aver that language planning is part of broad social engineering that can be used to achieve other goals such as political participation and national integration. In such a context, national cohesion should prevail and co-exist with linguistic and cultural diversity (Webb and Kembo-Sure 2000).

The social functions of language are said to be instrumental and symbolic (Mugane 2003), albeit also context-dependent. Language is instrumental in that it informs or expresses desires and intentions, binds community groups, and facilitates active participation in societal activities. It is also symbolic in that it is an organising tool for identity formation.

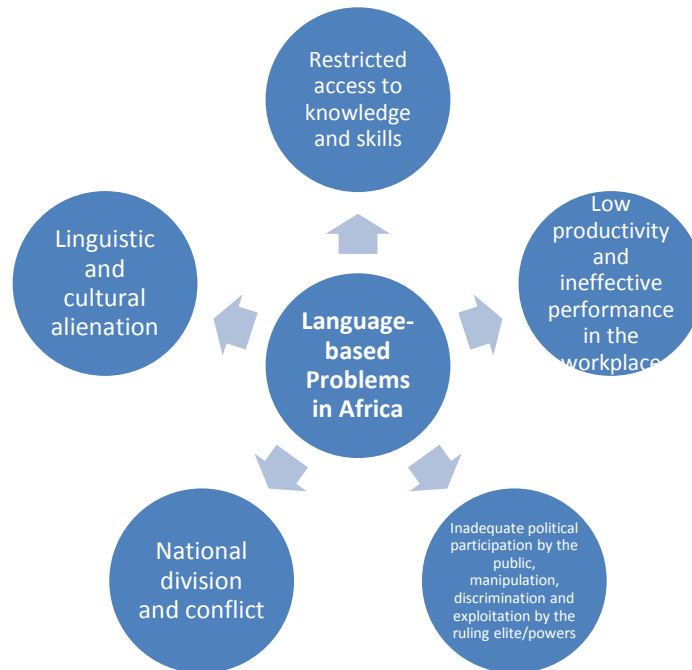


Figure 2: Language-based Problems in Africa. Developed from Webb and Kembo-Sure 2000

Methodology

The new Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No. 20) Act is fairly recent. The main techniques used for collecting information in this article were:

Historical Analysis

This article employed the historical analysis method. Historical analysis can be defined as the effort to obtain a more complete picture of a historic situation by exploring its historical and structural relationship. Historical analysis is a tool

to assist in grasping the reality with which society is dealing (Kumar n.d.); and,

Literature Searching

The writer searched for relevant published and unpublished literature so as to acquaint himself with previous research on the statement of the study.

The above research methods were employed in order for the writer to discover and be aware of the available literature relevant to the statement of the study. The methods also allowed for the

gathering of enough documented and in some instances unpublished evidence, hence good groundwork for research. Finally, the research methods enabled the writer to solicit other people's opinions about the statement of the study and weigh them against his beliefs and gathered evidence.

The article is, however, not without shortcomings. The following factors probably affected the entire pattern of the article:

With the Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No. 20) Act 2013 being fairly recent, there was barely any standard literature available dealing with the statement of the study. Published works relevant to the statement of the study included preliminary reports and papers presented at seminars and conferences: and,

The time factor was also a major shortcoming. The writer could only review related literature outside his normal work schedule. No funding or any form of sponsorship was available for the study and thus a limited scope was preferred.

Discussions

Prior to the enactment of the new Constitution, the Zimbabwe government albeit acknowledging Shona and Ndebele as national languages, English largely

remained the accepted official language. This was because of the colonial legacy right across English-speaking Africa where the English language was perceived to be "the language of national consciousness, integration and identity" (Mugane 2003: 71). In such a scenario, indigenous languages were confined to the home and informal settings. The English language was perceived as a language for upward mobility. The somewhat latent resistance and marginalisation of indigenous languages can be summed up as a creation by a sub-conscious satisfaction over what linguistic heterogeneity can offer (Mugane 2003).

This marginalisation of indigenous languages has had some repercussions in regard to the overall information infrastructure in Zimbabwe and how such languages can be used to build and sustain state-society relations. Some studies indicate that most glaring shortcomings in regard to the transmission of information are not with the transmission itself but rather the reception of what is being transmitted (Lundu 1996). Those falling outside the scope of dominant languages, in this case, Shona, Ndebele and the exogenous English, are excluded from social, cultural and political activities. An emerging consensus, also supported by Ogot (2002), is that every language and culture has pervaded another and left its own

mark. Ethnic singularity is viewed as a colonial construction where the aim was to create un-contaminated communities. Unfortunately, both colonial and post-colonial regimes manipulated ethnicity as captured in language. This put paid to the old adage of divide and rule which has no room in modern-day polity.

New thinking seems to acknowledge and appreciate ethno-linguistic hybridity, arguing that such hybridity should be marshalled into a dynamic national language policy. The hybridity “underpins the inalienable right for languages to co-exist and enrich each other (Mugane 2003: 72). The concerted effort to resituate indigenous languages in Zimbabwe is an appreciation of this possibility. “Equally, it is an effort to recognise the need for the creation of national unity, and philosophy, in an

ethnically diverse nation-state” (Mugane 2003: 72).

The importance of language in any society cannot be over-emphasised. Nevertheless, it is important to point out the following six facts about the importance of language:

- it is a medium of communication;
- it is a means of expression;
- it captures memory;
- it is a source of power;
- it guarantees biodiversity; and,
- it is a right (of a person or a people).

Following is a table explaining the above six facts about the importance of language.

Table 1: The Importance of Language

The Importance of Language	Explanation
Medium of communication	Mirrors one's identity and is an integral part of one's culture. It is the soul of culture.
Means of expression	Allows the participation of people in community activities and fosters a culture of democracy.
Captures memory	It encapsulates human creativity and originality and peepholes ideas nurtured over time into explainable heritage, local traditions and customs.
Source of power	It creates opportunities for cultural identity and upward social mobility.
Guarantees biodiversity	Biodiversity and knowledge of local ecosystems are guaranteed through eco-linguistic preservation.
It is a right	It emerges as a reason or pretext for conflict or pedestal for tolerance through the exercise of language rights.

Adapted from Moja, I. (n.d.). *Mazwi: a Zimbabwean Journal* [Online] Available from: <http://www.mazwi.net/essays/the-importance-of-language>. [Accessed 15 January 2015]

The inclusion of other languages (in addition to only three as was the case in the previous Constitution) in the new Constitution of Zimbabwe resonates well with popular scholarly feeling that governments in African countries should inscribe the place of indigenous languages in their constitutions (Mugane 2003). "Constitutional provisions fortify the role of language in national affairs. In South Africa, the constitution has clear stipulations on language. Constitutionally, the official languages of South Africa are eleven and there are other crucial statements regarding the place of other languages" (Mugane 2003: 74). This puts the Zimbabwe constitution in good stead in regard to the social functions of

language and good practices that prevail in modern and developing democracies.

As a first, the new Constitution of Zimbabwe establishes five Independent Commission to support the country's young and developing democracy. The Commissions are the:

- Zimbabwe Electoral Commission;
- Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission;
- Zimbabwe Gender Commission;
- Zimbabwe Media Commission;
- and,
- National Peace and Reconciliation Commission.

- The general objectives of these Independent Commissions are to:
- Support and entrench human rights and democracy;
- Protect the sovereignty and interests of people;
- Promote constitutionalism;
- Promote transparency and accountability in public institutions;
- Secure the observance of democratic values and principles by the state and all institutions and agencies of government, and government-controlled entities; and,
- Ensure that injustices are remedied (Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No.20) Act 2013).

While all the six Independent Commissions have a bearing on resituating indigenous languages and identities, the Zimbabwe Media Commission is the one that specifically refers to the official languages of the country among its functions. It specifically says the Commission is “to encourage the use and development of all the official languages of Zimbabwe” (Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No.20) Act 2013: 98). This is obviously in reference to the media and how they employ and/or deploy all the sixteen official languages in their work.

Nevertheless, indigenous languages and identities allow for the transmission of local material culture and non-material culture. Such culture (or information about it) is stored, preserved and disseminated for human continuity and benefit “from the knowledge and skills of others” (McGarry 1981: 38). Library and information systems and services become a “storage system to transmit these benefits over time” (McGarry 1981: 38). Libraries are therefore, a storage system that facilitates the transmission of knowledge and information in indigenous languages and identities. They are a link between generations within languages and identities because they store, index and allow for the retrieval of information that is referenced accordingly.

Some scholars have argued that the survival of indigenous languages and identities is threatened (Okore et al. 2009; IFLA 2008; Stevens 2008). Libraries can in regard to this, provide “resources and expertise in collection, organisation, storage and retrieval” of material in indigenous languages (Stevens 2008). Already some libraries have made progress in preserving local languages and cultural identities in paper and digital formats and promoted the exchange of information (Okore et al. 2009). Through indigenous languages and identities, indigenous knowledge transforms into a contemporary body of knowledge that

calls for the deployment of communication and information technologies (ICT's) for such knowledge to be accessible in libraries (Okore et al. 2009).

Democracy and respect for human rights (linguistic rights in particular) are ends in themselves among various and varied human aspirations. However, they are also means for attaining human development, whether at individual or collective level. Development in this context should be interpreted to mean that process in which people are freed from exploitation (South Commission 1990).

Finally, the Constitution recognises the institution, status, and role of traditional leadership under customary law. "A traditional leader is responsible for performing the cultural, customary and traditional functions of a Chief, head person or village head, as the case may be, for his or her community" (Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No.20) Act 2013: 110). Further, the Constitution outlines the functions of traditional leaders, which are:

- to promote and uphold the cultural values of their communities and, in particular, to promote sound family values;
- to take measures to preserve the culture, traditions, history and

heritage of their communities, including sacred shrines;

- to facilitate development;
- to administer communal land to protect the environment; and,
- to resolve disputes amongst people in their communities in accordance with customary law.

The role of traditional leaders and their recognition and inclusion in the Constitution helps resituate indigenous languages and identities in Zimbabwe. Language is a medium of communication that mirrors one's identity and is an integral part of one's culture. Similarly, language is a means of expression, allowing people to participate in community activities and in turn foster a culture of democracy. Language also captures memory, that is, encapsulating human activity and originality and situating ideas nurtured over time into explainable heritage, local traditions and customs. As a source of power, language creates opportunities for cultural identity and upward social mobility of people. Biodiversity and knowledge of local ecosystems are guaranteed through eco-linguistic preservation. Lastly, language emerges as a reason or pretext for conflict or pedestal for tolerance through the exercise of language rights (Moja, I. n.d.).

Conclusion

What is important in this article is the interpretation of the information and the situation so that a trend can be set for the possible future resituating of indigenous languages and identities as outlined in the new Constitution of Zimbabwe. Also important is the articulation of the use of indigenous languages and identities in the organisation, storage and retrieval of indigenous knowledge in libraries. In this way it is the writer's hope that the article will be a contribution to the provision and improvement of these essential requirements in a society that is striving to raise its standard of democracy through unity in diversity and a common desire for freedom, justice and equality and resistance to all forms of domination and oppression.

The inclusion of other languages in the Constitution in addition to Shona and Ndebele and the exogenous English should be a source of linguistic and cultural harmony. The exogenous English is no longer as hegemonic as it was in the past. Similarly Shona and Ndebele as indigenous languages and identities no longer enjoy the dominance, at least constitutionally, they had in the past.

References

- Chimhundu, H. (1993). The status of African languages in Zimbabwe. Harare: SAPEM Literary Series.
- Chimhundu, H. *et al.* (1998). Report on the formulation of a national language policy. Harare: National Language Policy Advisory Panel.
- Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No. 20) Act, 2013 (2013). Harare: Government Printers.
- Dzinesa, G.A. (2012). Zimbabwe's Constitutional reform process: challenges and prospects. Wynberg: The Institute for Justice and Reconciliation.
- Global Political Agreement (2008). Agreement between the Zimbabwe African National Union–Patriotic Front (Zanu-PF) and the two Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) Formations on resolving the challenges facing Zimbabwe. Harare: Government Printers.
- International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions. 2008. IFLA statement on indigenous traditional knowledge. [Online]. Available from: <http://www.ifla.org/publications/ifla-statement-on-indigenous->

- [traditional-knowledge](#) [Accessed 30 March 2015]
- Kumar, M. (n.d.) Historical methods of research. [Online] Available from: <http://www.slideshare.net/manukumarkm/historical-method-in-research>. [Accessed 14 January 2015]
- Lundu, M. (ed). (1996). The political economy of information on development, democracy and security in Southern Africa. Harare: SAPES Books.
- McGarry, K.J. (1981). The changing context of information: an introductory analysis. London: CliveBingley.
- Maseko, B. and Ndlovu, K. (2013). Indigenous languages and linguistic rights in the Zimbabwean media. [Online] Online International Journal of Arts and Humanities, Vo. 2 (5). Available from: <http://www.onlineresearchjournals.org/IJAH>. [Accessed 30 January 2015]
- Mazrui, A. and Mazrui, A. (1998). The power of Babel: language and governance in the African experience. Oxford: James Curry.
- Mkanganwi, K. (1992). Language planning in Southern Africa In: Crawhall, N.T. (ed). Democratically speaking: international perspectives on language planning. Pretoria: South African National Language Project.
- Moja, I. (n.d.). Mazwi: a Zimbabwean Journal [Online] Available from: <http://www.mazwi.net/essays/the-importance-of-language>. [Accessed 15 January 2015]
- Mugane, J.M. (2003). Linguistic typology and representation of African languages. Trenton, N.J.: African World Press.
- Ndhlovu, F. (2009). The Politics of Language and Nation Building in Zimbabwe. Bern: Peter Lang AG International Academic Publishers.
- Ngara, E. (1991). Culture for liberation and social transformation: paper presented at the Ministry of Education and Culture Seminar on Cultural Awareness held at Kadoma Ranch Motel, 15 – 17 May 1991.
- Okore, A.M. et al. (2009). Promoting access to indigenous knowledge in the digital age: libraries as facilitators. Libraries Create Future: a paper presented at the Nigerian Libraries Association 47th Annual General Conference 2009, Ibadan, Oyo State, 26 – 31 July 2009.
- Ogot, B. (2002). Building on the indigenous in constitution making: paper presented at a Constitution of Kenya Review

- Commission, Semina Naivasha, 7th February 2002.
- Satyo, S. (1992). A response to Neville Alexander's Essay In: Language policy and national unity in South Africa/Azania. SAJALS 1 (i).
- South Commission Report: the challenge to the South Turk, Danilo and Joinet, Louis Final Report of the Special Rapporteurs of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights and the Rights to Freedom of Opinion and Expression. (1992). Geneva: United Nations.
- Sow, A.I. *et al.* (1979). Introduction to African culture: general aspects. Paris: UNESCO.
- Stevens, A. (2008). A different way of knowing: tools and strategies for managing indigenous knowledge. *Libri 58: 25 – 33*. [Online] Available from: http://www.librisjournal.org/pdf/pdf2008_pp25_-33.pdf [Accessed 30 March 2015]
- Viriri, A. (2003). Language planning in Zimbabwe: the conservation and management of indigenous languages as intangible heritage [Online] Available from: <http://www.icomos.org/victoriafalls2003/papers/C1-5%20viriri.pdf>. [Accessed 30 January 2015]
- Webb, V. and Kembo-Sure. (2000). Language as a problem in Africa In Webb, V. and Kembo-Sure. (eds). African Voices: an introduction to languages and linguistics in Africa.