Intergenerational knowledge transfer in the Vhavenda communities in South Africa

Jasmijn van den Berg
Student number: 10384847
Supervisor: Dr. ir. Yves van Leynseele
Local supervisor Univen: Prof. Vhonani Netshandama
Second reader: Dr. Mirjam Ros-Tonen
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University of Amsterdam
Graduate School of Social Sciences
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ABSTRACT

The Vhavenda communities in the Venda region in South Africa are facing challenges from the modern industrial world. The erosion of community ties and the growing gap between the youth and elders are threatening the preservation of their local knowledge system. While most existing literature is concerned with the content of the local knowledge system of the Vhavenda, presenting it in a rather static way, this research addresses the dynamic character of indigenous knowledge and shows how it is embedded in social dynamics and relationships. Since there is limited literature regarding the process of indigenous knowledge preservation from within, this thesis aims to uncover how indigenous knowledge is inter-generationally transferred and is supported by a local grassroot organization. Based on semi-structured interviews, focus groups and participatory observation, the first findings present that the social mechanisms and local institutions of knowledge transfer were connected to the Vhavenda’s ancestral worldview and living environment in nature. Secondly, findings show that Christianity, urbanization and other influences of modernization affected the deterioration of these social mechanisms and local institutions, resulting in new social dynamics and relationships between the younger and elder generation. Lastly, findings present how grassroot organization Dzomo la Mupo introduces new tools and mechanisms for intergenerational knowledge transfer. The study concludes that the social mechanisms and local institutions of knowledge transfer are intertwined with a certain worldview and living environment, where changes in these dimensions subsequently impact the process of intergenerational knowledge transfer. In order to bridge the gap to the next generation, the social mechanisms and local institutions of knowledge transfer need to be dynamic, as cultures are changing and in constant motion.

Keywords: Vhavenda communities, indigenous knowledge, intergenerational knowledge transfer, social dynamics, South Africa
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Without all of you this master thesis would not have been possible.

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VENDA TERMINOLOGY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mupo</td>
<td>Nature, Mother Earth – All of Creation which is not human made</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Makhadzi</td>
<td>Woman, as well as a spiritual role of women, which has many categories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vhomakhadzi</td>
<td>Plural form of makhadzi or singular respectful form of a female elder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vho</td>
<td>Respectful way to address an elder or a person who is a parent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tshivenda</td>
<td>Local indigenous language of the Vhavenda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tshikona</td>
<td>Traditional ritual dance, only danced by men while women beat the drums</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vhakoma</td>
<td>Title for the mother of the chief, who also facilitates village affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mutanuni</td>
<td>Title for the wife of the chief</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vhongwaniwapo</td>
<td>Indigenous people who originate there</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tshitanga</td>
<td>Traditional round kitchen hut</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khoroni</td>
<td>Entrance at the gate of the homestead</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Musevhetho</td>
<td>First level of girl initiation school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vhusha / vhukomba</td>
<td>Second level of girl initiation school, after first menstruation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ludodo</td>
<td>Third level of girl initiation school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tshikanda</td>
<td>Fourth level of girl initiation school, only for the royal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domba</td>
<td>Fifth and last level of girl initiation school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phyton dance</td>
<td>Traditional dance, danced during the last level of domba school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mahondwani</td>
<td>Indigenous game for adolescents, to sustain a family in the bush</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mukomana</td>
<td>Elder sisters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zwifho</td>
<td>Sacred natural site in the forest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snuff fola</td>
<td>Grinded tobacco, used by traditional healers and makhadzi for rituals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mudzimu / Nwali</td>
<td>God or Creator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mudzimu wa Thohoni</td>
<td>God of the father clan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mudzimu wa Damuni</td>
<td>God of the mother clan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minwenda</td>
<td>Traditional Venda attire with colourful stripes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U losha</td>
<td>Respectful greeting by bowing down on the ground</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shebeen</td>
<td>Slang for pub or bar</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

The indigenous Vhavenda communities in the Venda region in South Africa are facing challenges and threats from the modern industrial world. Massive destruction of forest along the river and in the mountains of the Vhembe district, along with pollution of mining and construction projects, are causing biodiversity loss, environmental degradation and loss of healthy food sovereignty¹. Even though indigenous rights and lands are legally protected under South Africa's constitution, sacred natural sites are still under threat, which are important to the Vhavenda to maintain the health and vitality of ecosystems, seasonal cycles, human well-being and spiritual life. The women and female elders, called the makhadzi, are seen as the guardians of these sacred sites, as well as the custodians of their eco-cultural knowledge system (Ross 2017: 3). Historically they have played a central role in advising chiefs on community affairs and environmental sustainability, but today their role is undermined, as local politicians and chiefs continue with profitable deals to establish foreign coalmines, casino's and tourist resorts, despite their warnings (ibid.: 4). Furthermore, elders are concerned about the deterioration of community ties, especially between the youth and elders². Youth view the elders as “uneducated” in Western tradition, while the founder of grassroot organization Dzomo la Mupo calls them “living libraries of knowledge”³. This erosion of community ties between the younger and elder generation is threatening the preservation of their local knowledge system, which is considered important by the vhomakhadzi⁴ to halt environmental degradation and prevent irreversible disorder within Mupo – Nature or Mother Earth.

While there is a large academic focus on the content of the Vhavenda’s ecological knowledge system, for instance on ethnobotany (Mabogo 2012), ethno-pharmacology (Arnold & Gulumian 1984), or the role of the makhadzi in biodiversity conservation (Ross 2017), limited research has been done about the process of intergenerational knowledge transfer in the Vhavenda communities in South Africa. In addition, most existing literature presents the local knowledge system of the Vhavenda in a rather static and essentialist way. This approach, however, tends to ignore the dynamic quality of indigenous knowledge and overlooks social dynamics and relationships, which are central in knowledge production and preservation. Therefore, my research objective is to uncover the process of intergenerational knowledge transfer in the Vhavenda communities and explores the efforts of a local grassroot organization in indigenous knowledge preservation from within. This study aims to reveal why there is a gap between the youth and elders today and explores the role of grassroot organization Dzomo la

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¹ http://www.thedzomolamupo.org/ (12/01/2018)
² http://www.thedzomolamupo.org/who-we-are/ (20/04/2018)
³ http://www.thedzomolamupo.org/who-we-are/ (20/04/2018)
⁴ Plural form of makhadzi, as well as the singular respectful form to address an elderly.
Mupo – meaning ‘Voice of the Earth’ – to facilitate intergenerational knowledge transfer inwards and outwards of the communities.

The academic relevance is that this research contributes to the emancipation, development and protection of the Vhavenda’s local knowledge system and thereby supports the larger shift ‘towards critical but resolute re-appropriation of the practical and cognitive heritage of millions of people around the continent’ (Hountondji 1997: 35 in Nygren 1999). It also contributes to existing literature by addressing the dynamic process of intergenerational knowledge transfer and local preservation efforts of a grassroot activist organization. Taking an emic approach, it also contributes to understand the local context through the eyes of the local people. This research can be relevant to the field of Cultural Anthropology, African studies and Critical Development Thinking within International Development Studies, making the shift towards a post-colonial and post-development paradigm.

The social relevance is that the Vhavenda’s ecological knowledge system could contribute to deal with the (global) challenges of our time – such as Climate Change and biodiversity loss – as indigenous knowledge has a large emphasis on the interconnectedness between people and their natural environment. In terms of its local impact, this research can support Dzomo la Mupo to gain insights into the process of intergenerational knowledge transfer and reveal the causes for the gap between the youth and elders today. Finally, my presence as a researcher also contributed to the process of intergenerational knowledge transfer, since talking with me facilitated intergenerational learning and empowered the youth to take action.

The thesis starts with a theoretical framework (chapter 1), which defines indigenous knowledge, discusses the social ecology of indigenous people – referred to as kincentric ecology – and discusses the political ecology of social movements, in order to place the Vhavenda communities and Dzomo la Mupo in a theoretical context. It also addresses decolonization of research methods, in order to support the shift to a transformative research paradigm. Then follows a methodology chapter (chapter 2), which goes deeper into my research questions, qualitative research methods, operationalization of major concepts and the conceptual scheme. It also addresses my research positionality and ethics, data analysis and limitations. After this methodology chapter, there are three analytical chapters which present the findings in the field. These chapters are divided into intergenerational knowledge transfer in the past, based on the memories of the elders (chapter 3), the present, which explains the gap in intergenerational knowledge transfer today (chapter 4) and the work of Dzomo la Mupo to revive indigenous knowledge, with eye on the future (chapter 5). Lastly, the discussion and conclusion chapter bring all findings together and give an answer on the research question. It also discusses the limitations of the study and provides recommendations for further research.
Chapter 1: Theoretical Framework

Introduction

In order to gain a better understanding of the local knowledge system of the Vhavenda, this theoretical chapter firstly explains how indigenous knowledge can be defined according to several scholars (1.1). Secondly, this chapter addresses the way indigenous people often relate to their natural environment, which can be referred to as kincentric ecology (1.2). Thirdly, it addresses the political ecology of social movements with regards to biodiversity conservation, in order to understand the work of Dzomo la Mupo in a theoretical perspective (1.3). It also addresses brokers and practices of strategic translation, since Dzomo la Mupo communicates both inwards and outwards (1.4). Lastly, this chapter addresses a decolonization of research methods (1.5), in order to support the shift towards a post-colonial research paradigm. The concept of intergenerational knowledge transfer is described in the methodology chapter (2.2), where I further operationalize the major concepts.

1.1 Defining indigenous knowledge

According to Western tradition the term ‘indigenous’ has often been associated with ‘primitive, wild and natural’, stemming from the oriental discourse of the colonial times, which either romanticized or looked down upon the exotic ‘other’ (Said 1978). According to Semali and Kincheloe (2002) indigenous knowledge reflects the ‘dynamic way in which the residents of a certain area have come to understand themselves in relationship to their natural environment and how they organize that folk knowledge of flora and fauna, cultural beliefs and history to enhance their life’ (Semali & Kincheloe 2002: 3). Dei (1993) defines indigenous knowledge as ‘the cultural tradition, values, beliefs, and worldviews of local peoples as distinguished from western scientific knowledge’. According to him, local knowledge is the product of indigenous peoples’ direct experience of the workings of nature and its relationship with the social world (1993: 105).

Other scholars use the term ‘Traditional Ecological Knowledge’ to refer to indigenous knowledge, explaining it as a ‘knowledge-practice-belief complex’. Berkes, Colding and Folke (2000) describe Traditional Ecological Knowledge as ‘a cumulative body of knowledge, practice and belief, evolving by adaptive processes and handed down through generations by cultural transmission, about the relationship of living beings (including humans) with one another and with their environment’ (Berkes et al. 2000: 1252). Using a ‘system of knowledge’ framework, Banuri and Marglin (1993) distinguish indigenous knowledge as a holistic form of knowledge, which is embedded in its particular context, does not believe in individualistic values and does
not create a subject/object dichotomy (Banuri and Marglin 1993: 10-18).

Western science, on the other hand, is usually presented as universal and transcultural, denying its locality and claiming a Eurocentric ‘west-is-best’ discourse (Semali & Kincheloe 2002: 28). It is based on Cartesian philosophy and science – stemming from the Enlightenment – which makes a separation between mind and matter, object and subject and tends to explain the world as a mechanical system, which can be measured and understood by breaking it up in smaller particles and using abstract reasoning. The knower is supposed to be out of the picture, free from personal bias of opinions, perspectives and values (ibid. 25). This separation between mind and matter, and between the social and the natural world, results in the objectification of nature and has led to increasing domination and exploitation of the natural world, considering humanity at the top of the pyramid of life. Some indigenous scholars argue that indigenous knowledge can counter the ‘western science destruction of nature’, as it gives emphasis on relationships, of both human beings to one another and to the ecosystems in their natural environment (ibid.: 16). This focus on interconnectedness and interdependence has mostly been absent in western knowledge production in the past centuries, though it is slowly coming back.

According to Nygren (1999) and Agarwal (1995), we should move beyond the dichotomy of indigenous versus western knowledge, as indigenous knowledge systems have always been subject to interaction with other cultures, colonization and modernization, and therefore should be seen as hybrid. Also before the European conquest indigenous cultures have interacted and travelled, and therefore cannot be seen as ‘pure’. Also according to Semali and Kinchereoe (2002) indigenous knowledge should not be romanticized as ‘essential and authentic’, as if it is a static historical artefact which has been isolated and far removed from contemporary life. Instead, indigenous knowledge should be seen as a dynamic process, constantly changing and coevolving over time (ibid: 22) Agarwal (1995) raises the awareness not to bundle all indigenous cultures together as one, but still acknowledge that many indigenous knowledge systems and cultures have been oppressed and deteriorated by dominant forces.

When indigenous knowledge gained renewed attention in the discourse of ‘development from below’, the project of archiving intended to preserve indigenous knowledge in archives, but Agarwal views this as problematic, as it fragmentizes knowledge out of its holistic context and destroys the dynamic quality of information (Agarwal 1995). The focus of this research on the process of intergenerational knowledge transfer within indigenous communities, could therefore be an interesting contribution to reveal the mechanisms of knowledge preservation within indigenous communities, as well as understand how it is brought outwards.
Chapter 1: Theoretical Framework

1.2 Social ecology – kincentric ecology

Social ecology is about the way that people relate themselves to their natural environment. Kincentric ecology analyses the way in which many indigenous people perceive their relationship to the natural world: as part of an ecological extended family, which shares the same origins and ancestors (Salmon 2000: 1327). To many indigenous people, human beings are at equal standing with other life-forms, which are seen as interconnected and interdependent as kindred relationships. This kin includes all elements of an ecosystem – from the animals to plants and minerals – and is grounded in the realization that nature affects humans and humans affect nature. Kincentric ecology has therefore a reciprocal relationship to nature, which result in care-taking responsibilities of sustainable subsistence and harvesting and practices that ensure the preservation of ecosystems and biodiversity. This preservation of ecosystems and biodiversity is considered important to ensure clean water flows to the community and maintain the health of their territory and human well-being (ibid.: 1330). Many indigenous people believe that their physical, mental, social and spiritual health depends on their ability to live in balance with the natural world. It is understood that when humans harm the natural world, they will also harm themselves (ibid.: 1331). Also scientist James Lovelock speaks for the rights of micro- and macro-organisms, where rivers have the right to flow and remain unpolluted and forest have rights to be untouched by human intervention. Lovelock explains that ‘the Earth acts as if it were a living organism, maintaining its life forms, its climate, its seasons and weather patterns as self-sustaining, self-governing, self-organizing and self-correcting system’ (Kumar 2007: 120).

Knowing that you share your place with other life-forms as your relatives, influences one’s sense of identity, thought and language, and shapes cultural histories, rituals and people’s sense of self. Rituals and ceremonies are often performed to thank the land or ask for rain, and songs and dances can be performed to heal people and animals. There is the idea that all life, spiritual and physical, is interconnected in a continual cycle, which consists of a process of morphological change of birth, death and rebirth (Salmon 2000: 1330). Many indigenous people see humans and other life-forms as spirit and matter, in which humans, plants, animals, and land have a spirit and share the same breath. ‘With the awareness that one’s breath is shared by all surrounding life and that one is responsible for its mutual survival, there comes the awareness that nature is related to you and to other human beings, as family or a kinship, which shapes people’s interactions with the environment’ (ibid.: 1332). When human beings do not recognize

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5 Kinship is a system of social organization based on ‘real or putative family ties’, according to Encyclopedia Britannica. It has been explored and analyzed by many scholars in the field of Cultural Anthropology and Sociology, such as Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown, Kroeber, Murdock, Evans Pritchard and Lévi-Straus. Especially in ‘primitive’ societies kinship plays an important role as organizational framework for marriage, (re)production and decision-making. ttps://www.britannica.com/topic/kinship (30/07/2018)
their role in the complexities of life in a place, then life suffers and it loses its sustainability. It is commonly observed that people's environmental and cultural connections have been weakened by processes of industrialization and urbanization, where people are removed from subsistence living and do not feel their direct dependence on the natural world (Maffi & Woodley 2010).

Even though rural populations often heavily depend on local land, natural resources and substance farming (Godfray et al. 2010), it would be problematic to generalize and romanticize that all indigenous people have a kincentric ecological relationship to their natural environment. As the previous sub-chapter already addressed, indigenous knowledge could be seen as dynamic and hybrid, where processes of trade, colonization, modernization and cultural interactions could influence people's worldview, farming practices, ecosystem management and one's relationship to the natural world. Hardin (1968) addresses that the shared use of common-pool resources can lead to overexploitation and environmental degradation, which he calls the 'tragedy of the commons'. Ostrom (1990) on the other hand, argues that communities are able to develop effective self-governing institutions that support long-term sustainable use of their natural resources (Ostrom 1990; Dietz, Ostrom & Stern 2003; Cox, Arnold & Villamayor Tomás 2010; Dell’Angelo et al. 2017).

The Vhavenda communities refer to all lifeforms as Mupo, which means ‘All of Creation, including the cosmos’⁶. According to the website of Dzomo la Mupo the term Mupo has a deep significance in Venda, evoking ‘the memory of the core responsibility of each generation to safeguard nature – Mupo – for the next generation’. This shows that the Vhavenda communities have a safeguarding relationship to their natural environment, which could indicate kincentric ecology. This research aims to uncover whether the Vhavenda communities, as well as Dzomo la Mupo, have (elements of) a kincentric ecological understanding of their natural environment. It also aims to explore whether they have effective self-governing institutions for sustainable resource use, as addressed by Ostrom.

“Mupo is all the non man-made things that were naturally created, it is something beautiful which brings harmony” – Tshavungwe Nermarude, Ngovhela⁸

1.3 Political ecology of social movements

In order to gain a better understanding of the positionality and politico-organizational principles of Dzomo la Mupo, this sub-chapter addresses the political ecology of social movements, with a focus on biodiversity conservation. According to Escobar (1998) the term “biodiversity” could

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⁶ http://www.thedzomolamupo.org/what-is-mupo/ (12/01/2018)
⁷ http://www.thedzomolamupo.org/what-is-mupo/ (12/01/2018)
⁸ http://www.thedzomolamupo.org/what-is-mupo/ (12/01/2018)
be seen as a discursive invention, which is fostered by a complex network of actors (such as international organizations, NGO’s, universities, local communities and social movements) that articulate their knowledge and objectives through this network of power constellations, shaping dominant discourses or counter-discourses\(^9\) (Escobar 1998: 53).

The leading discourse of biodiversity conservation is held by dominant institutions, such as the World Bank and northern NGO’s, presenting a global-centric perspective of resource management, which is rooted in science, capital and management. The third world national discourse is overall not questioning the fundamentals of this global perspective, but seeks to negotiate the terms of biodiversity treaties and strategies. Southern NGO’s on the other hand, aim to reinterpret the ‘threats of biodiversity’, as they perceive the global perspective as “bio-imperialism” and aim to move towards “bio-democracy”. Instead of looking at local habitat destruction, they place emphasis on biodiversity threats of mega-development projects, monocultures, genetic manipulated resources and the consumption habits of the North, thereby shifting the focus from the South to the North as source of the diversity crisis. They also resist against the western framework of intellectual property rights and instead advocate for collective forms of rights, which recognize the intrinsic value and shared character of knowledge and resources (ibid.: 59).

Social movements have many points of view in common with the Southern NGO perspective, but they have also a unique approach to biodiversity conservation and appropriation. They articulate an alternative political ecology framework, linking biodiversity to culture, identity and territorial defence, by enacting ‘cultural politics’. Their defence is not focusing on ‘biodiversity’ alone, but becomes an entire ‘life project’ (ibid.:60). Culture can be seen as political, as it articulates alternative conceptions of the world, which can unsettle dominant cultural meanings and redefine social power. Social movements often use a set of politico-organizational principles to defence and achieve their cultural, territorial and environmental objectives, which are formulated from their worldview and desires. These principles often contain: ‘1. The reaffirmation of identity; 2. The right to territory (as the space for being); 3. Autonomy, particularly in the political realm, but with the aspiration of a certain degree of social and economic autonomy; and 4. The right to construct an autonomous perspective of the future, like an autonomous vision of development’ (ibid.: 65).

With regard to the project of reconstructing cultural identity, identity can be seen as rooted in ‘traditional’ practices and forms of knowledge, as well as ‘an always changing project of cultural and political construction’ (ibid.: 66). The approach of social movements to connect

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\(^9\) A discourse is a shared way of understanding the world, which is embedded in language and is related to power and knowledge. Discourses can change through struggle and affect the way of doing things. (Lecture of Dr. Ros-Tonen in the course Environment, Development, Conflict 30/10/2017)
culture to territory in biodiversity conservation, shows their emphasis on complex eco-cultural dynamics, which is mostly absent in conventional approaches. They address nature not as entity 'out there', but as deeply integrated with human life (ibid.: 72). With regard to the South African context, Robins (2003) states that the land restitution process in South Africa has become a catalyst for the emergence of identity politics, which tend to draw on apartheid and colonial categories and ‘discourses on tribe, tradition, and custom’ (Robins 2003: 266). He explains that despite the culturally hybrid character of these post-apartheid identity claims, ‘South African land policies and development discourses continue to draw upon reified notions of indigenous knowledge and tribal identities that were dominant during the apartheid era’ (ibid.: 266). This reinforces the essentialist understanding of indigenous knowledge and reasserts an artificial divide between tradition and modernity (Gupta 1998). Post-development critic Escobar (1995), interprets these endogenous discourses as subaltern resistance to development, capitalism and modernity and therefore values grassroots social movements as defenders of local autonomy and centres for innovation and alternative discourses. According to Robins (2003), however, this should not reinforce the traditional/modern dichotomy, as social movements often have more complex and nuanced negotiations, which are ‘neither wholesale endorsements nor radical rejections of modernity’ (Robins 2003: 281). He refers to these hybrid responses therefore as indigenous modernities. This research aims to explore whether Dzomo la Mupo enacts cultural politics and creates alternative discourses by linking biodiversity conservation to cultural and territorial defence.

1.4 Knowledge brokers and practices of strategic translation

According to Mosse and Lewis (2006), brokers could be seen as intermediary actors who operate in the ‘interfaces’ of different worldviews and knowledge systems and reveal their importance in negotiating roles, relationships and representations. They operate as active agents who are often powerful, yet marginalized and vulnerable and located between the connection points of a complex system of relationships (Mosse & Lewis 2006: 10). They are facing two or more positions at once and try to connect these worlds by using strategic presentations to meet their objectives.

This research aims to uncover whether the founder of Dzomo la Mupo could be seen as a broker in the way she represents the Venda culture outwards. She could be a broker as she stands between the ‘indigenous’ and ‘modern’ way of life. To illustrate this, she is a Vhavenda woman herself and has spent countless hours with the elders – making her very knowledgeable in their local knowledge system – while she also studies a Master’s programme at the University of Venda and is a well-known activist in the region. This study aims to explore which tools, strategies and social representations she uses to meet Dzomo la Mupo’s objectives.
1.5 Decolonization of research methods

Since this research is about indigenous knowledge production and preservation in a post-colonial context, I intend to acknowledge and respect the Vhavenda’s ontology and epistemology on equal terms. African scholar Chilisa (2017) points out the need to decolonize transdisciplinary research approaches, as mainstream research methodologies are based on European and Western paradigms, which marginalize and silence other knowledge systems and therefore could be seen as methodological imperialism (Chilisa 2017: 813). Shizha (2010) argues that the academic system could be seen as ‘the epicentre of colonial hegemony’, where research instruments have perpetuated the dominance of one race over the other (or the colonizer over the colonized) and continue to promote Eurocentric thought systems, as theoretical concepts, research questions and research methods are grounded in a western ontology and epistemology (Chilisa 2017: 814). Scheurich and Young (1997) further illustrate this by reminding us that ‘when any group within a large, complex civilization significantly dominates other groups for hundreds of years, the ways of the dominant group (its epistemologies, ontologies, and axiologies), not only become the dominant way of that civilization, but these ways also become so deeply embedded that they typically are seen as ‘natural’ or appropriate norms rather than as historically evolved social constructs’ (Scheurich & Young 1997: 7). Methodologies that are rooted in African philosophies, worldviews and history therefore could bring alternative research methodologies, which could reclaim space for indigenous epistemologies and work towards ‘equal participation of academics, practitioners, indigenous knowledge holders and local communities in framing research topics, methodologies and dissemination strategies’ (Johnson et al. 2016; Chilisa 2017).

In order to support the shift towards a post-colonial research paradigm, I have been open and respectful to the customs, protocols and approaches of the vhomakhadzi while conducting the focus group. In addition, I collaborated with Mphatheleni Makaule as indigenous knowledge holder, to understand how my research could be of value to their needs.

Concluding remarks

This study takes a dynamic approach to indigenous knowledge and explores whether the local knowledge system of the Vhavenda is presented in an essentialist or hybrid way. It explores whether Dzomo la Mupo enacts cultural politics and uses strategic representations to negotiate alternative discourses to biodiversity conservation and indigenous knowledge preservation. This research undertakes an intergenerational analysis of views and has an emic approach, in order to understand the local context through the eyes of the local people. The next chapter addresses the methodology in further detail.
Chapter 2: Methodology

Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodology framework through which this research is conducted. Firstly it presents the research question and sub-questions (2.1), followed by the operationalization of the major concepts (2.2) and conceptual scheme (2.3). Then it presents the research location (2.4) unit of analysis (2.5) and methods of data collection (2.6), which address my epistemological stance, research design, sampling strategy and qualitative research methods; followed by a reflection on the quality of my research, ethical considerations and my research positionality. The last two subchapters present the data analysis (2.7) and limitations (2.8).

2.1 Research question and sub-questions

Research question:
How is the local knowledge system of the indigenous Vhavenda communities in the Venda region in South Africa maintained and inter-generationally transferred, and what is the role of grassroot organization Dzomo la Mupo to support this knowledge transfer and (strategically) bring this knowledge outwards?

To help answer this question, the following sub-questions are addressed:

1. How is the local knowledge system of the Vhavenda defined and perceived according to the Vhavenda elders¹⁰?
2. What are the social mechanisms and local institutions of knowledge transfer?
3. How has intergenerational knowledge transfer changed under contemporary pressures?
4. Who are involved in intergenerational knowledge transfer and what are the social dynamics between the youth and elders?
5. Who are involved in Dzomo la Mupo and what are their motivations, activities and strategies to support the Vhavenda communities in intergenerational knowledge transfer?

¹⁰ Who are part of the member communities of Dzomo la Mupo
2.2 Operationalization of Major Concepts

2.2.1 Local knowledge system

Drawing on my theoretical framework about indigenous knowledge, the Traditional Ecological Knowledge framework is applied to operationalize the local knowledge system of the Vhavenda communities. According to Berkes, Colding and Folke (2000) indigenous knowledge can be understood as a ‘knowledge-practice-belief complex’, which consist of: 1. *Local observational knowledge* of species and other environmental phenomena. 2. *Practice* in the way people carry out their resource activities and ecosystem management and 3. *Belief* regarding how people fit into or relate to ecosystems and the natural world – their worldview or cosmology.

This local knowledge system is often accumulated over generations by trial-and-error, and is adaptive in nature, as it responds to feedback loops from the environment (Berkes et al. 2000: 152). Ecological practices of biodiversity conservation are important to secure ecological services on which people depend, such as food, clean water, medicine and regulation of seasonal cycles for rain. With regard to ecological knowledge and management I have focused on indigenous cultivation practices, sacred sites and the use of taboo, which are common aspects in Traditional Ecological Knowledge.

The worldview or cosmology is about the way people perceive themselves in relationship to their natural environment, so I explore their perception of the human-nature relationship, spiritual-physical relationship and their perception of time and human consciousness. The worldview of a culture gives also shape to cultural values, basic norms and rules of a society (ibid.: 1256), so this is also taken into account.

Regarding the social dimension I look at social institutions which help to maintain ecologically sound management practices, which are often leaders, stewards or custodians of the territory (ibid.: 1257).

2.2.2 Intergenerational knowledge transfer within indigenous communities

According to Berkes and others (2000), the difference between scientific ecological knowledge and Traditional Ecological Knowledge is that the last is highly dependent on social mechanisms and local institutions to ensure the transmission and internalization of knowledge, worldviews, values and norms, so that societies can act on their local knowledge and use it to produce a livelihood from the environment (Berkes et al. 2000). Examples of social mechanisms for intergenerational knowledge transfer are: 1. *Oral transfer*, like through cultural stories, fables, myths and fairy tales, which are passed on to children and sustained by cultural beliefs and yearly festivals. 2. *Apprenticeship-based learning*, like hands-on learning on the land or in the
household; and 3. *Social mechanisms for cultural internalization of knowledge*: such as rituals, ceremonies and other traditions, including dances, drumming and celebrations. ‘Rituals help people remember the rules and appropriately interpret signals for ecosystem change and it reinforces community cohesion’ (ibid.: 1257).

2.2.3 Grassroot organization Dzomo la Mupo

Dzomo la Mupo – founded in 2007 – aims to strengthen the *makhadzi* and Vhavenda communities in their ecological governance, by reviving indigenous seeds and cultivation, supporting the protection of sacred sites and food sovereignty, and facilitating and encouraging intergenerational knowledge transfer by rebuilding trust in their indigenous knowledge systems. Since local chiefs and politicians undermine the traditional *makhadzi* role in land reforms and decision-making processes, the *makhadzi* are socially and economically vulnerable in national, provincial and local traditional leadership structures (Ross 2017: 4). Dzomo la Mupo is a bottom-up activist organization, largely run by *makhadzi*, to reclaim their eco-cultural knowledge practices and prevent irreversible disorder within *Mupo* – Mother Earth.

2.3 Conceptual scheme

Before I entered the field, I used the conceptual scheme of Berkes and others (2000) to operationalize the Vhavenda's local knowledge system and be able to look closer at the process of intergenerational knowledge transfer. After I came back from the field I drew a new conceptual scheme, as it emerged out of my findings through my inductive approach.

2.3.1 First conceptual scheme – before the field

Even though this representation does not show the feedback loops between the four dimensions, it shows how Traditional Ecological Knowledge is embedded in social institutions and is shaped by the worldview of a particular culture (Berkes et al. 2000: 1257)

*Figure 2. Traditional Ecological Knowledge system as knowledge-practice-belief complex (Berkes et al. 2000)*
**Operationalization table**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept</th>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Indicator</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local knowledge system or Traditional Ecological Knowledge system</td>
<td>Worldview/cosmology</td>
<td>Perception of human-nature relationship</td>
<td>How does human life interact with the environment?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Perception of spirit-physical relationship</td>
<td>Belief in animism and ancestors?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Perception of human consciousness/life/soul</td>
<td>Where do we come from and where do we go?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Perception of time and history</td>
<td>Linear or cyclical? Is it bound to their land?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Cultural values</td>
<td>Values, beliefs, norms and rules</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social</td>
<td>Social institutions</td>
<td>Leaders, stewards and custodians of local knowledge and practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Land and resource management systems (ecosystem management)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Agro-ecological farming principles</td>
<td>Seed selection and preservation Local farming techniques</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sacred sites</td>
<td>Role of sacred sites in ecosystem management Principles that ensure the protection of sacred sites</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Taboos</td>
<td>The use of taboos to protect ecosystems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local knowledge of land, species and ecosystems</td>
<td></td>
<td>Observation of ecosystems</td>
<td>Knowledge of regeneration cycles of ecosystems Observed changes?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Pharmacology</td>
<td>Medical plants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge transfer</td>
<td>Within the community</td>
<td>Social mechanisms for internalization of knowledge</td>
<td>Rituals, ceremonies Rite de passage Music, songs Dance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Oral transfer</td>
<td>Stories, fables and myths</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2: Methodology</td>
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<td>------------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Time</strong></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>How long does knowledge transfer entail?</td>
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<tr>
<td>From Dzomo la Mupo to whom?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Which aspects are important to communicate outwards?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Outside of the community</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>When is knowledge transferred?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transfer through apprenticeship</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transfer through ‘written’ sources</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participation in (daily) practices on land</td>
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<td>Books, documents, maps, symbols, art...</td>
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<tr>
<td>What role does age play to give/receive knowledge?</td>
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<tr>
<td>In what occasions does knowledge transfer take place?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Is it connected to seasonal cycles/times of the year?</td>
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<tr>
<td>How long is the whole process perceived to be?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Who brings the local knowledge outwards and how?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Which local knowledge is brought outwards and how is it represented?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Dzomo la Mupo</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Activities</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ways to facilitate intergenerational knowledge transfer</td>
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<tr>
<td>How they bring youth and elders together?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Objectives</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>What is Dzomo la Mupo's mission?</td>
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<td>What they aim to achieve?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Motivations</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations of Dzomo la Mupo members</td>
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<tr>
<td>Why they support the Vhavenda and the makhadzi in particular?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>(Strategic) Translation</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Redefining cultural identity</td>
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<td>Tools and strategies</td>
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<tr>
<td>How they present the Vhavenda culture and indigenous knowledge outwards?</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
2.3.2 Second conceptual scheme – after the field

This conceptual scheme is inspired by the conceptual scheme of Berkes and others (2000) and came forward after my preliminary findings in the field. It presents four dimensions regarding intergenerational knowledge transfer, which forms the structure of my first two analytical chapters. This conceptual scheme shows that the outer dimensions (worldview/belief system and living environment) influence the inner dimensions (social mechanisms & local institutions of knowledge transfer and social dynamics & relationships), so when changes occur in the outer circles, this subsequently influences the inner circles. This way of drawing circles is inspired by the ‘indigenous way’ of presenting knowledge – as used by the Vhavenda communities to draw the ecological calendar – as circles shows the holistic character of knowledge and include cyclical thinking.

To start with the outer circle of the conceptual scheme, the *worldview* or *belief system* presents the way people understand themselves in the world and gives answers on existential questions. The second circle is the *living environment*, which could refer to the way people relate to their natural environment (e.g. kincentric ecology) as well as indicate life in urban or rural areas. The third circle presents the *social mechanisms and local institutions for intergenerational knowledge transfer*, which are embedded in this particular worldview and living environment. The most inner circle displays the *social dynamics and relationships*, which are often taught and
internalized through these social mechanisms and local institutions of knowledge transfer. These social dynamics and relationships take place between children, youth, adults and elders. Since the most significant flow of knowledge transfer takes place from the elder to the younger generation, this is presented by the dark blue arrow, but as knowledge exchange also happens in the opposite direction, this is displayed by the light blue arrow.

The four categories of children, youth, adults and elders are defined in the indigenous way, which are not determined by age but rather seen as a stage of life. Childhood is the stage from birth until adolescence, where adolescence is entered when girls start menstruating and boys have a 'reception', "a clear mind where knowledge can be absorbed and understood"\(^\text{11}\), according to my key informant Mphatheleni. The stage known as 'youth' or 'adolescence' is the phase where one grows from childhood into adulthood, which was characterized by initiation school and a \textit{rite of passage}\(^\text{12}\) in the past. Marriage could be seen as the final transition into adulthood, where you start to have a family of your own. Once becoming a grandparent and your hair turns white, you are considered a knowledgeable elder, who is highly respected in the indigenous communities.

Since the understanding of these stages is based on the 'indigenous way of life' – and this way of life is changing over time – it is more difficult to define the boundaries of these four categories or stages of life in contemporary life. Therefore, similar to the understanding that indigenous knowledge could be seen as dynamic, these four categories or life stages could also be seen as dynamic and fluid. Therefore, young adults who are studying and are not married yet, could be classified as 'youth'; and adults, who are considered very knowledgeable and are highly respected in the communities, could be classified as 'elder'.

2.4 Research Location

This research took place in Vhembe district in the Limpopo province in South Africa. Most of my fieldwork research took place in Vuwani – a small town where Dzomo la Mupo is based and I lived with the founders in their home – as well as the surrounding areas where the Vhavenda communities are located and I lived for participatory observation. Vuwani is located close to Thohoyandou, the capital city of Venda. The communities I visited were the villages Tshidzivhe, Funyu Funyu, and Gabeni, which are considered poor rural areas. The Vhembe district is known for its abundant biodiversity and is locally governed by chiefs, who work under the South

\(^{11}\) Interview with Mphatheleni Makaulule in Vuwani (15/03/2018)
\(^{12}\) Rites of passage mark the transition from one stage into the other and are often characterized by temporary suffering, deprivation and strict codes of conducts, while being temporarily isolated from society. Rites of passage could be seen as an endurance test, where participant need to demonstrate that they deserve the full rights and responsibilities of adults (Eriksen 2010 [1995]: 68).
Chapter 2: Methodology

African government. In 1962, the Venda region was known as the homeland or Bantustan by the Apartheid Government, which allowed the Black South Africans to govern themselves, but denied them rights and opportunity to participate in White South African politics. The homelands were created to move every Black person to his or her ethnic homeland, in order to remove the Black population from White South Africa. In 1979 Venda was declared independent by the South African government, though the United Nations Security Council did not recognise this, as it would establish further apartheid. Since the Blacks owned only thirteen percent of South Africa’s land and their farmlands were in poor conditions, millions of Blacks had to leave the homelands to work in mines, industries and for White farmers. Eventually, in 1994, all Bantustans in South Africa were re-incorporated in democratic South Africa.

2.5 Unit of Analysis

My unit of analysis is indigenous knowledge transfer and indigenous knowledge preservation and explores how it is negotiated in inter-generational interfaces. I have distinguished three sub-units, which are 1) intergenerational knowledge transfer in the past, 2) intergenerational knowledge transfer in the present and 3) efforts of indigenous knowledge preservation with an eye on the future – the role of Dzomo la Mupo. The Vhavenda communities and Dzomo la Mupo have been observed in their own natural environment, without intervention or experiments of change.

2.6 Research Methods

2.6.1 Epistemological stance

This research is conducted from a critical realist perspective, which is based on the idea that there is one reality ‘out there’, which can be perceived in different ways, as people have their own frame of reference, standpoints, worldviews and experience of senses (Easton 2010). I also took an interpretative perspective, acknowledging that I am the instrument of research who generates and interprets the data, having also my own frame of reference and perceptions which could colour my findings. I have been open and receptive to understand the world through their eyes and valued their epistemology and ontology on equal terms. By including their approach and needs in the research process, I aimed to contribute to a post-colonial research paradigm.

2.6.2 Research design

This research has an exploratory design, as it aims to gain a better understanding of the research problem and explores a rather new area of knowledge. This research uses qualitative research methods and has an inductive approach, making an attempt to create theory from the data rather than from a predisposed hypothesis (Streb 2010).

2.6.3 Sampling strategy

The founder of Dzomo la Mupo, Mphatheleni Makaulule, was my gatekeeper to the field, as she could bring me in contact with the Vhavenda communities and introduced me to the makhadzi, the youth, the chiefs and other community members. Snowball sampling was used to find additional participants, for instance the youth who left the communities and lived in cities, which I mainly found through one friend at the University of Venda.

2.6.4 Methods of data collection

I used semi-structured interviews, focus groups, participatory observation and field notes as data collection methods, as these methods could provide me with in-depth data about their worldview, local knowledge system and social mechanisms and local institutions of knowledge transfer. Since knowledge transfer could be understood as a dynamic process, qualitative research has been useful to hear the stories and experiences from an emic perspective – through the eyes of the local people – as it is open and inductive in nature. With regard to Dzomo la Mupo, qualitative research methods have helped me to understand their objectives, motivations
and activities, as well as discover how they strategically present themselves outwards.

**Semi-structured interviews**

In-depth interviews allow the researcher to gain deep insights into the experiences and perspectives of the participants and allow the researcher to probe for additional information. Through in-depth interviews highly valuable findings can be found, as well as unexpected outcomes. Semi-structured interviews make use of a topic guideline, which leaves room for flexibility and interaction (Bryman 2008). The topic guideline helps to direct the interview to certain themes, but is open to take on other directions during the conversation. Notes were taken during the interview to remember body language and facial expressions.

Semi-structured interviews were my main method of data collection, which I used with my two key informants Mpatheleni Makaulule and her husband Dr. Dima – eight vhomakhadzi elders, six adults (three men and three women) and five youth (two girls and three boys). Besides the interviews, I had many informal conversations with elders, vhomakhadzi, adults, the chief of Tshidzivhe and youth on campus and in taxi vans.

**Focus groups**

Focus groups provide rich data through interaction in a group of people. A focus group enables participants to present their views and perceptions, while also listening to the experiences of others and reply on what they hear. This method empowers certain groups to speak and exchange knowledge and ideas, which can lead to new concepts (Bryman 2008). Focus group discussions can therefore complement individual interviews, by providing new insights through the group synergy. Moreover it is presenting more a ‘real life’ environment, as in daily life people also interact and respond to one another.

I used this method to talk with a community of vhomakhadzi elders and a few young adults in Tshidzivhe to explore how they perceive indigenous knowledge and how Dzomo la Mupo facilitates intergenerational knowledge transfer. I have also used this method to talk with the youth in the village Funyu Funyu, to explore how they experience their cultural traditions and how knowledge is transferred to them. Both focus groups consisted of approximately 15 people and were conducted in their own natural environment.

In order to support the shift towards a transformative research paradigm, or a post-colonial indigenous research paradigm in particular, I have been open and receptive to the protocols, customs and indigenous practices while conducting the focus group in Tshidzivhe, including their approaches in the research process. Since it was not my position to introduce alternative research methodologies as a way of decolonization – as I come from the Global North myself – all I could do was to give space to their customs and ways of doing, in order to co-create the focus group together. This way the focus group took more the shape of a community
dialogue or community meeting, which could take similar form in daily life.

The focus group took place at the chief’s palace and we were sitting in a large open circle under the trees outside, where children and dogs where playing around. When everyone was present the vhomakhadzi started to clap and sing an indigenous song, where one makhadzi danced in the middle of the circle and chose another to take her place. After the songs some protocols were followed, such as respectfully saluting each other by u losha – bowing down on the ground to show respect – ululating by the vhomakhadzi – who made a sound with their tongue to invite the ancestor spirits to the meeting – and some welcoming words by Mphateleni of Dzomo la Mupo and two vhomakhadzi, to make everyone feel free and at home. During the introduction we repeated the u losha several times again, while the vhomakhadzi were ululating again. Then I introduced my topic and first question in the group and from there I let it flow in the direction of the conversation. Most of the time I took a step back to give space to the elders to have their dialogue together; when there was a silence or a moment of translation I introduced another question. At the end of the dialogue I offered food and drinks to everyone and the mother of the chief – Vhakoma – gave me a Venda name and a traditional Venda skirt to wear on the spot, while the vhomakhadzi were ululating again. I felt they really welcomed in the community and I decided to live there for one week, to experience the ‘Venda way of life’.

Participatory observation
Participatory observation was carried out during my stay with Dzomo la Mupo as well as during my stay with the Vhavenda communities. I observed the way they live, interact, cultivate the land, perform rituals and ceremonies, sing and dance, and transfer knowledge to the children. I have also taken part in their gendered livelihoods and participated in the house chores. With regard to Dzomo la Mupo, I participated in their annual meeting in the forest and I observed the
interaction with chiefs, the *vhomakhadzi*, youth and other community members. Documentation of my observations was done through detailed *field notes*, as well as video’s and photographs after their free and prior informed consent.

### 2.6.5 Methodological reflection on the quality of research

In order to reflect on the quality my qualitative research, I evaluate two alternative criteria for validity and reliability, which are *trustworthiness* and *authenticity*, laid out by Lincoln and Guba (Bryman 2008, 378).

**Trustworthiness**

Starting with evaluating trustworthiness, *credibility* is taken into account by using triangulation of research methods, to ensure a realistic account of reality by comparing data from in-depth interviews, focus groups, field notes and literature reviews (e.g. Stayt 1931). To reflect on the internal validity of my findings, I talked with my fellow researchers of Indigenous Knowledge Systems at the University of Venda and I shared my preliminary findings with my local supervisor in the department of African Studies and Indigenous Knowledge Systems. I also discussed my preliminary findings with my supervisor Dr. Yves van Leynseele who has conducted his PhD research in the Venda region and has extended knowledge about the area. I had a good and trusted relationship with my research participants, which was probably also facilitated through my direct connection with Dzomo la Mupo. Respondent validation was assured by giving most of my interview transcripts back to the participants while staying in the field, where they could make corrections and give their feedback to avoid misunderstandings and misinterpretation. I offered to keep their responses anonymous and confidential, though most of the participants wanted to be mentioned by name.

With regard to *transferability* – which is about external validity – I believe that the larger storyline of my findings could be transferred to other contexts of indigenous communities or ethnic tribes on the African continent or in the world, as literature shows that many indigenous communities have similar local institutions – such as initiation school – and all are under influence of modernization, though may it be to a different extend or in another moment of time.

Concerning *dependability* I took record of my whole research process, by taking video’s, audio-records, two notebooks of field notes, interview transcripts and I collected news articles and booklets regarding the work of Dzomo la Mupo. I also viewed several DVDs and ecological calendar maps, which the community members created with Dzomo la Mupo and African Biodiversity Network.

In terms of *confirmability* or objectivity, I intended to always stay open-minded and open-hearted without judgement to the respondents perspectives, while continuing to explore
my own cultural biases. With regard to gender roles and gender equality I found it sometimes challenging to leave my own cultural values and bias aside, but I managed to adapt to their way of life and did not let it influence my data. Since my interviews were mostly built on personal relationships and always took place in interaction, I believe that inter-subjectivity can never be fully avoided and is always part of qualitative research.

Authenticity

The second criterion, authenticity, is concerned with the wider social and political impact of this research. Fairness was taken into account by including all viewpoints of different members, such as elders who were part of Dzomo la Mupo, elders who were outside of Dzomo la Mupo, teachers who work with Dzomo la Mupo, youth in rural areas who are imbedded in their cultural tradition, youth in urban areas who are outside their cultural tradition, the chief of the village Tshidzivhe where I did participatory observation, and the wife of the bishop to get a perspective from the church.

Ontological authenticity was enhanced by bringing youth and elders together in a focus group in Tshidzivhe, where they could hear each other’s perspective and understand different viewpoints. The moment when I give my master thesis back to the communities will also enhance the opportunity to learn from each other, which could enhance educative authenticity.

My intention as a researcher has not been to particularly empower community members to take action, but during an in-depth interview with a male student emerged his vision to take action, which is an example of catalytic authenticity. The interview brought his dream to the surface to create a workshop in the forest, to reconnect youth from the city to nature and their cultural roots. This has already led to several action steps: the first (trial) workshop in the wilderness with twelve adolescents, the establishment of their organization name, a committee, community meetings and a written mission and vision. This way the research has contributed to tactical authenticity, where youth has been empowered to bring a vision into action.

2.6.6 Ethical considerations

With regard to ethical considerations I reflect on voluntary participation, informed consent, safety in participation, confidentiality and trust.

Already before I went to South Africa, I was in contact with Mphatheleni Makaule, the founder of grassroots organization Dzomo la Mupo, who expressed her enthusiasm and willingness to welcome me for my research. Before I visited the communities she already announced my coming to the communities, which gave them the opportunity to withdraw or participate voluntarily. Once I was in the field I also had a first introduction meeting, which took place at the ‘core’ village of Dzomo la Mupo, Tshidzivhe. Once everyone knew me and heard my
story, we organized a second meeting the week after for the focus group. This way every participant could choose to participate in the dialogue and gave their free and prior informed consent.

Before the in-depth interviews I also explained the purpose of my research and mentioned each time that they could withdraw any moment, that they were free to answer or not answer a question, and that I would ensure their confidentiality and anonymity, unless they wanted to be mentioned by name in my research. I also asked their free and prior consent before I recorded them or made a video of the interview or focus group.

With regard to the consent forms I had a little miscommunication with my host, where I thought that I should not bring consent forms directly beforehand (e.g. with the focus group), since community members could misinterpret it as ‘too serious and formal’ which could scare them away. In the end of my research period when I was asked why I did not bring the consent forms before the meetings and interviews, it became clear that it was a miscommunication. In order to set it straight I visited the community members again and explained the purpose and formality of the consent forms for the university. Everyone was willing to sign them, only one village, Funyu Funyu, was too far to visit again. Since most elders were illiterate and unable to put a signature themselves, another community member put their signature while the form was explained to them in Tshivenda.

With regard to safety of the participants, the interviews and focus groups always took place in their natural environment, where they would feel comfortable and safe. There has not been any uncomfortable situation or sensitive topic, where their safety could be in danger. Trust was built through my connection with Dzomo la Mupo and Mphatheleni, who introduced me to all community members and had already a strong connection with the members. Since I was already warmly welcomed by Dzomo la Mupo, I could also feel this warm welcome in the communities. With the youth I easily became friends at the university and out of these relationships I conducted the interviews.

2.6.7 Researcher positionality

As a researcher from the Netherlands I had a particular position in the indigenous communities in South Africa, as I am a white women in a black region, which is still embedded in a post-apartheid sensitivity. Grassroot organization Dzomo La Mupo had already experience with two PhD students coming from Europe, which could have made it easier for me to become included in the communities. Being a women and in my twenties might have also helped me to speak with the female elders and connect to the youth. Coming from ‘outside’ their culture and community could make it easier for them not to feel judged when they spoke about their struggles regarding
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their cultural identity, at the same time being an ‘outsider’ meant to gain their trust.

With regard to their cultural norms and values, respect and honour were very important values in South Africa and these communities, so I always tried to be humble and respectful. As I did not know all the customs and taboos from the start, this made it challenging sometimes to do everything ‘right’. As I come from the Global North and the Netherlands in particular, they could also see me as a representative of the colonial history, which disrupted their land and culture. Moreover, they might have seen me as ‘wealthy’, though it might have had a different meaning to them. I have always tried to position myself simple and down-to-earth and I was open-minded to learn from their worldview and ways of life.

Looking at my positionality and personal biases, I have been already long time interested in alternative ways of living and acting in the world, which are more in harmony with nature and have a more holistic understanding of nature and the world. I am very open to different ontologies and perspectives on reality, such as the integration of human/nature as a whole, as I can also feel this connection myself. As I also grew up with the western worldview, I think I am able to understand both perspectives and I believe that these ontologies do not have to exclude one another, but can complement each other by showing different sides or layers of the same reality.

2.7 Data analysis

This research is explorative and inductive in nature, which means that through data analysis new concepts and theory could emerge. I have used Atlas.ti to code and analyse my data, as it could help me to break down the interview transcripts into different categories and use labels to code different fragments (Boeije 2010). Before I used Atlas.ti, I used different colours to highlight quotes in the transcripts, which I divided into intergenerational knowledge transfer in the past, the present and the role of Dzomo la Mupo. I differentiated the following categories, which became clear after I wrote an overview of my preliminary findings: ‘social mechanisms and local institutions of knowledge transfer’, ‘worldview and belief system’, ‘living environment’, and ‘social dynamics and relationships’, which I divided into the past, the present and Dzomo la Mupo. Having these categories I could find relationships, similarities and dissimilarities within the data. Beside this inductive approach, I also reflected on my theoretical framework and operationalization of mayor concepts, which was a deductive approach. Field notes helped me to analyse the findings better and remember my experiences in the field.
2.8 Limitations

Limitations of the study is that using only qualitative methods makes this research difficult to replicate (since dynamics change over time), it is more subjective as I am the instrument of research and interpret the data (inter-subjectivity) and it might be more difficult to generalize my findings to a larger context. The fact that I needed a translator could also limit my research, as it sometimes slowed down the conversation flow and details could have been left out during translation on the spot. Since the founder of Dzomo la Mupo, Mphatheleni Makaulule, is very knowledgeable about the local knowledge system of the Vhavenda, has a deeper understanding of the indigenous words in Tshivenda and has many personal relationships with community members which created trust, she was most suitable to be my translator. On the other hand, her presence could make interviews less confidential, but since the research topic was not very sensitive and I only worked with her with the elders and the focus groups, I do not think it was a problem. The interviews with the youth and adults in the city were in English and therefore I did not need her as a translator, which allowed them to speak freely and ensured their confidentiality and trust.
Chapter 3: Indigenous knowledge transfer in the past: perspectives of the elderly

“\textit{This learning is not about going to the classroom. You learn through experience, because it is happening while you are growing.}”\textsuperscript{17} – Vho Lily

Introduction

This chapter explains how indigenous knowledge was transferred in the past. It is based on the memories of elders and adults who grew up in rural areas in their ‘bowl of culture’\textsuperscript{18}, meaning in the ‘Venda way of life’ which followed the local customs and traditions. This chapter intends to show how social mechanisms and local institutions of intergenerational knowledge transfer were still in place – in comparison to now – and how these were connected to the Vhavenda’s worldview and their living environment.

In order to place the stories of the elders in perspective and understand where their answers come from, this chapter starts with the background and environment of the elders (3.1), before I address the elders’ perception and understanding of ‘indigenous knowledge’ (3.2). Then I lay out the social mechanism and local institutions of knowledge transfer (3.3), followed by explaining how these were connected to their living environment in \textit{Mupo} (3.4) and embedded in the Vhavenda’s ancestral worldview (3.5). Lastly I will address the social dynamics and relationships, with special focus on the relationship between the younger and elder generation (3.6).

3.1 Background and context – experiencing the ‘Venda way of life’

Many elders who told me their stories were \textit{makhadzi} women from the mountain village Tshidzivhe, which is a quite a remote village in the Soutpansberg mountains, where I had to drive for over an hour on an ‘off-grid’ bumpy road through the pine forest plantations and indigenous forest, before the village rose up in the green lush hills. On my way I could see and smell the rich biodiversity of the forest, with many varieties of trees covered in climbing plants, birds and insects zooming around and I could see baboons and monkeys sitting on the rocks and cattle walking down to a small water stream.

In Tshidzivhe I was invited to live for one week at the chief’s palace (in colonial discourses and literature often referred to as ‘chief’s kraal’), which consisted of several round houses with clay walls in between, surrounded by banana trees and a large piece of land down the valley. \textit{Vhakoma} – the mother of the chief – was cultivating maize, pumpkin, peanuts and

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{17} Interview with Vho Lily in Vuwani (02/03/2018) ‘Vho’ is the respectful way to address an elder.  
\textsuperscript{18} Expression by Mphatheleni Makaule}
potatoes in a polyculture way, with splendid view over the Soutpansberg mountains. There was one square house with a television and a few chairs in an empty room at the chief’s palace, as well as one round guestroom with red sofas and a cabinet, but overall they lived a simple and quite ‘traditional’ lifestyle, where the children slept on braided mats on the ground, and where Mutanuni – the wife of the chief – cooked on a wood fire in the middle of a dark round kitchen every day. Thursday evening was known as ‘cultural evening’ at the chief’s palace, where the family gathered together in the round kitchen around the fire and Mutanuni and Vhakoma started singing and clapping, while the children danced traditional Venda dances. The chief was drumming on big wooden drum covered with cow skin, which they also use for rituals, funerals, celebrations and initiation school. While he was playing the drum he was explaining to me their Venda culture, for instance how he had chosen to have only one wife, while many other chiefs had many wives, as polygamy was part of the Venda culture. A calabash was going around with homemade alcohol, which made the gardener quite drunk and led him to express all his sorrows and hardships to me.

Behind the chief’s palace, up in the mountains, lay the sacred forest of Thathe, which was known by the villagers as the home of the ancestral spirits and the home of the lion, the totem animal of the clan. The sacred forest of Thathe was known by all the villagers as a strictly forbidden area, where only the chief was allowed to enter, as well as one Vhomakhadzi of the clan, who was chosen by the ancestors to perform rituals there. Rituals were performed according to the ecological calendar, where all the clan members would gather and the Vhomakhadzi would lead – by bowing down in nature and ask for blessings of the ancestors.

Other elders I interviewed were from other rural villages, such as Vuwani, Funyu Funyu and Gabeni, which were more accessible and surrounded by mountains with green vegetation on the red fertile soil. Mphatheleni Makafulule and her husband Dr. Dima were my host family in Vuwani, where I lived for more than two months together with their two children. Living so closely together created the space for many insightful conversations in the evenings, the opportunity to learn the customs and taboos while I participated in the household, and allowed me to experience the Venda culture from ‘inside out’. This interaction made them to be my two key informants. Mphatheleni and Dr. Dima were both descendants of a royal family, which meant that they grew up in a large family and learned all the local customs and traditions. Mphatheleni’s father was a highly-respected chief and traditional farmer and healer, who had four wives and worked closely with other doctors and international (white) people. Dr. Dima is a traditional healer and an acting chief himself, filling at the moment the position of chieftaincy after his brother passed away, until the new chief will be installed. Mphatheleni is the founder of Dzomo la Mupo, a well-known activist in the region and considered phangami by the community.

19 Thathe means Lion in Tshivenda, which could also refer to the spirit of the lion.
members – ‘a leader who is like a shepherd of cattle, leading from behind’\textsuperscript{20}. In collaboration with Gaia Foundation and African Biodiversity Network she has travelled to several indigenous communities around the world (e.g. the Amazon in Colombia, Kenya, Ethiopia and Botswana) and she has received a Bill Clinton Fellowship to be trained in leadership in the USA. In 2012 she was one of the UN Forest Heroes Program & Award finalists and in 2013 she won the Global Leadership Award in New York, by International Indigenous Women’s Forum (FIMI).

Most of the elders I interviewed where members of Dzomo la Mupo and were uneducated and illiterate, as Vhomakhadzi Tshisikhawhe said jokingly during the focus group in Tshidzivhe, “Dzomo la Mupo is for the illiterate”, upon which everybody laughed. She expressed how fortunate I was to have gone to school and be able to read and write, “unlike us, we stored knowledge in our minds”\textsuperscript{21}. A few elders I interviewed were non-members of Dzomo la Mupo, but were still connected to Mphatheleni in another way, either as family or as acquaintances.

3.2 The perception of indigenous knowledge by the elders

Having a better understanding of the background where most elders come from and live, this section addresses their understanding and perception of the term ‘indigenous knowledge’, to explore whether it corresponds to my theoretical framework about indigenous knowledge. Mphatheleni Makaulule understands indigenous knowledge as “the knowledge of origin”, which is “common knowledge among the Venda people” and is “functional to daily life”\textsuperscript{22}. In Tshivenda – the local language – people refer to the word indigenous by vhongwaniwapo, meaning “what is originated there”, or “what is naturally found there”\textsuperscript{23}. Indigenous or local knowledge is therefore understood as “the knowledge of the people who can be found there, settled for years and years, millions of years”\textsuperscript{24}. Elders addressed that indigenous knowledge is the knowledge of their ancestors, which goes far back in time and has been passed down from generation to generation. According to the elders it is also knowledge which is connected to Mupo – Nature or Mother Earth – as it includes knowledge and skills about their living environment and how to make a living. According to several elders it is knowledge about the soil and plants, the trees and animals, the workings of the moon and stars, cultivation and preparation of food, medical plants and is connected to their indigenous language.

Another elder, Vho Nyawasedza from the mountain village Tshidzivhe, understands indigenous knowledge as “their culture” and “the Venda lifestyle”, which “shows where you come from and where your forefathers come from”, and means to ”comply with the rules and

\textsuperscript{20} Explanation of the word by Mphatheleni Makaulule
\textsuperscript{21} Focus group dialogue at Tshidzivhe, Vho Tshisikhawhe (10/02/2018)
\textsuperscript{22} Interview with Mphatheleni Makaulule in Vuwani (15/03/2018)
\textsuperscript{23} Interview with Mphatheleni Makaulule in Vuwani (15/03/2018)
\textsuperscript{24} Interview with Dr. Dima in Vuwani (28/02/2018)
Chapter 3: Indigenous knowledge transfer in the past: perspectives of the elderly

taboo of the forefathers, to follow their footsteps”\textsuperscript{25}. Mphatheleni explains: “Even though we are on the modern way, where things keep on changing, the root, or the taproot of knowledge of vhongwaniwapo, the knowledge of indigenous, the taproot still remains.”\textsuperscript{26}

3.3 Social mechanisms and local institutions of knowledge transfer

Regarding the question how indigenous knowledge was passed down from generation to generation, the interviews with the elders revealed a coherent story, with many similarities and common themes about learning and growing up in the past.

The first theme that came up is that child rearing was a shared responsibility, since families were large and villagers had the mentality to support each other in guiding children towards good behaviour. Vho Lily from Vuwani addressed this by saying:

“For the growth of a child there is not one person responsible, it is a joint responsibility. From different stages of growth, a girl child would learn from everyone, every women who is there, because the learning of this knowledge is by seeing and trying to follow what they are doing”\textsuperscript{27}.

Mphatheleni explained to me her similar experience, while she grew up at the chief’s palace:

“I grew up learning the knowledge from my mother, from my big sisters, from my grandmother, from my makhadzi, from other women, from other girls, from my age group, this is how I learned. Your mother will be the last one maybe, because in the family there are many women, you learn from them.”\textsuperscript{28}

Another common theme that emerged through the interviews is that learning and growing up happened stage by stage, as Dr. Dima mentioned explicitly, “knowledge transfer goes stage by stage – age by age – that is how they transfer the knowledge.” In each of these stages knowledge would come to you and you would learn your responsibility. The first stage would be the phase of a baby, who would stay with the mother until the end of breastfeeding and would learn the indigenous language. “That is why we say mother tongue”, Dr. Dima explained, “because fathers do not have time to sit with the baby and teach the language”\textsuperscript{29}. After a ritual – which marks the transition into childhood – children would spend more time with their “grannies”, who would tell them proverbs, riddles, folk stories and taboos, and would discipline the children to have respect, greet in a polite way and follow the rules. All the elders addressed the importance of these taboos, for instance Vho Lily, by saying:

\textsuperscript{25} Interview with Vho Nyawasedza Mutshinyalo Netshidzivhe in Tshidzivhe (10/02/2018)
\textsuperscript{26} Interview with Mphatheleni Makaule in Vuwani (15/03/2018)
\textsuperscript{27} Interview with Vho Lily in Vuwani (02/03/2018)
\textsuperscript{28} Interview with Mphatheleni Makaule in Vuwani (15/03/2018)
\textsuperscript{29} Interview with Dr. Dima in Vuwani (05/02/2018)
“In the past there were many laws or customs, which were respected and able to be followed by the children. The taboos were the guiding principles for the children, through which they learned what was allowed and what was not allowed to be done. The people of the past were having their idiomatic expression or the proverbs, which they always told the children when they were growing.”

She gave an example of a proverb which grandmothers used to say when children did not respect the customs or followed the taboos, “u sa pfa hu tunya mavhudzi”, meaning “your hair will be removed alive”. Vho Nyawasedza from Tshidzivhe also addressed the importance of the rules that had to be followed in the past “We had a lot that we had to follow. We were told not to do certain things so did not do them. It was preferred that we were taught the rules while we were still young”.

All the elders addressed that it was the core responsibility of the grandmothers to tell these folk stories, riddles and proverbs, which was mainly done in the evening around the fire in the dark round kitchen, called tsitanga. This was the place where the young children, the grandmothers, and other women would gather around, to chat about the home chores and laugh about the riddles and stories, which had usually moral messages inside. When boys grew older and had a ‘reception’ – the ability to absorb knowledge as they grew into adolescence – they would stay at the campfire at the entrance of the gate, called khoroni, to talk there with their big brothers, fathers and elder men. Mphatheleni addressed that sitting around the fire was “a real learning place, a lot of knowledge was shared”. In large polygamous families every wife would have her own tsitanga and fireplace, “where her own children and elders would stay, but children could also choose at which tsitanga they wanted to sit together”. Several elders addressed that issues related to marriage or sexuality were not discussed around the campfire, as these issues were not supposed to be heard by the younger boys and girls. Issues related to adulthood would only be discussed among matured men and women, or would be disclosed during initiation school, which I will discuss at a later stage.

Besides this oral transfer of knowledge at the fireplace, there was also transfer by observation and participation, which was often ‘gendered learning’, as men and women had different roles in their gendered livelihoods. Girls observed their mothers and elder sisters in their household duties, while the boys would join their fathers or elder brothers to look after the goats or cows. Mphatheleni explained how she learned by observation and participation:

“We Venda people, we eat porridge. Porridge comes from the mealie-mill, or powder of maize, where our mothers go and grind it, or go and stamp it, in a wooden mortar with a wooden pestle...
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and we imitate that, when they put it down, we go and imitate. They did not tell us come and learn. When they go and cook we try... and they just say,"eeh, put it down and do it this way". That is how we learn. When we sweep, we see them sweeping. It is a way of transfer of knowledge. Because we see them, we hear them talking, we see their actions, and for us as girls, this is a transfer of knowledge."34

Vho Lily also addressed how she learned by observation, mainly from her elder sisters, called mukomana, her mother and other women. Some elders explained to me how they would sit down in the kitchen with their "grannies" and would watch how they prepare a meal, "and then from one day the elder would say, "take over, prepare that food for me"."

Besides observation and participation in the household, children would also learn farming through apprenticeship-based learning on the land, receiving their own equipment and piece of land for cultivation. Vho Tshisikhawe from Tshidzivhe shared her experience as a young child:

“When it was time to plough we would follow them and imitated them as they were ploughing. They made a hoe suitable for kids so that kids learn how to plough. As we grew up we realized that is a way of life. We learned that in order to have food you must first plough the land to produce it.”36

Dr. Dima shared his similar experience, saying "my father and mother would give me a field with a bush, telling me to go to this bush and make my own maize crops there."37 Several elders explained that as a child they would take part in the whole process and observed what the elders were doing from ploughing, planting and harvesting – by men and women – to seed selection, storage and saving – only by women.

When the children would grow older and understood how to make a living – reaching the stage of adolescence – they would go camping for several weeks, to play the indigenous game mahondwani (mainly in summer time after the harvest). Together with their peers they would go into the bush, a distance away from home, to play they were a family, where they had to maintain their own household. The adolescents would choose if they would take the father or the mother role during these three months, or play one of the children, which were often the younger siblings. Dr. Dima explained, “you had to learn how to maintain a wife, a husband or your children, you learn it by yourself”38. From home you were given some food and the utensils you needed, but for the rests you had to provide your own food from the field, fetch water and firewood and boys would go hunting or bring bugs back home, which the girls would prepare in the evening. Mahondwani was the moment where children could bring their knowledge into

34 Interview with Mphatheleni Makaulule in Vuwani (15/03/2018)  
35 Interview with Dr. Dima in Vuwani (28/02/2018)  
36 Interview with Vho Tshisikhawe in Tshidzivhe (14/02/2018)  
37 Interview with Dr. Dima in Vuwani (05/02/2018)  
38 Interview with Dr. Dima in Vuwani (05/02/2018)
practice, and experienced how to sustain a family by themselves.

A local institution for knowledge transfer – at the stage from childhood to adulthood – were the initiation schools, which were divided into boys and girls schools and had multiple levels. The boy initiation school had usually one or two levels and the girl initiation school five levels. Livhuwani, a middle aged woman whom I got to know at the University of Venda, told me everything about the girl initiation schools, as she had done her honours research about this topic and did now a PhD to explore whether social media could be used to make initiation school more attractive again among the youth. One afternoon she brought me to her mother’s and sisters’ home, in a rural village in the wide stretched landscape, where we were sitting in a traditional round room on a mattress on the floor and they shared with me their insights. Even though they explained to me some knowledge about the five initiation levels, all the elders addressed that the deeper content is secret and not supposed to be shared, as it is only for the initiated.

Therefore, addressing it only generally, the first level was called musevhetho, where girls would learn how to prepare food and serve it in a respectful way, by bowing down to the elders or their future husband. The second level was called vhusha or vhukomba, where girls would be sent after first menstruation and would learn “to respect boys as their brothers”\(^{39}\). They would learn to abstain from sexual relationships before marriage, as losing your virginity was considered a huge taboo and disgrace to the family. Vho Nyawasedza illustrated this by saying “we respected many taboos to the extent that the moment we met boys we fled”\(^{40}\). After vhusha came the third level called ludodo, where girls were disciplined to respect their older sisters and underwent many physical challenges and hardships, to train perseverance and humility. The fourth stage, called tshikanda, was only for the royalties, where girls would learn songs which carried messages, which they would sing at the opening of the domba dance, also called the python dance. This domba or python dance belonged to the last level of initiation school, where the girls would learn everything about men and womanhood and what it meant to be a wife. They would learn how to take care of a family, their duties and responsibilities of a married woman and daughter in law, how to stand strong and have perseverance in their marriage, and how to deal with childbirth and labour pain. The python dance would be danced every week during the months that domba school was in progress, where the girls would hold each other closely in a long line or circle – wearing only a traditional Venda skirt with their breast uncovered – while moving their arms together as a living python on the rhythm of the drum and songs. According to Livhuwani’s mother, this movement of the domba dance symbolized “unity, connection and love”\(^{41}\), which referred to sisterhood as well as unity in marriage. According to

\(^{39}\) Interview with Livhuwani in Khakhanwa (01/02/2018)

\(^{40}\) Interview with Vho Nyawasedza Mutshinyalo Netshidzivhe in Tshidzivhe (10/02/2018)

\(^{41}\) Interview with Livhuwani’s mother in Khakhanwa (01/02/2018)
Stayt – an ethnographer of the Vhavenda culture in the twenties – the python dance referred to the building up of the foetus in the women’s womb (Stayt 1931: 116). Several elders addressed that these female initiation schools were commonly held at the chief’s palace in the round kitchen hut (as I had seen in Tshidzivhe) and were guided by elder women only, who could be seen as the local custodians of knowledge.

The boy initiation school was held for the purpose of circumcision and to learn about women and manhood. Their initiation school would take place in the bush and included physical and mental disciplining, physical punishments, memorizing songs and proverbs, and learning how to respect women. The elderly men did not want to go into detail with regard to the boy initiation schools, as this was perceived secret and only for the initiated as well. Only one young man gave me some insights about his own experience, as he had gone to initiation school three times, for himself, his siblings and his cousin. As he grew up at the chief’s palace in a ‘traditional way’, his story can be also representative for the boy initiation schools of the past. He explained:

“Initiation school is about what it means to be a man. A man always respects a woman, and should not let another man try to infiltrate what he has already built. So other men would try to provoke you. You should show you would not get weakened by another man. Do not let another man explore your weakness. You have to be strong for yourself, because the moment you get angry, that person knows your weakness. You are supposed to hide it, nobody is supposed to know. In my opinion they could make it a little bit different. But the culture… we cannot take it away, it has been there since centuries…

I got good lessons by watching the people, but not by the songs. There are initiation songs that you sings, they do not make sense… the words just do not make sense. It is like a secret code. I asked my father, but he does not know, he does not understand. Many kids went there without understanding… And what I do not like is the method. You get taken, blindfolded, because you are not supposed to see where you are taken. They take your legs and pick you up… If you do not follow the order, you get punished. But they do not punish you, they punish my brother, who is disciplining me… My brother is the one who is taking care of me and disciplining me. When his life gets on the line, I have to sing the songs and obey. So I needed to make sure I knew the songs before I get out of there. If I get rebellious, he gets punished….”

Dr. Dima explained that the initiation schools were particularly important to teach you ethics, “which is done by the living library only”43. He said:

“Most important is that you respect anybody. When walking there, they must not take you as an easy person to jump into. But you must not be showing that you are proud, that you are a king, you are a chief, no no, the ethics can value you. It can value your stage. The number one thing is

42 Anonymous interview in Thohoyandou (13/03/2017)
43 Interview with Dr. Dima in Vuwani (28/02/2018)
After the boys and girls would “graduate from initiation school” and returned back home, they would be ready to marry, which was often an arranged marriage in the past. Two elderly women told me about their experiences of their arranged marriage, of which the first appreciated the custom while the other experienced it as a tough challenge. Vho Nyawasedza addressed her appreciation, by saying:

“...it was better when they arranged marriage for us. It protected us from a variety of things. They would ask about the background of the family... and if that family behaved well, they allowed their child to go there. Our parents would already arrange a marriage for us before we could comprehend anything. We could not dispute that.”

It became clear through the interviews that respecting your parents and abiding the family rules was very important in the past, “even if the boy was disabled you would accept him, that was to respect the parents”.

Vho Selina Makaulule told me about her challenging experience, where she had to marry the chief who was fifty years older than her and had already married her elder sister, among several other wives. "It was so difficult for me to marry him, I did not want that, but I had to obey and respect the will of my parents.” She explained to me how much perseverance, endurance and prayers it took for her to be strong and get through this experience alone.

Concerning knowledge transfer at this stage of adulthood, there would be conversations among married man or married women only, about the challenges and issues they were facing in their marriage, through which they learned. The elders addressed that if you had a problem or a conflict in your marriage, you would go to your own makhadzi, which was usually the sister of your father, and would be your confidential aunt throughout your life. This makhadzi was valued as an advisory and intermediary person, which could help to solve conflicts or could give blessings by performing a ritual to the ancestral spirits. Finally, on Sundays there would be a community meeting at the chief’s palace, where the villagers would discuss important issues, which was another opportunity for sharing and intergenerational learning.

Growing older and becoming rich in life experience and knowledge, you would be considered a knowledgeable elder, which Mphatheleni called a “living library of knowledge”.

Elders were highly respected in the Venda culture, which came forward many times in the interviews. To give an example, Mphatheleni stated:

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44 Interview with Dr. Dima in Vuwani (28/02/2018)
45 Interview with Vho Nyawasedza Mutshinyalo Netshidzivhe in Tshidzivhe (10/02/2018)
46 Interview with Vho Nyawasedza Mutshinyalo Netshidzivhe in Tshidzivhe (10/02/2018)
47 Vho Selina Makaulule is the aunt of Mphatheleni (the sister of her mother) and married her father.
48 Conversation with Vho Selina Makaulule in Gabeni (03/02/2018)
49 Addressed as a role
“An elder is a respected person, you need to respect an elder. If you do not respect an elder you are messing up your own life. Perseverance has to be there to respect an elder, because this is the holder of your luck, your fortune, your blessings. That is why in an indigenous Venda culture, when we meet an elder, we do *khotha*, we greet in a respectful way”\(^{50}\). [By bowing down on the ground]

According to Mphatheleni, the indigenous elders are more connected to the ancestors, because "they will go back to the ancestral world" and therefore have a “spiritual form of knowledge”\(^{51}\). An elderly women whom I once visited in the foggy mountains behind Thohoyandou, confirmed this by saying that her knowledge about healing plants came to her spiritually, “it is like someone is whispering to me, go and pick this plant and this plant..."\(^{52}\). Lastly the elders addressed that learning never stops, "you learn until you die"\(^{53}\). It seemed through the interviews, that the elders were considered the custodians of knowledge and therefore could be seen as a *local institution of knowledge*, according to Berkes and others (2000).

### 3.4 Living environment – in connection to *Mupo*

It became clear through the interviews with the elders that life in the past was connected to *Mupo*, as people were living in rural villages and were largely cultivating their own food, had to fetch water and firewood and looked after the cattle and goats. While literature shows that the Venda region was known as the homelands, where people had to sell their labour in mines and plantations – as most of their land was taken in the colonial and apartheid period (Lahiff 2000) – this did not come forward in most of the interviews\(^{54}\). Most elders explained to me that they were living from *Mupo* – which could be also perceived through the eyes of child – where they bathed in the river, cultivated and ground their own mealie-mill, picked wild vegetables and fruits from the forest, walked large distances by foot and did not have electricity. Mphatheleni illustrates this connection with *Mupo* when she grew up as a child:

> “You know, when you are a little girl, early in the morning, we young girls we were not allowed to sleep for forever, until seven or eight o'clock. They will wake us early in the morning, when it is still a little bit cold, and say “go and fetch a broom”. And we go out of the gate and walk a little distance to the nearby forest, and we go and pick the branches and leaves of that plant, the *tshifulathulo* and *musudzungwane* plant, and make that broom on our own! Early in the morning when we go to pick the broom and sweep, we also go to the river and bath. I grow up connected to water from *Mupo*. Because for me a river is *Mupo*, and going to bath in the river is our indigenous way, which is an indigenous knowledge. In Venda it was a very clean river, and we bath there. And when we travel

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\(^{50}\) Interview with Mphatheleni Makaulule in Vuwani (15/03/2018)

\(^{51}\) Interview with Mphatheleni Makaulule in Vuwani (15/03/2018)

\(^{52}\) Interview with Vho Ramadolela in Duthuni (09/03/2018)

\(^{53}\) Interview with Dr. Dima in Vuwani (05/02/2018)

\(^{54}\) Except for one conversation with Dr. Dima.
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from home to the river, we meet many things from Mupo, from nature. In the morning we are feeling the atmosphere from Mupo. In the morning we see the sunrise coming. Is it not Mupo? And we arrive at the river, there is little dew, and moisture from the grass, which we do not feel as a problem, we enjoy that. I grow up learning that seed is food, we learn how to cultivate. When you are sick, you learn in the indigenous way that medicine comes from the forest. I grew up going to the forest to pick up the fruits. I grew up picking the wild greens, for us it is vegetable, not weed, we eat it. I know all the vegetables at Vuvha where I am born. I know all plants. I know all the fruits on those mountains. When you grow up, you learn to connect deeply to Mupo.”

Another theme that emerged is that people had to follow many rules to relate to Mupo, which were transferred through these social mechanisms of knowledge transfer – such as the taboos, community dialogues, and through learning by observation and participation. The elders I interviewed referred to these rules as the ‘laws of origin’ or the ‘laws of nature’, which were considered the rules of their forefathers and were based on respect for Mupo. Examples of these rules were that it was not allowed to cut a living tree, as it would disturb the interconnected ecosystem and would deprive the tree from its living right and purpose. Trees were seen as important for regulating the climate, give fresh oxygen, create rain by evaporation and filter groundwater to become clear water streams. Moreover, trees could protect human beings, animals and the wetland from the heat of the sun with their shadow, protect houses from heavy winds and storms with their branches, provide fruits and medicine, and are home to many animals, such as monkeys, insects and birds. Therefore, firewood could only be fetched from dead wood, though it was not allowed to be taken from medicine trees or fruit trees, as these were important to fertilize the soil. It was also forbidden to pollute the spring of water or kill the “remnants of water” – such as frogs, swifts and the white python – as these animals would protect the spring of water to become dry. With regard to farming it was not allowed to cultivate on steep mountains, as the rain could take the fertile topsoil away. Instead, Dr. Dima explained, people should make “flat foundations or rails with stones”, so the water and topsoil would stay in place. During my stay in Tshidzivhe I did not observe these flat foundations or rails of stones, however the cultivated hills – with polycultures and trees – still looked very fertile and green.

There were also rules to protect the wetlands, as these were considered “very important sources of water”, mainly for the evaporation of rain. In order for the wetland not to become dry, it was forbidden to cultivate on the wetland, as well as to cut the grass during spring or summer time, as the open area would become too hot and all water would evaporate. Therefore the grass could only be trimmed during winter time, which was used for sleeping mats or roofs. It was also forbidden to graze animals on the wetlands, as “walking on top of it will make the

55 Interview with Mpatheleni Makaulule in Vuwani (15/03/2018)
56 Interview with Dr. Dima in Vuwani (05/02/2018)
57 Interview with Dr. Dima in Vuwani (05/02/2018)
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wetland come dry”\textsuperscript{58}. In order to protect it, Dr. Dima expressed that they would put a fence of dead wood around the wetland, so that cows, goats and donkeys would not enter. Lastly, several elders explained that it was not allowed to remove stones from rivers or mountains, as they also had a purpose in the larger whole. Some makhadzi elders explained that stones in the river would give pressure on the roots of plants and trees to stay in place, and in the mountains they would protect the soil from erosion. Dr. Dima illustrated this, by saying:

“You know very well if I move this stone from the mountain, I am causing the erosion of soil, because when the rain is raining, it is causing all the soil from that rock to move. That stone was blocking something, so in other words, the Creator, we called Mudzimu or Nwali, has never put that stone with joking, or playing. No, no, that stone has been fitted there with a purpose, with a purpose.”\textsuperscript{59}

The chiefs of the past were the stewards of the territory and made sure that the villagers followed these rules. When someone would take an axe into the forest and chopped down a living tree, that person would be arrested and brought to the chiefs court, or would directly await a punishment by the chief or elders. This shows that the Vhavenda had a self-governing institution for sustainable use of resources, as addressed by Ostrom (1990). Since these ‘laws of nature’ were taught at an early age and breaking them was considered a taboo, people lived according to these laws, to respect Mupo and their forefathers.

As becomes clear through these stories of the elders, indigenous knowledge was connected to their living environment in Mupo, and therefore also their social mechanisms and local institutions of knowledge transfer were connected to Mupo. To illustrate this, knowledge was shared around the fire, children learned on the cultivated land and would go into the forest – to fetch water, firewood, wild vegetables and looking after goats and cows – and mahondwani and initiation school took largely place in the bush; where boys and girls took ritual baths every morning in the cold river and learned how to respect their elderly family members, their ancestors and nature.

3.5 Worldview and belief system – ancestral spirituality

The Vhavenda’s connection to their ancestors came forward as an important aspect of their life in the past and seemed interwoven with their local knowledge system. Firstly, Mphatheleni addressed, “this is the knowledge from our ancestors, and when Vhavenda say our ancestors, we still respect their spirits”. Several elders explained how the ancestral spirits would stay here on Earth and reside in sacred natural sites called Zwifho. These sacred sites were places of high

\textsuperscript{58} Interview with Dr. Dima in Vuwani (05/02/2018)
\textsuperscript{59} Interview with Dr. Dima in Vuwani (05/02/2018)
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spiritual, cultural and ecological significance to the Vhavenda, which were often situated at sources of water and therefore played a central role in the functioning of ecosystems and climatic patterns. The elders addressed that human health was intrinsically connected to Mupo’s health, and that Zwifho needed to be respected and protected to ensure physical, social and spiritual well-being. They believed that the ancestral spirits would guide and bless them after performing rituals, but could also bring misfortune and illness when they were ignored, dishonoured or disrespected.

This respect for the ancestors was connected to respect for Mupo, as nature was considered sacred and had intrinsic rights to exist. Each aspect was considered important for the larger whole and could therefore not be disturbed or destroyed by human need. Vhakoma, the mother of the chief in Tshidzivhe, explained to me how they were troubled by monkeys – as they would try to steal their maize crops – but that she would not kill them, as they were part of Mupo and needed to be respected. Instead she would wake up very early in the morning to chase the monkeys away and make sure that the maize crops were protected. Furthermore, cultivation was done according to the ecological calendar, where each process was accompanied by rituals to the ancestors. Some plants, such as the luranga pumpkin or fruits of the maroula tree, could only be taken before an offer to the ancestors, so children would grow up seeing these practices. The makhadzi were the only ones who could perform those rituals, as it was believed that only women could spiritually connect to the ancestors. When performing a ritual, a makhadzi would bow down in nature, sometimes leaving her breast uncovered – out of respect and humbleness – and put down some snuff fola of tobacco on the ground, while reciting the names of her ancestors. She would start with citing "Mudzimu wa Thohoni – God of my father clan", and would mention all the names of her forefathers, as far back as she could remember, "until the ones I do not know since origin", said Mphatheleni. Then she would mention her mother clan, starting with "Mudzimu wa Damuni – God of my mother clan"61, and call out all the names as far as she could remember. During some rituals (like funerals or rain ceremonies) the vhomakhadzi would also pore spring water from a calabash and seeds on the ground, which I also observed during a royal funeral at Tshidzivhe.

The boys and men would perform a sacred dance called Tshikona, where every man would blow on a wooden pipe with different tones, which special sound would call the ancestors. This dance I have observed at the royal funeral as well, where Vhakoma – the mother of the chief – played on the big wooden drum in the middle of the circle. The elders explained to me that Tshikona was mostly danced at the chief’s palace, during ceremonies and rituals, to invite the ancestral spirits, who in turn could “open the way to bring their prayers to Nwali

60 Booklet ‘Heritage Site Nomination - Sacred Natural Sites of Vhutanda’ - Mphatheleni Makaulule, Dzomo la Mupo, 2010
61 Interview with Mphatheleni Makaulule in Vuwani (15/03/2018)
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[God]"\(^62\). Some boys explained to me that they felt very peaceful and spiritually connected during Tshikona, as well as proud of their indigenous roots. Berkes and others (2000) addressed that ceremonies and dances could serve as *social mechanism for cultural internalization of knowledge*, which might have been the case to internalize their ancestral worldview and connect to their culture.

Since respect for the ancestors was part of growing up in rural villages, which translated in respect for *Mupo*, this was automatically part of the process of intergenerational knowledge transfer. At each stage of growth there was a ritual, to mark the transition into the new stage and ask blessings from the ancestors. Mphatheleni illustrated this by saying:

"In the Venda culture, from baby to childhood, there is a ritual. Marriage, is ritual. Initiation school, before marriage, has rituals... all your stages of growth have rituals. Even when you die, you are buried in an indigenous ritual way. The pumpkin calabash has to be there, the seed has to be there to plant, the water has to be there, when we lay you to rest, and you go straight to the soil. That is an indigenous way of order."\(^63\)

Some elders expressed they did not follow the ancestral rituals as they were converted to Christianity, but nevertheless valued their indigenous knowledge system, ‘the rules and taboos of the forefathers’ and social mechanisms and local institutions for knowledge transfer, such as initiation school. Other elders expressed they went to church, but at the same time respected and honoured their ancestors and performed rituals and prayers, as this ancestral spirituality was in their veins and belonged to their role as *makhadzi*. Other elders expressed that the ancestral spirituality was for them the only way, and perceived Christianity as ‘colonization of the mind’\(^64\), undermining their indigenous knowledge and practices.

### 3.6 Social dynamics and relationships – respect and obedience

The social dynamics and relationships between the younger and elder generation seemed largely the result of the internalized norms and values, which were transferred through the social mechanisms and local institutions of knowledge transfer. Since early age, children were taught to have respect and follow the taboos, and during initiation schools these ethics and norms were disciplined and internalized even more. The main theme that emerged through the interviews was the importance of *respect*. Respect for the elders, the chief, and *makhadzi*, respect for your parents and anyone older than you, and respect for the ancestors and Mother Earth. This value of respect was brought outwards in ‘good manners and behaviour’, which was expressed in respectful greetings, obedience to the will of your parents, and following the

\(^{62}\) Anonymous conversation at Funyu Funyu (24/02/2018)

\(^{63}\) Interview with Mphatheleni Makaulule in Vuwani (15/03/2018)

\(^{64}\) Interview with Mphatheleni and Dr. Dima at Vuwani (21/02/2018)
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taboo-Disciplining was usually done through corporal punishments, which I have also observed during my stay in Tshidzivhe and Vuwani. If a child would not listen, disobey or disregard the customs and taboos, he or she could be beaten or tapped on the fingers, which made children think twice to commit the same mistake again. In contrast it was regarded disrespectful to shout, argue or get angry with a person older than you, especially with the elders. This could indicate that the relationships between the younger and elder generation were hierarchical, where in each stage of growth you would become a more respected member of society. On the other hand, Dr. Dima explained that elders would respect children, as the elders were considered role models and “you first have to respect someone, before you get respect back”\(^{65}\).

Lastly it became clear that reputation was a driver for people to behave well and conform, as people did not want to bring shame to themselves or their family. This shows that besides the social disciplining by the elders, there was also self-disciplining, which was related to social conformation. This aspect of reputation seemed stronger within royal families, as their family name was more important in the community and people felt the responsibility to keep their name high. Since child rearing was also a joint responsibility and villagers were supporting each other to correct children towards good behaviour, this indicates that there was a collectivist society in the past, which some elders lamented its loss in contemporary time.

Concluding remarks

According to the stories of the elders, indigenous knowledge was perceived as the knowledge of the forefathers or the knowledge of ‘origin’, which was functional to daily life and was transmitted from generation to generation. It was also expressed as the knowledge of vhongwaniwapo, meaning the knowledge of the people who could be found there since ‘origin’ and therefore called themselves indigenous. Some elders understood it in a broader way and saw it as their ‘culture and Venda way of life’, which was connected to the ancestors and living environment in Mupo. This understanding of indigenous knowledge relates to my theoretical framework about indigenous knowledge, as scholars defined it as a ‘knowledge-practice-belief complex’ (Berkes et al. 2000), which is connected to a particular place and is about the way people relate themselves to one another and their natural environment (Semali & Kincheloe 2002). The way that the elders presented indigenous knowledge shows a more essentialist understanding rather than hybrid, which could be either their experience and perception of the past, their way of telling the story – leaving the larger context of South Africa out of the picture – or could be a (strategic) representation, to show a sharper contrast with contemporary life and indicate that they have the right to the territory as they are vhongwaniwapo – the people who live there since ‘origin’. With regard to the rules of nature it can relate to kincentric ecology, as

\(^{65}\) Conversation with Dr. Dima in Vuwani (22/02/2018)
nature or *Mupo* was highly respected and elders addressed that human health was intrinsically connected to *Mupo*’s health. This understanding came also forward in the importance to safeguard *Zwifho* – the sacred natural sites – where they believed the ancestral spirits reside and inhabit essential sources of water. Even though they did not mention explicitly that they perceived nature as an extended family, human beings were considered part of *Mupo*, which shows the dissolving of the human-nature dichotomy; another characteristic of indigenous knowledge, addressed by Banuri and Marglin (1993).

Concerning intergenerational knowledge transfer, knowledge was transferred ‘stage by stage’, where children learned from everyone in the household and received more knowledge and responsibilities during each stage of growth. From early age children would learn to respect and follow the taboos, which was mainly done by the grandmothers, who told stories, proverbs and riddles around the fire in the kitchen. Growing up further it was a ‘gendered learning’, as boys and girls fulfilled different roles and responsibilities in the household. Girls would learn by observation and participation in the household chores, while boys would join their elder brothers or fathers to go after the goats and cows. Both would participate in hands-on learning in the field, where they got acquainted with the ecological calendar, rituals and indigenous cultivation practices. Reaching the stage of adolescence, children would practically learn how to sustain a family by the indigenous game *mahondwani*, followed by attending initiation school, where they would learn everything about ethics and what it meant to be a man or woman. The taboos and ‘laws of origin’ were the guiding principles for a good life and good behaviour, which were respected and followed by the children. The social dynamics were based on respect and obedience, were the younger generation would listen to the will of their parents and were disciplined since early age.

In the past there seemed to be a coherence between the Vhavenda’s indigenous knowledge system, their living environment in *Mupo* and their ancestral worldview, which was based on respect for the ancestors, respect for one another and respect for *Mupo*. Everyone would live together in the same living environment, which allowed a constant flow of knowledge transfer. Elders, youth, adults and children could interact on a daily basis and spend time around the fire in the evening. This way, children grew up in a ‘bowl of culture’66, in which the local knowledge system of the Vhavenda was able to be maintained and transferred to the next generation.

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66 Even though this ‘bowl of culture’ seems quite isolated from the outside world and is presented in a rather essentialist way, it should be stated that in fact no local community can be completely self-sustaining and unchanging through time (Eriksen 2010 [1995]: 63). Since most interview participants were women and many Black men had to work in mines and for White farmers in the Venda homeland – this did not come forward in my data, though it should be taken into account.
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“Today they are far away from their culture, because they are growing in a way which has interference of a new way of life which has come in. It makes children go away from their culture.” - Vho Lily

Introduction

Having an understanding about intergenerational knowledge transfer in the past, this chapter aims to explore intergenerational knowledge transfer today – by comparing the past with the present. This chapter intends to show how the social mechanisms and local institutions of knowledge transfer are affected by a changing worldview and living environment, as well as been subject to influences of modernization. Finally, it explains how these changes have transformed the social dynamics and relationships between the younger and elder generation.

Firstly, this chapter aims to paint a picture of the dominant worldview and belief system in comparison to the past, which addresses the role of Christianity as a perceived threat for indigenous knowledge transfer (4.1). Secondly, it addresses the impact of a changing environment, comparing life in urban and rural areas (4.2). Thirdly, it explains how the social mechanisms and local institutions of knowledge transfer changed and disappeared under contemporary pressures of modernization (4.3), leading to a transformation of social dynamics and relationships between the younger and elder generation (4.4).

4.1 Perceptions on the role of Christianity

During all the interviews and conversations with the youth, adults and elders, it became clear that Christianity plays an important role in contemporary life. Most of the adults and youth I have spoken told me how they converted to Christianity, while contrarily some elders held on to their ancestral spirituality. While some elders expressed to see a common ground in both worldviews, others perceived Christianity as a strong and dominant force, which disrupted their culture and undermined indigenous practices.

Starting with the perspective of the youth, there was a difference between youth in urban and rural areas. The youth and young adults I spoke with in Thohoyandou and the University of Venda were all converted to Christianity, while some of the youth I have spoken in the rural villages Funyu Funyu, Gabeni and Tshidzivhe expressed a connection to their

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67 Interview with Vho Lily in Vuwani (02/03/2018)
68 Modernization refers to the increasing immersion into the capitalist world-system by globalization and development (Eriksen 2010).
69 I have spoken with approximately fourteen students at the University of Venda and in Thohoyandou.
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ancestors. Candice, a twenty-year old girl whom I met at the University of Venda, explained to me how she converted to Christianity. It started slowly by going to Christian school, evolved by following her parents to church – “but then I did not understand the concept of Christianity, I just went for the sake of going” — until it touched her heart and she repented. While most of her other family members practiced the ancestral rituals, she followed the footsteps of her father. When I asked her how her family members responded when they turned towards Christianity, she explained:

“They were really angry (laughs a bit) most of them do not talk to us anymore. They do not even visit anymore, yeah and they almost turn my grandmother and my grandfather against my dad. They succeeded for years, but now we are trying to repair the relationship. Yeah... I think because I am very close to my family and not to my external family, I just thought, “if my family is going, I will be going with my family”. But it was really painful when I was young, because we would not go to those family gatherings that we used to have.”

This shows that the influence of Christianity could have a divisive effect in families and communities, which could contribute to the erosion of community ties and disrupt the flow of indigenous knowledge transfer from the elder to the younger generation.

Furthermore, several youth and adults explained to me that you had to choose between Christianity or the indigenous religion, as both were difficult to correlate. This came forward in phrases like “in Christian life we do not do both, you have to choose whether you do traditional or you do Christianity”, or “those things are way to different, they do not click well, I find it hard to correlate it to each other”. The main differences that came forward is that Christianity rejects the idea of ancestor spirits who stay on Earth and still have an influence; and that praying through the ancestors is considered idol worshipping. Mammie Bishop from Christ Worship House in Thohoyandou explained to me,

“I do not believe in the spirit of my grandmother, who is dead. That person cannot come and help me, according to me that spirit is in Heaven. When I want to ask something from God I go straight to God, I do not go through my granny who is dead.”

Since the Christians I interviewed found both belief systems difficult to correlate, some addressed that they were no longer interested in indigenous knowledge, as they perceived it as ‘backward’ and saw more value in the Bible and scientific education.

In addition, it was remarkable to observe that the youth seemed most active to

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70 Interview with Candice at Uviven in Thohoyandou (31/01/2018)  
71 Interview with Candice at Uviven in Thohoyandou (31/01/2018)  
72 Interview with Candice at Uviven in Thohoyandou (31/01/2018)  
73 Interview with Pande at Thavhani Mall in Thohoyandou (13/03/2018)  
74 Interview with Vho Nyawasedza Matshinyalo Netshidzivhe in Tshidzivhe (10/02/2018)  
75 Interview with Mammie Bishop at Christ Worship House in Thohoyandou (18/03/2018)
‘evangelize’ one another to convert to Christianity, which I observed on campus at the University of Venda and at Christ Worship House in Thohoyandou. On campus, Candice and her friends evangelized other students every Friday, where they gave away balloons with Biblical phrases and played music in the canteen, to invite other peers to Every Nations Church on campus. At Christ Worship House, new visitors were especially welcomed on stage – under a singing and applauding crowd – and guided to another room by the youth, where they were offered sweets and drinks and could subscribe to the church. The services I joined on campus and in Christ Worship House were real outlets of joy and emotion, where people sang and danced gospel together, dressed up nicely as if they went out, and prayed together to worship Jesus or the Lord – where I could see and feel a connection of love and happiness among the attendees.

Mphatheleni and Dr. Dima gave their perspective from the ‘indigenous side’, as they held on to their ancestral spirituality and considered Christianity as ‘colonization of the mind’. Mphatheleni and Dr. Dima explained this to me during a conversation at the dinner table:

Mphatheleni: “What contradicts me, is that Christianity comes and removes makhadzi role, removes our cultural ancestral path and discourages that, it removes our culture, that we must not live according to our culture. They said it is demon, that it does not belong to Jesus or God, that is how they disconnect it...”

Dr. Dima: “even with the indigenous food, which was having a nutrition on it, like the Mopani worm, they discourage that”

Mphatheleni: “they discourage everything about our culture”

Dr. Dima: “everything. From culture, religion, attire...”

Mphatheleni: “we told you that our clothes of tradition, it was once burned into fire, they said it was a demon clothing”

Dr. Dima: “and when the mission came, someone was given a money to colonize us...”

Mphatheleni: “First they bring colonization, they did not first bring missionary. That is why I argue, if it is about God, who want to save us that we are sinners, God should first send missionaries before colonization. Even here, God should have sent somebody like Moses, to tell us that we are sinners and go to hell, not that they first come and colonize. It is like you come to me and say "I want to cut your nails because they make money". Then when I deny, deny, you come with the Bible and say "if you do not remove your nails, you would go to hell". That is my argument.”

Kirkaldy (2005: 169) presents a similar quote of Makhado – the highly-respected Vhavenda king, who fought against the Boers colonizers in the 1870s – who made clear that he and his people viewed the White God with great suspicion. According to missionary Beyer, the king once said:

76 Recorded conversation with Dr. Dima and Mphatheleni in Vuwani (21/02/2018)
"Yes, if we would see that one of our people, a black person like us, came down from heaven and brought us the message, then we would all agree and believe; why should we accept the Word of God from a white man?" (BMB, 1874: 564-565 in Kirkaldy 2005: 170)

Mphateleni explained that she is a descendent of Makhado (as he is one of her great-grandfathers) and that she perceives him as a real hero and defender of the Vhavenda people. Her quote could therefore be inspired from Makhado, where she associates missionary activity with colonization. Her example of the nails could in this case refer to the land which the colonizers took, or symbolize the removal of their ancestral spirituality, which they referred to as sin.

Mphatheleni and Dr. Dima explained that the Venda people were difficult to colonize because of their strong ancestral spirituality, so that they "targeted the mind to control the Venda people". Mphatheleni addressed this further by saying:

“This Christianity came after the colonizers, who were defeated by the Venda people. So then they said, “go and remove them from their spirituality, this is when you will be able to colonize them”.”

When talking with Mphatheleni and Dr. Dima I could sense a certain sadness and anger in their voices about the dominant power of the church, where they felt being criticized and demonized by the church, without being properly understood. During a Christian funeral I observed that the priest made fun of the indigenous belief system by referring to it as “praying to a goat” and during another funeral the necklace of Mphatheleni – which consisted of traditional beads – was called ‘demon’ by community members, when they held it in the air after Mphatheleni lost it. This demonization by Christianity is also addressed by Kirkaldy (2005), who stated that missionaries aimed to turn people away from everything ‘traditional’, as they perceived it as synonymous with ‘darkness’ and ‘superstition’ and the power of Satan (Kirkaldy 2005: 167). Once people internalized this idea that ancestral spirituality is ‘wrong’ and that practicing their cultural traditions and rituals would lead them to hell, this drove people away from indigenous knowledge and practices – as this knowledge and practice was intertwined with their ancestral worldview.

4.2 Changing living environment – urban and rural areas

Besides this influence of a changing worldview by Christianity, there is also the influence of a changing living environment on the maintenance of indigenous knowledge. This entails largely the movement from rural to urban areas, where urbanization effects the loss of indigenous knowledge and practice.

77 Dr. Dima in recorded conversation with Dr. Dima and Mphatheleni in Vuwani (21/02/2018)
78 Recorded conversation with Dr. Dima and Mphatheleni in Vuwani (21/02/2018)
79 An expression I heard several times in- and outside of the church during my time in Venda
Chapter 4: Intergenerational knowledge transfer today

4.2.1 Life in urban areas

Starting with life in urban areas, there is a strong influence of modernization and development, which impacts the loss of cultural traditions and weakens the connection to Mupo. Since indigenous knowledge and practice was interconnected with Mupo in the past, life in urban areas undermines this connection to Mupo, as people are no longer directly dependent on their natural environment for their survival, as there are shops, malls, restaurants, electricity, tap water, pharmacies, cars and new technologies. Mphatheleni explained how people lost their connection to Mupo and subsequently indigenous knowledge, which she not only attributed to a changing lifestyle but also the loss of ancestral spirituality:

“New knowledge has disconnected people from their ancestors. If we respect our ancestors, we respect soil, we respect the trees, we respect the rivers, we respect the elders, we respect even the babies, we respect everything, because we know that we are in the bowl of Mupo. We respect Mupo. But new knowledge disconnect you from soil, disconnect you from nature, it disconnect you from the forest, disconnect you from river, disconnect you from getting food from nature, from Mupo, from soil, disconnect you even from healing. That healing is connected with Mupo, with nature. But new life disconnect you with the sky, the moon, the stars. Look at nowadays children, they do not even know the importance of the moon, of the sky, because for them the importance is the bulb of electricity. Indigenous knowledge teaches us that everything is connected with Mupo. When you want to drink water, that water comes from the wetland, the river, the spring, which is in Mupo, and rain has to fall and water has to flow in the river. But new knowledge is disorder, because new children grow up knowing that water comes from the tap, from the bathroom, in the kitchen. How do the children know that the bridge which they are crossing, when they are in the car or in the taxi, there is a river under the bridge and that water goes to the dams and then to the taps. How many children know that question. How many people in the supermarket, when they are buying milk, know that there should be grass, there should be rain, there should be soil, that the cattle has to go to graze and walk, and the cattle has to grow for another calf, so that we keep on getting milk. How many people bother to understand.”80

This quote shows that indigenous knowledge has a deep connection to Mupo, which slowly gets lost with modern developments like electricity, tap water and supermarkets. ‘New knowledge’ might refer to Christianity or western knowledge systems taught in school, as it disconnects people from their ancestors.

A female student I spoke in a taxi-van around Thohoyandou, explained that she no longer saw importance in indigenous knowledge in contemporary life, as she said, “what would I do with it? It is not functional anymore, it is a waste of time. We do not have to fetch water from the

80 Interview with Mphatheleni Makaulule in Vuwani (15/03/2018)
Chapter 4: Intergenerational knowledge transfer today

river. Modern life is easy and attractive\(^81\). A male adult I spoke in the taxi addressed that he found modern life “too easy and comfortable”, almost as if he regretted that some aspects got lost. Other elders and adults addressed that they experienced life in the city as “very fast”\(^82\), where they enjoyed the peace and calmness of Vuwani. Mphatheleni explained the difference by addressing that indigenous knowledge is slow and based on cyclical thinking – following the rhythm of Mupo – while modern life is fast and concerned with ‘end products’ in linear thinking, and therefore pursues quick harvest, fast medicine, fast food, fast transport and fast money\(^83\).

Pande, a male student who grew up in the chief’s palace in a rural village, explained how he experienced city life, where he slowly felt being ‘trapped’ and disconnected from his roots:

“What happens, when you are coming from the village and you go to the city life, the city can just absorb everything out of you. Then you just find yourself living that city life, and forgetting what your actual name is and what your actual name means, just to satisfy the city life. Sometimes you might even abandon your name. Since I am done with school I abandon my name, and you get trapped in the city world. You just lose who you are... completely. Once you move to the city it all changes, because your background is not solved. So what happens is, a lot of people who actually get to the city life, it either goes bad or good for them... but actually it is always bad. So you might find out that you finished your degree, have a nice house, have nice kids, and at the end of the day you still feel empty, you still feel there is something missing, because one day, your son or your daughter will ask you, where are we actually coming from.”\(^84\), \(^85\)

Durkheim (1951 [1897]) refers to this sense of emptiness as anomie, which is the feeling of alienation caused by the inability to believe in or live up to the values of a society. According to Durkheim this feeling of emptiness or meaninglessness is stronger in urban areas, as there is less social cohesion and sense of community. Relating this to the quote of Pande, it can indicate that he experienced more meaning, sense of community and embeddedness in cultural values in the village, which he perceives as eroding in the ‘city life’.

Furthermore, elders addressed that life in the city made people forsake their culture, such as their traditional clothing or their indigenous language Tshivenda. Vho Lily explained how their Venda attire – called minwenda – largely disappeared from the streets, as people felt ashamed of their culture or preferred modern western clothing. She said:

\(^81\) Female student in taxi around Thohoyandou on our way to Univen
\(^82\) Conversations with clients of Dr. Dima who visited his home in Vuwani for traditional healing. They often came from cities like Thohoyandou, Pretoria and Johannesburg.
\(^83\) Conversation with Mphatheleni in the taxi from Thohoyandou to Vuwani
\(^84\) Interview with Pande at Thavhani Mall in Thohoyandou (13/03/2018)
\(^85\) In the Venda culture names were usually given by the makhadzi, which carried a deeper meaning and purpose inside, communicated by the ancestors (according to Mphatheleni and several elders of Tshidzivhe). The church, however, encouraged people to change their names into Christian names, as Venda names were considered ‘demon’ and Christian names would bring blessings from God. Mphatheleni and Dr. Dima explained that in the apartheid time people could only register in school with a Christian name, which forced people to break with their ancestral line.
“If you look around, people are shy to wear their clothing. Venda people still hide their culture. Even though they preach and say that our culture defines us, they do not want to do it completely. It makes people to disconnect with their culture”.86

Vho Tphisikhwane from Tshidzivhe explained how it was also related to a sense of inferiority, as she said:

“In the past we were not allowed to go to townships with our traditional dresses, with our traditional stripes. They referred the Vhavenda as inferior, so they did not enjoy being a Venda. So when they went to the township they neglected it”.87

Regarding their local language Tshivenda, people adopted to speak other languages in urban areas, which often started already at school, continued in university and was encouraged in jobs, leading to erosion of the indigenous language. Vho Lily explained:

“When people go to Johannesburg, Pretoria, or somewhere, they did not want to speak their own language, they want to speak Sotho, Zulu, all these other language, they were ashamed to speak their own language.”88

Since indigenous knowledge was embedded in their local language, a loss of this language subsequently meant a loss of indigenous knowledge. Whorf (1956) confirms this interconnectedness by saying that language is the carrier of a way of thought and worldview and is hence connected to a life-world and local knowledge system.

Lastly, movement to urban areas often meant a separation between family members and erosion of community ties, as youth and adults would move to the city for education or jobs while elders would often stay on the countryside; sometimes taking care of the children. This separation between youth, adults and elders also contributed to a blockage of intergenerational knowledge transfer, as they no longer lived together on a daily basis.

4.2.2 Life in rural areas

Regarding life in rural areas, I observed a stronger connection to Mupo and the ‘traditional’ Venda way of life, as many households had plots of land next to their house where they cultivated their own food. I observed many traditional round houses with cow dung and straw roofs next to the square houses and I saw more people wearing Venda clothing and children playing outside in the streets. I also observed influences of modernization, such as shops, cars, electricity and some houses with tap water. Overall it was less developed and the Venda culture

86 Interview with Vho Lily in Vuwani (02/03/2018)
87 Interview with Vho Tphisikhwane in the forest in Tshidzivhe (14/02/2018)
88 Interview with Vho Lily in Vuwani (02/03/2018)
seemed more alive. However, according to several elders, it was not like life in the past, as people were more “adopting a western lifestyle” and local structures – such as the chief’s palace – were slowly broken down. Vho Lily explained:

“In the past we had the traditional chief’s palace, where everything was in good order. In the palace there was Tshikona, and every boy was responsible to take part in Tshikona. But nowadays the chief’s palace is getting destroyed. There is no longer Tshikona there, even though the chief could say there should be Tshikona, the children say it is their right not to participate in Tshikona, there is no one who could force.”

Several elders explained that by the declining role of the chief and increasing power of politicians and government officials (and a changing mind-set of chiefs who were still in power) the ‘laws of nature’ or ‘laws of origin’ were no longer followed and safeguarded, causing large destruction to Mupo. Vho Ramadolela from the mountain village Duthuni illustrated this by saying:

“The chiefs are the ones who are responsible. But the problem is... the chiefs are already attracted to other ways of living. The modern way of making money, selling the land, like around here in my village, there are many places where they destroy, destroy.”

Some elders also blamed the ‘democratic rights’ of the government and concept of ‘ownership’ for the destruction of Mupo, which gave people the freedom to do what they want. Vho Ramadolela explained, “all this is affected by freedom, which people say it is freedom... and privatization of ownership. This is a serious problem, which should be solved”.

Vho Lily addressed the same problem, by saying:

“Our culture is very important to protect Mupo, but nowadays so much destruction is happening. A person has a choice to follow the customs or to dis-follow the customs. You cannot be able to handle a human being. A human being is very difficult. It depends on your own consciousness, because it is wrong to chop down those trees. But a person will wake up at night and chop that tree. It is about the consciousness of a person that determines what they do.”

When driving through the countryside with Dr. Dima and Mphatheleni, we could see the environmental destruction taking place: wetlands were being damaged by (brick) mining and farming activities, trees were cut down, large indigenous forests were replaced by tea and pine plantations (on land that was already taken in the colonial times), garbage and litter was spread around and rivers had become dry through droughts and distorted climate patterns. Dr. Dima

89 Interview with Vho Nyawasedza Mutshinyalo Netshidzivhe in Tshidzivhe (10/02/2018)
90 Interview with Vho Lily in Vuwani (02/03/2018)
91 Interview with Vho Ramadolela in Duthuni (09/03/2018)
92 Interview with Vho Ramadolela in Duthuni (09/03/2018)
93 Interview with Vho Lily in Vuwani (02/03/2018)
explained that the politicians and government officials had no knowledge on the area ‘on the ground’, as they only worked from offices and often came from other areas. Since the government’s major concern seemed economic growth, job creation and development – as I heard several times on the radio and on television in the news – mining and commercial agriculture were largely supported as main source of income; despite its environmental consequences.

During my visit at the village Funyu Funyu, I met the uncle of Mphatheleni – Magadtzha David – who could be regarded a ‘local hero’ in the village and played an important role for the youth in particular. He carried the Venda culture in his heart and his eyes sparkled when he talked about his childhood; how he looked after the goats and cows in the forest, swam in the river, climbed the mountains and cultivated his own food. His mission was to transfer the value of the Venda culture to the next generation, so therefore he had set up a youth centre, to teach the boys traditional dances, organize mountain climbing and set up sport events for boys and girls. During our focus group meeting with fourteen boys – estimated between sixteen and twenty-six years old – it became clear how much Magadztzha David and Tshikona dancing meant to them. When we were sitting on top of the rocks together, after we had climbed the mountain, the first boy in his twenties, said:

“We have been trained by Magadtzha and he has taught us many things, different traditional cultural dances and we value that. Even when I get employed, overseas, or anywhere in South Africa, I will have the knowledge of my culture, and when I am there I will share with others that I am proud of being a Venda person, this is what I have learned from childhood, our culture is carrying a value.”

The second boy, who was sitting next to him, around eighteen years old, continued:

“This culture of the Venda people is my life, my life is depending on this culture. If I do not practice or do the cultural thing, I feel I am not a person. An important thing for me is also Mupo, and when people are destroying Mupo, I feel so hurt. It is a sore to me, because we benefit a lot from our culture and from Mupo. I wish this culture continues to the young children, that is why I also participate in gathering the children to keep on practicing Tshikona. It is my wish that this culture continues to the younger generation, so that the younger generation will continue it to their children, so that our culture does not vanish.”

Another theme that emerged from the focus group, was that the boys enjoyed Tshikona because it gathered them together – from all different ages – as they would eat together after Tshikona and would learn from each other. According to the boys, knowledge was not only transferred from the elders, but the youth had the responsibility to pass it on to the younger children.

94 Boy one (in his twenties) at focus group in Funyu Funyu (24/02/2018)
95 Boy two (around eighteen years old) at focus group in Funyu Funyu (24/02/2018)
boys expressed that they valued everything they learned from Magadtdzha David and their brothers, such as respect and good behaviour. A boy, around sixteen years old said, “In Tshikona we learn how to respect each other, we learn much about respect. I am very happy because I learn that.” A boy in his mid-twenties added:

“Tshikona it is assisting a lot, us young people. Because we used to come on Friday and visit other places or villages where we are invited. We go on Friday and come back late on Saturday, and that period, Friday, Saturday, young people are involved in alcohol and doing all these funny things... It saves us from these kind of things, like drugs and alcohol, because we come back on Saturday evening. When we come back we hear “oooh this and this happened in this shebeen”97, but for us the Tshikona saves us from this modern behaviour. Magadtdzha, as our leader, is a big guidance for us, because he is showing us good life and good manners. He does not allow us, the people in Tshikona, to smoke dagga, to do alcohol things, even to smoke a cigarette. Tshikona is the place where we learn a lot about the behaviour of boys.”

In addition, the boys explained to me how they felt very peaceful and ‘clear of mind’ during Tshikona, especially by playing the flute, and that the sound was to them like a ‘cry’ which would call the ancestors. It showed that they understood the deeper meaning of Tshikona and that it made them feel proud and connected to their ancestral worldview and indigenous roots. These examples show that despite the erosion of cultural traditions and practices on the countryside – like the declining role of the chief’s palace – David stepped up to bridge this gap, teaching the younger generation to value their roots, have good manners and respect one another and Mupo.

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96 Boy eight (around sixteen years old) at focus group in Funyu Funyu (24/02/2018)
97 South African slang for pub or tavern according to the youth and adults
98 Boy six (in his twenties) at focus group in Funyu Funyu (24/02/2018)
4.3 Disappearing social mechanisms and local institutions of knowledge transfer

As the previous sub-chapters have shown the perceived role of Christianity and urbanization on the maintenance of the Vhavenda's local knowledge system, this sub-chapter addresses the impact of these dimensions on the social mechanisms and local institutions of knowledge transfer, as well as the influence of modernization. Since growing up happened 'stage by stage' in the past, this subchapter follows the same order of these stages, while comparing the past with the present. Mphatheleni stated, "nowadays there is a big gap, no longer knowledge comes through this process". This subchapter explores the reasons why.

As became clear in the previous chapter, child rearing was a joint responsibility, where all family or community members were involved in raising children together. Vho Lily lamented this loss in contemporary time, as she experienced a division in the village. She said:

“There is no support, because nowadays people are jealous, they do not want somebody to prosper. Now if you meet parents who can guide your children in a good way, give thanks to them, because the others are busy brainwashing their children to go the wrong way. In the past parents were supporting each other to hold the growth of the children towards good manners. Nowadays there is no togetherness in supporting the children anymore.”

The elders also explained the impact of ‘democratic rights’ by the government, which they perceived as a western concept that disrupted their culture. They said that these ‘democratic rights’ gave children the freedom to do what they want, as parents could no longer discipline the children towards good behaviour. Where in the past physical punishments were used to discipline the children to follow rules and taboos, the ‘democratic rights’ created space for children to say ‘no’ or rapport their parents to the police for abuse. According to Vho Lily, these ‘democratic rights’ created two groups of people in the village, “the people who love each other and the people who do not love each other; the people who appreciate one’s prosperity, and the people who do not appreciate one’s prosperity”, which impacted the loss of communality in raising children. She explained:

“I want to tell you a real story, it is not a joke. There is another family here who would take care of the child, trying to show the good way of living. The other women go to that child and say, “the treatment which you are getting at home by your parents, that is called an abuse, go to the police there and say they are abusing you”. Then the parents are called there at the police and they are...

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99 Interview with Mphatheleni Makaulule in Vuwani (15/03/2018)
100 Interview with Vho Lily in Vuwani (02/03/2018)
101 With ‘democratic rights’ the elders most probably refer to human rights, which were introduced around the same time when democracy came in in 1994. The human rights are part of the SA constitution of 1996.
102 Interview with Vho Lily in Vuwani (02/03/2018)
taught that what they are doing to the child is an abuse.”

Another reason that came forward in some interviews and conversations with elders – regarding the decline in raising children together – was the promotion of nuclear families by the church, where married couples were encouraged to live on their own and move out of their family’s home. The encouragement of monogamy also resulted in smaller families, where children would no longer learn from many family members as happened in large polygamous families in the past. This created a separation between family members on a daily basis and weakened the flow of intergenerational knowledge transfer. On top, the worldview of Christianity “to safe your own soul” also contributed to individualism, according to Mphatheleni.

Continuing with the different stages of growth which were in place in the past, the grandparents played an important role in the earliest stage of children’s life, where they taught ethics, respectful greetings and did storytelling around the fire in the kitchen. Vho Lily explained that this practice has largely disappeared, because the round kitchen is no longer there. She said, “the problem is tshitanga is no longer there, that traditional kitchen. Sitting around the fire in a circle is not there – we are no longer sitting together”. When I asked the reasons for the disappearance of tshitanga, she said that people had no longer time to share stories, as they would watch television or read a book in the evening. She explained:

“In a house like this, everyone has his own room, and they are watching TV. The children are holding the book, having homework, and when the child has homework, he or she goes to the mother and says “mother, this is my homework, can you help me”. Me, as a grandmother, just sitting in my room, the child is only communicating with the mother. The child will only go to the grandmother when there is a homework about the riddles or proverbs, this is when the child will go there. But the child in the evening is holding a book, there is homework at school, there is no longer time that we sit around the fire together. The people of the past were not educated, they were not having responsibility of going to school. But there is no child that can sit at tshitanga now, because the children have the responsibility of studying the book. People in the evening watch TV and those riddles and those phrases that they learned are no longer there.”

Since the tshitanga is no longer a meeting space for oral transfer, there is less transmission of proverbs and riddles, which were connected to the taboos and good behaviour in the past. Vho Lilly explained the influence of this, saying, “all the customs... children are no longer able to follow those”. Vho Nyawasedza mentioned the same “children these days do not respect the

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103 Interview with Vho Lily in Vuwani (02/03/2018)
104 Conversation with Mphatheleni (field note)
105 Interview with Vho Lily in Vuwani (02/03/2018)
106 Interview with Vho Lily in Vuwani (02/03/2018)
taboos”. Other causes for the negligence of the taboos were, according to Mphatheleni, the influence of the education system, as “in the western understanding, they want to prove things before they accept it”, meaning that it stimulated critical thinking which challenged the taboos. Moreover, since people converted to Christianity and watched television, this meant an exposure to new worldviews, which could contribute to questioning and neglecting the taboos and rituals.

When boys and girls would grow older in the past, they learned by observation and participation in the household, which is nowadays interrupted by the modern education system, as children spend most of their time in school instead of the home. Furthermore, daily household activities of the past – such as fetching water, firewood, grinding mealie-mill and going after the goats and cows – disappeared by modern developments, such as electricity, tap water, shops and modern household equipment, making life easier and more comfortable. This development is stronger in urban than rural areas, as the previous sub-chapter has shown. A male adult in the taxi-van told me:

“Modern life is comfortable and easy. Some people in the village are stubborn and do not want to change; but people learn they can have electricity, a flushing toilet and transport by car. They see it on television, when they travel or go to town, this makes them desire it too.”

This way, indigenous knowledge and skills regarding ecosystem preservation and making a living out of the environment slowly disappear, resulting that it is no longer transferred to the next generation.

Regarding apprenticeship-based learning on the land, there is also a difference between urban and rural areas. People in urban areas no longer cultivate their own food, as they spend time at work and buy food in the supermarket. In rural areas I observed many homestead gardens, but the elders explained that youth were no longer interested to participate on the land. During the focus group in Tshidzivhe, Vho Joyce explained, “the problem lies when they have to plant. It is because of the manicure that they have done on their nails, they feel it is a challenge because they have to use the same nails to prepare the soil for planting.” In Funyu Funyu, the youth seemed more interested to cultivate the land and produce their own food, as they were inspired by Magadtdzha David. Some boys explained to me how they dreamed to have their own farm when they were older and employ other people to cultivate crops in the indigenous way (without agrochemicals).

When boys and girls would grow into adolescence in the past, they would participate in

107 Interview with Vho Nyawasedza Mutshinyalo Netshidzivhe in Tshidzivhe (10/02/2018)
108 Interview with Mphatheleni Makaulule in Vuwani (15/03/2018)
109 Conversation with a male adult in taxi from Vuwani to Thohoyandou (18/03/2018)
110 Focus group with makhadzi elders and a few adults and youth at Tshidzivhe, Vho Joyce (10/02/2018)
the indigenous game *mahondwani*, where they would learn how to sustain a family in practice. Mphathelelele and Dr. Dima addressed that it disappeared in contemporary life, without further explaining the causes. Through several interviews with elders it became clear that *initiation school* also largely disappeared, as it could no longer be practised without a permit from the government. Besides, adolescents also lost their interest to go, which seemed stronger in urban than rural areas. Several girls at the University of Venda explained to me that they heard hostile stories of harsh treatments during initiation school and on top they saw no longer the value of initiation school in modern life. Furthermore, it was discouraged by the church to go to initiation school, which came forward in interviews with several elders and Mammie Bishop of Christ Worship House. For instance, *Vho Nyawasedza* from Tshidizivhe mentioned, “initiation schools like *musevhetho, domba* and *tshikanda* are no longer there, because of the church. People send their children to church, so that their children are part of church initiates.”

Mammie Bishop perceived initiation school as abusive and therefore discouraged it:

“The songs which they sing are abusive, there use abusive languages, like vulgar, mentioning the parts of the body by their names straight away... which is not allowed to do as Christians. Then if you did not reside well, they would pinch you, like abusive. Some of the girls went there maybe after going astray, and if they found out that you were not a virgin anymore, the treatment was sort of cruel, because you were treated like an outcast.”

Regarding the boy initiation schools, circumcision was no longer done by male elders in the bush, but by doctors in the hospitals, which according to *Vho Lily* “is no longer according to our culture.” She explained that circumcision lost its purpose and meaning, as she said:

“In our culture women must not come, the women must not even know what is happening. But nowadays they change everything, circumcision is done by women doctors. They take the little boys, who do not even have a reception to understand the laws of manhood.”

Lastly, adults and elders addressed that adolescents can learn about sexuality and adulthood already from early age, which results in teenage pregnancies and ‘unaccepted’ sexual behaviour. While in the past knowledge regarding sexuality was kept highly secret until initiation school, today’s youth has access to internet, television and YouTube on their phones, where they can watch pornography and other video’s with criminal behaviour.

Then arriving at the stage of marriage, this also changed in comparison to the past. While in the past arranged marriages were common practice, today men and women can find their

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111 Interview with *Vho Nyawasedza Mutshinyalo Netshidzivhe* in Tshidizvhe (10/02/2018)
112 Interview with Mammie Bishop at Christ Worship House in Thohoyandou (18/03/2018)
113 Interview with *Vho Lily* in Vuwani (02/03/2018)
114 Interview with *Vho Lily* in Vuwani (02/03/2018)
115 Conversation with a male teacher in Vuwani (03/03/2018)
own partner, which can also result in ‘mixed marriages’ of different ethical backgrounds, showing hybridity. The indigenous rituals of marriage largely made place for Christian rituals and the understanding of being a wife changed. Vho Lilly addressed this by saying:

“Today the bride, or daughter in law, can sleep until half past 9, 10 or 11, and the mother in law will be sweeping and doing everything while the girl is sleeping. When the mother in law says something, the daughter in law will say “I did not come here to do that, I came for my husband”. This is vice versa from the past, because it was a taboo for the daughter in law to wake up late. It was the daughter in law who should wake up and do the home chores and prepare the water to bath, prepare the food to eat, so that the elder mother in law, the father in law and even her husband would find everything ready there when they wake up. That was the responsibility of the daughter in law. But today they say she was a slave… But that time it was not a slave life. It was a life were she had the understanding of the custom and how to hold on to have a family.”

Finally, it became clear through the interviews and participatory observation, that adults spend more time in their jobs and had less time for child rearing and knowledge transfer. Television also played a large role in the household, as it took away time for conversations. In addition, the community dialogues which took place on Sundays at the chief’s palace in the past, were replaced by services of the Church on Sunday, which disrupted this cultural practice. Lastly, the elders lamented the loss of respect for elders, as people had forsaken the respectful greeting u losha, which brought “dignity and humanity” to their culture.

4.4 Changing social dynamics and relationships – from obedience to free will

As already becomes clear through the previous sub-chapter, social dynamics and relationships changed under influence of Christianity, life in urban areas and the disappearance of social mechanisms and local institutions of knowledge transfer. Where the ancestral worldview brought a large emphasis on respect – for the elders, the ancestors, makhadzi, and Mupo – Christianity seems to have a smaller emphasis on this value. The elders also blamed the ‘democratic rights’ for the loss of respect and declining authority of the elders. While in the past the elders could discipline the children to follow demands, taboos, the customs and used physical punishments to correct misbehaviour, today the ‘democratic rights’ give children the right to say ‘no’, disobey and rapport their parents for ‘abuse’ to the police. According to Eriksen all norms in a society are connected to sanctions, where the main source of power refers to the ability to legally impose these sanctions on society (Eriksen 2010 [1995]: 64). Relating this to my findings, it shows that the Vhavenda elders lost their ability to legally impose their sanctions

116 Interview with Vho Lily in Vuwani (02/03/2018)
117 Interview with Vho Lily in Vuwani (02/03/2018)
on the youth, resulting in shifting power relations. This change can be related to the transition from the Venda homeland to the incorporation into democratic South Africa, where the Government replaced this legal authority from the chiefs and elders.

While most elders complain about the ‘democratic rights’ for the bad behaviour of children, others say it is the fault of the parents themselves, as they take less time and effort to guide their children in a good way. Since parents are busy with work and are already getting away from their culture, this can result in parents “leaving children as they are”\textsuperscript{118}. Some elders expressed their deep concerns about the current generation, as they hang around the streets, use alcohol and drugs and have sexual relationships causing teenage pregnancies. Dr. Dima therefore called this generation “the lost generation”\textsuperscript{119}, and Mphatheleni used the metaphor, “the new leaves are dying before the tree”, explaining that “the young leaves can only be healthy when they are connected to the roots”.\textsuperscript{120}

Furthermore there is a shift from following the parents will, to following one’s own free will, which results in more freedom of the youth but also friction between the younger and elder generation. While the elders want to hold on to their traditions and customs of the past, the younger generation is breaking free from these customs and chooses the life they want. A girl in the taxi-van around Thohoyandou explained how she enjoyed the larger freedom which she experienced on campus,

“There are too many rules at home, there is no freedom. But on campus you can go and do what you want. At home you have to tell exactly where you go, where you went and you have to come back early. It is also very crowded and everyone has an influence over you, even the neighbours.”

While in the past the social mechanisms and local institutions of knowledge transfer had a large impact on the social dynamics and relationships between the younger and elder generation, the disappearance of these subsequently resulted in changing social dynamics and relationships. Since respect, obedience, humility and perseverance were mainly taught and internalized through initiation school, the loss of this institution influenced the social dynamics consequently. Lastly, the interviews showed that the collectivist society of the past made place for a more individualistic society in the present, which seems stronger in urban than rural areas. Overall, there seem to be tensions between the expression of freedom of the youth on the one hand and declining authority and respect for the elders on the other hand. Tensions between following one’s own free will and following the will and expectations of the parents and community. When family and community members had different belief systems or different lifestyles in the city or countryside, this could cause frictions as well.

\textsuperscript{118} Interview with Dr. Dima in Vuwani (05/02/2018)
\textsuperscript{119} Interview with Dr. Dima in Vuwani (05/02/2018)
\textsuperscript{120} Conversation with Mphatheleni at Vuwani
Concluding remarks

While in the past there was a coherence between the Vhavenda’s ancestral worldview, their living environment in Mupo and their social mechanisms and local institutions of knowledge transfer – which was presented in a rather ‘essentialist’ way – today there is a strong influence of Christianity, urbanization, consumerism and multiple knowledge systems interacting with the Vhavenda’s indigenous knowledge system, showing the hybridity and fluidity of the Venda culture. While in the past there was a strong emphasis on ancestral spirituality, which seemed to be shared by all generations when growing up in ‘the bowl of culture’, today Christianity seems dominant in society, which mainly attracts the youth and adults to convert throughout their lives. As both belief systems seemed difficult to correlate by most respondents, the conversion to Christianity could lead to friction and erosion of community ties and a distancing from indigenous knowledge and practice.

Regarding the dimension of their living environment, there seems to be a difference between life in urban and rural areas. In urban areas people adopted a more ‘modern life style’, as the city was exposed to larger development, such as infrastructure, technology and commodities, driving people away from their indigenous culture. Especially in urban areas people tend to forsake their traditional attire, their local language and indigenous cultivation practices, which also resulted in a weaker connection to Mupo. As people were no longer dependent on their natural environment for their direct survival, this meant subsequently a disconnection with indigenous knowledge and practice regarding farming and ecosystem management. Lastly, the separation between family members in urban and rural areas also disrupted the flow of intergenerational knowledge transfer, as youth, adults and elders no longer lived together on a daily basis.

Comparing the social mechanisms and local institutions of knowledge transfer of the past with the present, it becomes clear that many mechanisms and local institutions have changed or disappeared under influences of modernization, such as the ‘democratic rights’ (or human rights) by the government, the modern education system and industrial development. While in the past children learned around the fire in the kitchen tsititanga, participated in household activities and went to mahondwani and initiation school, these social mechanisms and local institutions have largely been replaced by formal education, access to consumption goods and initiation by the church. While child rearing in the past was a joint responsibility, influences of modernization have also resulted in a more individualistic society, with less social cohesion and sense of community.

Social dynamics and relationships have largely shifted from obedience and respect towards an increasing freedom of the youth, where the elders experience a declining authority. The ‘democratic rights’ play a large role in this freedom of the youth, as it protects them from
corporal punishments and allows them to say 'no' to demands. While in the past the social dynamics between the youth and elders were internalized through initiation school, the disappearance of this local institution subsequently weakened the internalization of these social values. As the youth gained more agency to follow their own will, as they were less disciplined by sanctions, proverbs, taboos and initiation school, there is an observable power shift between the younger and elder generation.

All in all, this chapter shows that the Vhavenda communities experience an increasing emersion of 'the global in the local', which already started under colonialism, trade and missionary activity and continued under globalization and the increasing inclusion in the worldwide capitalist system (ibid.: 308). This historical process is often called 'cultural entropy', 'cultural globalization', 'hybridization' or 'Westernization', which means the increasing interaction and transformation of cultures under globalization (ibid.: 310). According to Eriksen (2010 [1995]) this 'cultural globalization' does not mean that groups of people become more cultural identical, but rather results in new kinds of differences at the interface of the global and the local – which are hence 'glocal' (ibid.: 318). Therefore, it becomes increasingly problematic to speak about 'the Venda culture' in clearly definable terms, as cultures are fluid and in constant motion and are 'neither closed nor internally uniform' (ibid.: 321). It could be a point of discussion whether this hybridity means a transformation or erosion of the 'Venda culture', where the youth and adults might identify with the first and the elders with the latter position.
Chapter 5: The role of Dzomo la Mupo to revive indigenous knowledge

“The purpose of indigenous knowledge is to go back to the order, to live in harmony with Mupo.”
– Mphatheleni Makaulule

Introduction

This last chapter focuses on the role of Dzomo la Mupo to reclaim their indigenous roots and support intergenerational knowledge transfer inside and outwards of the Vhavenda communities. As Dzomo la Mupo means ‘Voice of the Earth’ – to speak on behalf of sacred sites, the rivers and the trees – this chapter is organized by the metaphor of a tree. The chapter starts with addressing why they are founded – symbolized by the seed – continued with how they established themselves and developed their network – how the tree grows and develops – followed by their activities – the leaves of the tree – and lastly their vision for the future and why indigenous knowledge is important for our time – the fruits they hope to give to the world.

In order to make this tree of Dzomo la Mupo grow, this chapter starts with the background of Dzomo la Mupo, which discusses their establishment, vision and network (5.1). Secondly, it addresses their activities regarding environmental preservation and intergenerational knowledge transfer (5.2). Lastly, it discusses their larger vision for the future in the context of Climate Change (5.3).

5.1 Background of Dzomo la Mupo

Mphatheleni Makaulule is the founder of Dzomo la Mupo and developed her vision by her growing concerns. As she grew up in the indigenous way and saw the changes happening, she was concerned about the destruction of Mupo and the erosion of community ties, where the youth undermined the elders and no longer valued indigenous knowledge. Therefore she developed the vision to gain as much knowledge from the elders as possible before they passed away, as she saw them as ‘living libraries of knowledge’ and explained that “for me when an elder dies, is like a book which is put in the fire.” She said that it was her dream that this knowledge was passed down to the younger generation, as “this knowledge accommodates the protection of Mupo.”

After she graduated for her Bachelor in Education – with a deep passion for culture – she started her personal research in the communities and had many conversations with elders,

121 Interview with Mphatheleni Makaulule in Vuwani (08/03/2018)
122 Interview with Mphatheleni Makaulule in Vuwani (08/03/2018)
123 Interview with Mphatheleni Makaulule in Vuwani (08/03/2018)
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chiefs and *makhadzi*, where she gained deep insights in indigenous knowledge. With this knowledge she established a cultural village at Luvhola mountain, which attracted many people on a local, national and international level. When she won a scholarship to study leadership in the USA, she broadened her understanding about the world and built stronger relationships internationally, as she became known by many people. Back in South Africa she got acquainted with the people from African Biodiversity Network, who invited her to Ethiopia, where she attended ceremonies and celebrations regarding 'cultural biodiversity'\(^{124}\). Understanding that they shared the same vision and did similar work as she did in Venda, the African Biodiversity Network offered their assistance to set up an organizational structure in Venda and support them with funding. As Mphatheleni had already many groups and connections in Venda – consisting of teachers, chiefs, elders and *makhadzi* – they decided to establish themselves by the name of *Mupo*.

Then she went to Kenya with African Biodiversity Network and met the board of Gaia Foundation, who offered their help to register their organization under the name Mupo Foundation, in 2007. Mupo Foundation had several focus areas and programmes, which were mainly led by *vhomakhadzi* and a few men elders. There was one committee that was running all the programmes, which was called Dzomo la Mupo. In 2008 a group of *vhomakhadzi* raised their voice firmly to defend sacred sites and in 2011 they campaigned against an Australian mining company, who wanted to open a coalmine in the region. As they were not afraid, stood strong and spoke on behalf of *Mupo*, they called themselves Dzomo la Mupo: Voice of the Earth. This activism received large media attention and resulted in a court case against the construction of a tourist resort at Phiphidi waterfall – an important sacred site to the Vhavenda communities where they perform rituals. Eventually they won the court case, but the construction project is still going on. When they were facing growing frictions with Gaia Foundation’s directors, they decided to build their own organization and registered Dzomo la Mupo as non-profit community-based organization. They continued their work with the same vision and focus areas. Dzomo la Mupo works now together with 11 clans of sacred sites and 25 schools around Venda.

Dzomo la Mupo’s vision is ‘to protect Nature in all forms – especially the indigenous forests, rivers, wetlands and sacred natural sites – enhance the indigenous skills of traditional agriculture to preserve nutritional food security, and create opportunities for intergenerational learning’\(^{125}\). Dzomo la Mupo’s core work is to restore community cohesion and practices and revive the indigenous role of women, *makhadzi*, in order to deal with problems, threats and challenges of modern, unsustainable industrial development.

\(^{124}\) ‘Cultural Biodiversity (CB) is the link between cultural diversity – the variety of human cultures and societies – and biological diversity or biodiversity – the variety of plant and animal life, in any specific region or within the world as a whole’. www.thedzomolamupo.org (05/07/2018)

\(^{125}\) From Dzomo la Mupo’s Lottery Proposal (2018)
5.2 The work of Dzomo la Mupo to reclaim their roots

Since Dzomo la Mupo’s main objective is to halt environmental degradation, ensure healthy and nutritional food security and encourage intergenerational knowledge transfer, they have several activities to reclaim their indigenous roots. Their three focal areas of work are 1) the protection of sacred sites 2) the revival of indigenous seeds and farming practices, and 3) the facilitation of cultural biodiversity programs for intergenerational learning.

Starting with the protection of sacred sites, they do this through activism and defending sacred sites in court cases, as well as informing the government – the South African Heritage Resource Agency – about the importance of sacred sites, through their detailed sacred site booklets. These booklets explain the deeper meaning of the sacred site to their custodian clans and describes the abundant biodiversity and ecosystem services these sites provide. As the clans described themselves as vhongwaniwapo, the indigenous people who live there since ‘origin’, they address these sacred sites as cultural heritage, which could be compared to a church or temple in other religions.

Regarding the revival of indigenous seeds and farming practice, the elders addressed that seeds are at the heart of the indigenous way of life, as they symbolize the cycle of life and enhance biodiversity and food sovereignty. Dzomo la Mupo encourages communities to cultivate and store indigenous seeds, such as finger millet, indigenous maize, beans, sesame and indigenous vegetables. Furthermore, they encourage indigenous cultivation practices – also referred to as agro-ecology – which makes use of organic compost to regenerate the soil and plants in a polyculture way, to support and acknowledge the larger ecosystem. Lastly, they encourage community members to have their own tree nurseries of indigenous trees, in order to restore degraded areas, where indigenous forests have been destructed.
Chapter 5: The role of Dzomo la Mupo to revive indigenous knowledge

It became clear through the focus group and interviews that Dzomo la Mupo meant a lot to the community members, as they were already going the ‘western way’, but realized they were lost. Vho Nyawasedza from Tshidzivhe illustrates this by saying:

“I cannot remember exactly, but we too thought that it was good to have a Western lifestyle. I was already having three children when I saw that western life is germinating. Then when we thought of the past, we realised that we were lost. We thank Dzomo la Mupo.”

Also during the focus group in Tshidzivhe Vho Dora explained:

“We thank Vho Makaulule that she was very passionate about these things of Tshivenda. She went out to look for people in the villages so that we revive our past. Makaulule dedicated herself to teach us. We had neglected it to be honest, we were preferring modern things and the type of maize farming which was informed by western methods. She came and advised us to revive our past, so that we go back to our roots of Tshivenda. (...) It is not only here, we are a lot who have been trained to do this type of Tshivenda indigenous farming by her. We then teach and encourage each other in this regard.”

Finally regarding Dzomo la Mupo’s role in supporting intergenerational knowledge transfer inside and outwards of the communities, there is no clear distinction between ‘inside and outwards’, as they work together with schools and children of different villages, where there is no clear boundary of the ‘community’ anymore like it was in the past. In the past the term community was used interchangeably with the village, but today this seems more open and fluid, as people go in and out and do not know all the villagers anymore.

Dzomo la Mupo has several activities to facilitate intergenerational learning, which they call Cultural Biodiversity programs. Cultural Biodiversity refers to the understanding how human life interacts with the natural environment and teaches students ‘why life is the way it is today’. In collaboration with 25 secondary schools around Venda, Dzomo la Mupo aims to bring indigenous knowledge in the education system, by bringing teachers, learners and elders together. As the opening statement of the school curriculum of South Africa already encourages the integration of indigenous knowledge, many school teachers do not have this knowledge, so therefore Dzomo la Mupo organizes teachers trainings and wilderness retreats to reconnect them with Mupo. Subsequently, the teachers can integrate this knowledge in the classroom, mainly under the subject of life science or arts and culture.

Besides teacher trainings and wilderness retreats, Dzomo la Mupo also organizes drawing activities to create a dialogue and encourage knowledge transfer between the youth and elders. These drawing activities are the ecological calendar and ecological mapping, a tool

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126 Interview with Vho Nyawasedza Mutshinyalo Netshidzivhe in Tshidzivhe (10/02/2018)
127 Focus group dialogue at Tshidzivhe, Vho Dora (10/02/2018)
which Mphatheleni learned from the indigenous peoples in the Amazon in Colombia. Mphatheleni explained:

“In the ecological calendar and ecological mapping we are mapping the indigenous knowledge. When we are in this dialogue, the knowledge get transferred to the younger generation. We do not teach people to take a solution, we just do a dialogue and find the solution as a group. We talk about Mupo. The purpose of mapping is not to end up with the drawings, the paper itself is useless. The purpose of mapping is to get knowledge inside of you, inside your veins. So when you see the river, you see the importance of the river and the rights of the river. Then you will be able to say “no, do not destroy the river, there is fish there, my health is in that river”.”

Regarding the ecological mapping, they would draw a map of the past, the present and future of the territory, to understand the changes which happened over time. Mphatheleni explained:

“Go back and draw the map of the past. You will see that the purpose of indigenous knowledge is to bring order, from animal, insect, even human being... The purpose of indigenous knowledge is to bring order. Then the map of the present shows the disorder, which is we are having now, and they have to dream about the future, if they want to replace what can be replaceable or want to continue with the disorder of the present.”

They would select students who showed passion, as they could spread this knowledge among their peers and attract other students. As these mapping activities took place for several days in nature and were dependent on funding, they would only happen on special occasions when there was enough money.

Another occasion for intergenerational learning was the yearly Cultural Heritage Day on the 24th of September, where children, youth and elders would gather in the village and celebrate their culture. They would cook indigenous food, dance traditional dances and wear their traditional Venda attire, to reconnect with their cultural roots and indigenous knowledge. Mphatheleni also gave a speech on Cultural Heritage Day 2017, where she talked about the heritage of their ancestors and the undermining role of the church, which could be seen as a way to decolonize the mind of the community members.

Moreover, Dzomo la Mupo meetings also facilitate intergenerational learning, as they welcome children in the meeting and the members would practice the knowledge at home, where the children could learn by observation and participation. Dzomo la Mupo meetings were always held in the forest, to connect to Mupo and “share the same breath”.

When I joined a Dzomo la Mupo meeting in the forest, I observed that everyone wore their traditional Venda clothing and handmade necklaces, which showed the reconstruction of their cultural identity.

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128 Interview with Mphatheleni Makaulule in Vuwani (08/03/2018)
129 Interview with Mphatheleni Makaulule in Vuwani (08/03/2018)
130 Expression by Mphatheleni Makaulule
Finally, they work together with the University of Venda to give lectures and bring Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) as a Bachelor in the Department of African Studies, where they aim to decolonize the education system. Lastly, Mphatheleni and Dr. Dima speak on conferences and the local radio of UnivenFM about the importance of indigenous knowledge, which is another example to bring indigenous knowledge ‘outwards’. The next section explains why they believe that indigenous knowledge is important for our time.

5.3 Larger vision for the future – in the context of Climate Change

A common theme that emerged through the interviews with the members of Dzomo la Mupo, is that we live in a time of disorder, where “Mother Earth is no longer in a good way, because of the destruction that is happening”\(^\text{131}\). Mphatheleni addressed that Climate Change and Global Warming cannot be solved by “applying new technologies, but our attention should go back to the indigenous knowledge”\(^\text{132}\). She explained that indigenous knowledge asks questions about the trees, the plants, the rivers and biodiversity, while “most government policies are looking at development and making money”\(^\text{133}\). She further explained:

“When the government thinks about the shortage of food, or food insecurity, they not even look at the environment, only to bring food in the plate. It does not matter where this food comes from, the answer to them is to destruct nature, to plant the monoculture and put chemicals, so that there is food in the plate. In the indigenous way, when we want to solve food insecurity, we think about nature, the environment, the river, everything. We do not damage the soil, we protect the soil. When we think about Climate Change and food insecurity, we say, ‘let’s return order in the soil, so that there must be the communication of the sun, the environment, the mist, the rain, the water’. We do not think about quick quick food to the plate.”\(^\text{134}\)

The elders and Mphatheleni emphasized that the solution is indigenous knowledge and we have to move back to the past, to go from disorder back to order. Mphatheleni said:

“The future is in the past, the future is the indigenous way. The future is not the mind of destroying, the future is the mind of bringing order. They can say we are backward people, they can say the indigenous way is a slow process, but there was order in nature. There was order in the river. There was order even in the climate, in the atmosphere, in the sky there. The stars were in order, they were not disturbed. Order is to live in harmony with Mupo. Order of indigenous knowledge is to live in harmony with the river. Not to block the river for the sake of a human beings to get drinking water, and you forgot about the soil, the plants and animals, which are far. God created the river to

\(^{131}\) Interview with Mphatheleni Makaulule in Vuwani (08/03/2018)
\(^{132}\) Interview with Mphatheleni Makaulule in Vuwani (08/03/2018)
\(^{133}\) Interview with Mphatheleni Makaulule in Vuwani (08/03/2018)
\(^{134}\) Interview with Mphatheleni Makaulule in Vuwani (08/03/2018)
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flow, up to the sea. God was having a purpose. But human beings wanted to bring disorder, because human beings of the government, they do not think in an indigenous way. They think the river is created for the purpose of water for the human being only and forget about everything else. In the indigenous way, you do not block the animal migration. You do not fence the animals for the sake of people who go for a weekend to watch the animal. You have to make the animals free. In the indigenous way the animals are our totems. I want to tell the world, the order which they are saying was in Eden, where Adam and Eve were living with animals together, that was the order of the indigenous. Heaven for me, is the area where there is lots of biodiversity. Heaven for me, is Thathe sacred forest, where there is undisturbed forest. That is the order of indigenous. Eden is an indigenous forest place.”

When I asked her how we can go back to this order, she explained that time is cyclical, where we enter the point that the circle moves back to where it started. In order to deal with the challenges of our time, she said that we have to “limit what we are doing and start reversing, until we clean all these dirty things which are happening”. She said that if we cannot go back there and continue with the disorder, there is no more life for human beings. “The trees will survive, the rivers will come back, but the one thing which is going to get finished is human beings.” Lastly she said that the purpose of human beings is not to survive and live well, but to live in harmony with everything; to understand that our health depends on Mupo, and that true well-being means to have what is necessary – not to accumulate wealth or money by the destruction of Mupo.

Concluding remarks

This last chapter shows that Dzomo la Mupo’s objective is to revive indigenous knowledge and reclaim their cultural roots, in order to protect Mupo and go from ‘disorder’ back to ‘order’. As indigenous knowledge is perceived to be the knowledge of Mupo and is only valued when it is put into practice, it becomes more clear again that indigenous knowledge is embodied knowledge, which needs to be socialized and internalized in order to be practiced. Dzomo la Mupo revives this ‘embodied practical knowledge’ by supporting indigenous cultivation methods and reviving indigenous seeds for healthy and nutritional food; by encouraging tree nurseries in communities to recover degraded areas; and have eco-mapping activities with teachers, elders and children to transfer indigenous knowledge to the younger generation. As the formal education system played a role in ‘disrupting’ social mechanisms of knowledge transfer of the past, Dzomo la Mupo turns it around by bringing indigenous knowledge into the education system, which could be seen as ‘modern institutionalization of indigenous knowledge’.

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135 Interview with Mphatheleli Makaulule in Vuwani (08/03/2018)
136 Interview with Mphatheleli Makaulule in Vuwani (08/03/2018)
137 Interview with Mphatheleli Makaulule in Vuwani (08/03/2018)
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This could be an example of ‘indigenous modernity’, as it shows a hybridization of modern education and indigenous knowledge (Robins 2003).

Regarding the protection of sacred sites, it could be connected to my theoretical framework about social movements, as they see their work as an entire ‘life-project’ and connect biodiversity conservation to cultural and territorial defence. By describing themselves as the indigenous people – who live there since origin, being the custodian clans of the sacred sites – they claim ownership of the territory, aiming to preserve biodiversity and the ecosystem services for the larger community. The fact that Dzomo la Mupo strengthens their cultural roots by wearing their traditional Venda attire during Dzomo la Mupo meetings and celebrate their indigenous heritage on Cultural Heritage Day, this also shows that they enact cultural politics, as they reconstruct and strengthen their cultural identity.

Furthermore it becomes clear that Dzomo la Mupo uses strategic representations to participate in global discourses, by using terms like ‘food security’, ‘agro-ecology’, ‘indigenous knowledge’ and ‘Climate Change’, which Mphatheleni learned through her global connections with African Biodiversity Network and Gaia Foundation. Mphatheleni could therefore be seen as a broker, as she is the central figure of Dzomo la Mupo and communicates both inwards and outwards of the communities. Inwards she communicates with the illiterate elders, the makhadzi, the chiefs and children – in their local language Tshivenda – and outwards she communicates with teachers, the University of Venda, the government (South African Heritage Resource Agency) and on conferences and the radio – mainly in English.

Since Mphatheleni has travelled around the world and communicated with other indigenous communities – for instance in the Amazon, where she learned the tools of eco-mapping and the ecological calendar – it shows the interface of the global and the local again, where indigenous knowledge travels from its local context and becomes glocal. The key message of Dzomo la Mupo is to value indigenous knowledge for its relationship with Mupo, as it respects all life-forms and protects the trees, the rivers, the soil, the plants and animals and therefore brings ‘order’. As Mphatheleni also mentioned that they have Dzomo la Mupo meetings in the forest – ‘sharing the same breath’ – and raise the awareness that human health is interconnected with Mupo’s health, this shows that they have a ‘kincentric ecological’ perception of human beings to their natural environment. This ‘kincentric ecology’ recognizes the human role in the complexities of life, where ignorance of this interconnectedness results in loss of sustainability (Salmon 2000). Since the members of Dzomo la Mupo mainly blame the government for the ignorance of this relationship with nature, they want to go back to self-governance and decentralization of power. With their community engagement and bottom-up activism, they hope to reverse the negative consequences of unsustainable development and support the shift from the Anthropocentric worldview, towards an Eco-centric worldview, where we live in balance with the larger whole.
Discussion

The erosion of community ties and the growing gap between the youth and elders are threatening the preservation of the Vhavenda’s local knowledge system. Since indigenous knowledge preservation is a dynamic process, this research explored how the local knowledge system of the Vhavenda is maintained and inter-generationally transferred to the next generation. In addition it examined the local preservation efforts of a grassroot activist organization from inside out. The main research question that guided this study was:

How is the local knowledge system of the indigenous Vhavenda communities in the Venda region in South Africa maintained and inter-generationally transferred and what is the role of grassroot organization Dzomo la Mupo to support this knowledge transfer and (strategically) bring this knowledge outwards?

The findings show that the local knowledge system of the Vhavenda communities was transferred stage by stage and was a shared responsibility in the past. Grandmothers had the responsibility to teach young children the taboos and ethics and did storytelling around the fire in the kitchen (*tshitanga*). Girls would further learn by observation and participation from other women in the household, while boys would look after the goats and cows and learn from other men around the campfire at the gate (*khoroni*). Both would learn to cultivate the land, where women had the special responsibility to select and store seeds. Reaching the stage of adolescence, boys and girls would play the indigenous game *mahondwani*, where they practiced to sustain a family on their own, away from home. Initiation school would further discipline boys and girls to respect the cultural norms and values, educate them about manhood and womanhood and transfer the duties and responsibilities of holding a family. The elders were considered the custodians of eco-cultural knowledge and are therefore called the ‘living libraries of knowledge’. The local knowledge system of the Vhavenda showed to be intertwined with their ancestral worldview and living environment in *Mupo*, which is *embodied* and *practiced* to make a living out of the environment. Therefore, their local knowledge system can be seen as a ‘knowledge-practice-belief’ complex, which characterizes Traditional Ecological Knowledge according to Berkes, Colding and Folke (2000).

Regarding the maintenance of their local knowledge system in contemporary life, the findings show that the social mechanisms and local institutions of knowledge transfer of the past have largely disappeared, creating a lack in indigenous knowledge transfer to the younger generation today. The findings show that the causes for this gap are the conversion to Christianity by the youth, the movement to urban areas which promotes a ‘western’ lifestyle – while forsaking cultural traditions, such as clothing and language – and other forces of
modernization, such as new technologies (television and internet), consumption goods and modern education, which replace the lifestyle and local knowledge system of the past. As the social mechanisms and local institutions of knowledge transfer were connected to places in their living environment – such as homesteads in rural areas, the forest, the cultivated land, the kitchen *tsititanga*, the fire at the gate *khoroni*, and the chief’s palace – the disappearance of these places (or no longer making use of these places) contributes to the lack in intergenerational knowledge transfer today. Since the social mechanisms and local institutions of knowledge transfer were connected to the ancestral worldview in the past – as all stages of growth were accompanied by rituals – the conversion to Christianity replaced many of these rituals. While in the past the social dynamics between the younger and elder generation were based on respect and obedience, and were enforced by corporal sanctions and social conformation, this changed towards increasing freedom of the youth and declining authority of the elders. The elders blame the ‘democratic rights’ (or human rights) for this shifting power dynamic, where the elders can no longer discipline the children, as corporal punishments are considered abuse. Consequently, the elders lament the erosion of cultural values and express concerns about the neglect of taboos, local customs and respect for one another and *Mupo*.

*Dzomo la Mupo* aims to bridge the gap between the youth and elders and introduces new tools to facilitate intergenerational knowledge transfer. Firstly, they revive indigenous knowledge by promoting indigenous cultivation practices, tree nurseries in communities and the protection of sacred sites. Furthermore, they aim to bring indigenous knowledge in the modern education system, by organizing teacher trainings and wilderness retreats, drawing activities to map the territory and ecological calendar, and celebrate Cultural Heritage Day in September. Outwards Mphatheleni speaks on conferences, the radio, collaborates with the University of Venda and works with chiefs and the government to protect sacred sites, making her a broker. By using strategic presentations of the ‘traditional Venda culture’ and presenting themselves as *vhongwaniwapo* – the indigenous custodian clans of sacred sites who live there ‘since origin’ - they claim rights to the territory. By using terminologies such as ‘food security’, ‘agro-ecology’, ‘indigenous knowledge’ and ‘biodiversity’, they are able to participate in global discourses and negotiate alternatives to development. By linking biodiversity conservation to cultural and territorial defense, they align with the political ecology of social movements as explained by Escobar (1998), where they reconstruct their cultural identity by wearing traditional Venda attire in their meetings. As they do not fully embrace modernity nor fully reject it, it shows their hybrid response to modernity – which Robins (2003) calls ‘indigenous modernities’. Lastly, as *Dzomo la Mupo* has its community meetings in the forest and explains how human health is connected and interdependent with *Mupo’s* health’s, it shows that they have a kincentric ecological relationship to their natural environment (Salmon 2000).
Conclusion

My contribution to theory is that indigenous knowledge production and preservation in the Vhavenda communities is a dynamic process, which takes place through social mechanisms and local institutions of knowledge transfer and is embedded in social dynamics and relationships. This research shows how indigenous knowledge co-evolves over time and is subject to influences of colonization, missionary activity, modernization and development, which make it hybrid and glocal – global and local. This research also sheds light on the work of a grassroots activist organization, which revives indigenous knowledge from within and strategically brings this knowledge outwards. Another contribution to theory is the conceptual scheme, which presents the four dimensions of intergenerational knowledge transfer (figure 3). It shows how the social mechanisms and local institutions of knowledge transfer are embedded in a worldview/belief system and living environment, which shape social dynamics and relationships between the younger and elder generation. When the outer dimensions of the worldview/belief system and living environment become more hybrid, this subsequently affects the social mechanisms and local institutions of knowledge transfer as well as the social dynamics and relationships between the younger and elder generation. While in the past there was an emphasis on the shared worldview of ancestral spirituality and their living environment in Mupo – presented in a more essentialist way – contemporary life shows different

Figure 3. The four dimensions of intergenerational knowledge transfer
(contradicting) worldviews of Christianity, ancestral spirituality and western science, as well as two living environments in urban and rural areas. These transformations contribute to the erosion of the social mechanisms and local institutions of knowledge transfer. Since cultures are dynamic and become more hybrid by modernization and globalization, this means that the social mechanisms and local institutions of knowledge transfer need to be dynamic and reinvented as well, in order to be still functional in contemporary life. Dzomo la Mupo is an example of reinventing these social mechanisms and local institutions by creating new tools and spaces for intergenerational learning.

Limitations

Limitations of the study is that the findings are not generalizable to the whole Venda population, as some of the findings are only based on the stories of a few research participants and the majority of the research population are embedded in Dzomo la Mupo. This means that they are defenders of their cultural traditions and are more connected to their indigenous roots. The fact that I lived inside the home of Mphatheleni and Dr. Dima as my two key informants could also create more ‘inter-subjectivity’, making it sometimes challenging to take a distance from the field. On the other hand, this provided deep insights and a trusted relationship. Since most of my research participants were women, this research mainly presents their perspective. Therefore it did not come forward explicitly that men had to work in mines or for White farmers in the Venda homeland. The reason that I mainly interviewed women is that the makhadzi are seen as the custodians of their local knowledge system and nurture and grow children. Besides, the members of Dzomo la Mupo are mainly makhadzi.

Another limitation of the study is that the belief system of Christianity is presented in a rather general way, while in fact there are many types of churches, where some are more hybrid and merged with the indigenous worldview and knowledge system, while others are more contradicting and criticizing. Lastly, since this research has an exploratory design and is conducted in a relatively short fieldwork period, it is difficult to draw definite conclusions (Streb 2010: 372). The conceptual scheme could therefore be seen as a hypothesis, which could be verified and tested in further research.

Recommendations

Recommendations for further research are to investigate other Vhavenda communities outside of Dzomo la Mupo and see whether the findings correspond. The role of Christianity can be also explored in more detail and nuance, as well as the perspective of men regarding indigenous knowledge transfer. A recommendation for Dzomo la Mupo could be to collaborate with passionate youth and co-create new social mechanisms and local institutions of indigenous
knowledge transfer, which suit 'modern' society and is appealing to the youth today. A recommendation for the government and institutions of education is to acknowledge indigenous elders as knowledge holders and include their voice in lectures and decision-making processes.

This research hopes to contribute to the re-appropriation, valuation and protection of the Vhavenda’s local knowledge system and support the shift to alternative discourses of development, which are in balance with the Earth’s ecosystems. It aims to encourage the shift from the economic development of people – as an anthropocentric concept – to ‘development as homage to Gaia’, which recognizes that ‘humans and other forms of life evolve together and live symbiotically in deep dependence on each other and on the Earth’ (Kumar 2007: 119). This awareness to live together as one ‘Earth Community’, questions the goal of unlimited economic growth and fossil fuel-based mass production and consumption, which cause Global Warming and Climate Change. Instead, it promotes to move from ‘more and global’ to ‘less and local’, where we adopt a simple lifestyle and seek ways for human development without damaging the fragile fabric of Mupo, Gaia or Mother Earth.

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