

Religious Studies and Indigenous Knowledge in Secondary Schools in Zimbabwe: Bubi District Case Study, Matebeleland North

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Abstract

Independence in Zimbabwe brought hope that the predominantly Christian ideas that had permeated people's lives as a result of colonization would be replaced by traditional values to reflect the new dispensation in the secondary school curriculum. Thirty four years later Religious Studies has to a greater extent failed to accommodate other religions, thus remaining Christocentric and further diluting the once treasured traditional notions of human survival such as Indigenous Knowledge. The study comprised four secondary schools in the Bubi district in Matebeleland North with four teachers teaching Religious Studies purposively selected, and ten students doing the subject randomly selected to ascertain the level of understanding of Indigenous Knowledge as contained in the current syllabus, outlining the challenges of juxtaposing Religious Studies and Indigenous Knowledge in the classroom. Interviews and written exercises completed the data collection instruments. The study found that both teachers and students had a weak understanding of Indigenous Knowledge issues and were more at home with Bible stories which enjoy the major focus in the Religious Studies curriculum. One of the recommendations of the study was that Indigenous Knowledge be accorded an independent subject status to ground students into their culture and heritage.

Background

The arrival of the missionaries in Zimbabwe since 1859 is an important factor in understanding the character of education (Ndlovu, 2004:48). Christian missionaries played an important part in the development and history of Southern Africa, including Rhodesia during the 19th century (Ndlovu, 2004:45). The colonial government established formal education which was dual in nature. Missionaries through the religious studies (RS) were not only harbingers of the new religion but were also carriers of Victorian values that were consonant with the imperatives of industrial capitalist culture (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2009: 17; Mapira and Mazambara, 2013: 90). In fact, conversion was necessary before enrolment. It is in this regard that missionaries were credited with introducing *religious studies* into the secondary school curriculum (Ndlovu, 2004:50) which was then known as Religious Instruction (R.I.).

During the period between 1896 and 1942 there was no unified syllabus for R.I. The lack of a unified syllabus was attributed to the fact that there were many missionary groups which occupied Zimbabwe with different theological aspirations and religious ideologies such as the London Mission Society, Mennonites, Roman Catholics, Lutheran, Dutch Reformed, Methodists, Anglicans and others. These different groups meant different doctrines and dogmas infiltrated the teaching of R.I. The underlying assumption of the above denominations was to change African people from vestiges of traditional life and religion to Christianity. The essence was that R.I as a subject had multi- purposes for the colonialists and these included evangelization, colonization, and the eradication of African beliefs among many other things. Concurring with the above assertion, Zvobgo (1996) argues that *religious education* was introduced into the formal secondary school curriculum during the colonial era of proselytizing instrument, hence its cultural bias and prejudice.

Between 1930 and 1940 there was still no official R.I syllabus for use in the secondary schools in the then Rhodesia and as a result it was up to the clergy to design their own curricular (Ndlovu, 2004:58). It was not until 1942 that Cambridge introduced *religious education* which marked the beginning of an official syllabus to be used in learning R.I. Ndlovu (2004:101) argues that from 1942 to 1980, the greater part of the colonial period, *religious education* was known as Bible knowledge or religious knowledge. The syllabus was structured into two major components, syllabus A comprised the teaching and the life of Christ as contained in the synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. While syllabus B focused mainly on Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. It is interesting to note that the syllabus format crafted in 1942 still influences the current Religious Studies syllabus in secondary schools. The current Religious Studies (RS) curriculum has also two components which are syllabus A and B, exactly like in the colonial period; hence, it becomes critical to assess its impact in terms of content and practice in relation to Indigenous Knowledge (IK).

Hence, throughout this discussion, Indigenous Knowledge (IK) via Warren (1991) is the local knowledge that is unique to a given culture or society, thus the base for local-level decision making in agriculture, health care, food preparation, education, natural-resource management, and a host of other activities in rural communities. And more broadly via Flavier et al (1995: 479), it is the information base for a society, which facilitates communication and decision-making, and thus, indigenous information systems are dynamic, and are continually influenced by internal creativity and experimentation as well as by contact with external systems.

And in contrast, the colonial syllabus was largely Christocentric; as a result, it greatly impacted on pupils in adopting Christianity as the sole religion for salvation. This led to the demise of the once treasured and tested values of IK of the local people, and thus non-Christian religions were considered irrelevant. Yet the majority of the learners are from an African traditional background (Ndlovu, 2004:3). The teachings of the missionaries were designed so that pupils lost confidence in their own religion and anything to do with traditional life. Missionaries made deliberate attempts to denigrate anything traditional labeling it superstition and pagan. Thus, the colonial assumptions that prejudiced the Shona people as reckless and irresponsible with regard to the use and conservation of natural resources were very superficial (Rusinga and Maposa, 2010: 202; Mapira and Mazambara, 2013: 90; Puffer, 1995: 1). Concurring the same notion, Breidlid (2012: 7) argues that this denial of epistemological diversity and the privileging of European epistemic monoculture is still hegemonic and perceived as a sign of development and modernity whereas it in reality upsets the relationship between people and nature through ecological degradation, seeking to possess the earth in the same way as a master exploits a slave.

Zimbabwean independence in 1980 meant a change of the colonial educational system which was segregationist and oppressive to the majority of the Zimbabweans; hence curriculum change was inevitable in order to align pupils with the new ideology of scientific socialism, which unfortunately largely became a theoretical endeavor evidenced by the current structure and nature of Religious Studies. Shedding more light, Marashe, Ndana and Chireshe (2009) argue that soon after the attainment of independence, the Zimbabwean government, through the then Ministry of Education, Sport, and Culture, recommended the teaching of African Traditional Religion (ATR) in the schools. The rationale was in recognition of the multi-religious nature of the new sovereign and democratic society and to champion the teaching of African cultural beliefs and practices. The recommendation of teaching of African Traditional Religion was an attempt to reverse a purely Christocentric approach to the teaching of RS at 'O' level (an examination taken by secondary education students in the United Kingdom and Commonwealth countries or regions associated with the British curriculum) and to accept the complex religious nature of the Zimbabwean society and the need to align pupils with their cultural heritage.

A religious consultative conference was held in 1981. Participants mainly Religious Studies teachers agreed that the subject should incorporate the teaching of other religions besides Christianity (Religious Education Consultative Conference Report, 1981:13). Therefore, the Zimbabwean government through the Ministry of Education in 1984 made an attempt to broaden the scope of the subject, using the life experience approach, where learners were expected to study beyond the Bible and interrogate religious concepts in their own community (Ndlovu, 2004:97).

Attempts have been made to incorporate indigenous religion and some aspects of general living together within traditional communal life. Thus, there have been some noticeable changes in the teaching of Religious Studies in the Zimbabwean schools since the 1990s, with the inclusion of the small fractions of IK. However, despite these efforts, Christianity still dominates the teaching of Religious Studies in secondary schools to an extent that it is the only religion that gets much coverage in the curriculum compared to other religions. Indigenous Knowledge has aspects taught in the RS syllabus although with very low proportion as compared to Biblical stories, and the 'O' level RS examination has further worsened the situation by allocating very few marks to IK compared to Biblical related concepts. This implies that the RS curriculum from the colonial period to the present day has largely changed its name but not in content, and thus, it is still largely Bibliocentric at the expense of IK. It is against this background that the research examines the impact of Religious Studies on IK at the secondary education examination in Bubi district Matabeleland North in Zimbabwe, a culturally rich Ndebele district.

Statement of the Problem

Juxtaposing Religious Studies and Indigenous Knowledge in the classroom at 'O' level has negatively affected student's perception of their traditional culture, values and beliefs as all efforts to include IK in the RS syllabus have been cosmetic despite that the complexion of the Zimbabwean society has changed to embrace and tolerate all religions.

Research Questions and Methodology

The research herein was guided by research question such as: what is the 'O' level students' understanding of religious studies and IK; and how religious studies has impacted on secondary education students' perception of an Indigenous Knowledge system? Hence, this research employed a mixed methods design; the researchers used both qualitative and quantitative research paradigms (quantitative and qualitative paradigms are empiric, but collect different kinds of information using different methods). The use of mixed methods was an attempt to legitimize the use of multiple approaches in answering research questions, rather than restricting or constraining researchers' choices (Onwuegbuzie, 2004:17).

This study also employed purposive sampling and simple random sampling (purposive sampling involved choosing participants considered as knowledgeable and well informed) which involved four schools offering RS and four RS teachers as well as ten students who were interviewed. Simple random sampling was used in this research to select students to write an exercise on RS and IK, the scores from the exercise were analyzed using the Pearson Product Moment Correlation, a statistical tool used to understand the relationship between students' knowledge and performance in RS and IK.

Findings

The research found that the concept of IK was new to the students despite the fact that it is part and parcel of the RS curriculum. In general, pupils limited IK to the people's beliefs and customs such as burial practices and marriages only. Some further associated IK with ATR, and when such an association is perceived, the tendency was to negate IK by labeling it as 'demonic epistemologies'. Further, the study also found that teachers have difficulties in explaining and understanding IK concepts to the learners. The study found that such situations impact negatively on IK in the Zimbabwean secondary schools. In short, pupils remain rooted in Christian beliefs which receive seriousness in both the examinations and by teachers compared to IK practitioners.

The 'O' level Religious Studies examination plays a subtle role in empowering Christianity while at the same time negating IK of the Ndebele people by allocating very few marks on the concept. A closer analysis of 2012/1 paper as shown below clearly indicates how far unprepared the item writers are in to seriously include IK.

Table 1: Mark allocation in ‘O’ level RS examination

Exam concepts	Gospel stories	General Christian	Indigenous Knowledge	Other religions
Mark allocation	12	3	3	0

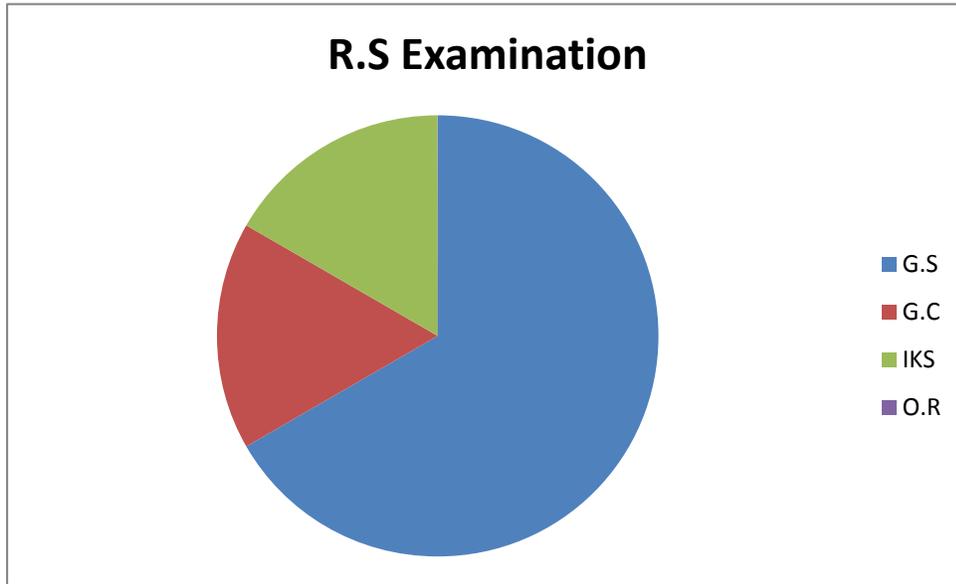


Fig. 1 Religious Studies examination allocation marks per question

Key: BS- Biblical stories, GCC- General Christian conduct, O.R-Other religions (see appendix).
 Source: Zimsec ‘O’ level 2012/1 N2012. Question 7.

Little allocation of marks by the examiners to IK indicates that the item writers do not add value or see no value in IK. This is further passed on to pupils who have realized that one can pass with flying colors without having to answer the IK concepts. So unless and until the examination begin to award IK an equal share in the examination, IK will remain an optional component which a student can or cannot answer depending on one’s interest. In essence, the teaching of IK is left to chance instead with deliberate efforts to ensure the survival of what once was valued knowledge base for the local people.

In addition, the study found that ATR is a very broad concept which has a lot of variations. Pupils come from different background, thus, they may have different interests when it comes to IK. The researchers acknowledge that the interests revealed by students indicate to some extent the interest of teachers and their capabilities in handling the area of IK.

From all the traditional issues related to IK, students were more conversant with very few aspects that they witness most of the time like marriage customs and burial rites, although they did not have a deeper understanding of these issues. Some of the pupils have participated in some rituals without a full understanding of what they were doing, thus, they turn to RS to gain understanding on this issue. While students may have some knowledge and interest in issues of marriage and burial customs in traditional African society, they were not convinced that it could be relevant academic knowledge, the study found. Seemingly, traditional leaders have performed rituals without explaining the rationale behind the ritual; leading to a consensus attitude that IK is of value on certain occasions, rather than being a lifelong experience.

Students and teachers who took part in this research indicated that they faced challenges in the teaching and learning of RS. The study found that they relied only on the use of the Bible, thus they become well conversant with Biblical stories. Students further noted that aspects taught in the IK were very challenging since they had to bank on the teacher to explain the concepts to them. Apparently, there are no textbooks that extensively covered IK in the secondary schools, thus, making it very difficult for pupils to have in depth knowledge of IK. The problem was further worsened by the fact that some of the practices were very difficult to articulate especially when one had to write an examination in English. Both teachers and students found it difficult to translate ritual names and practices from Ndebele to English. The situation made it difficult for the effective teaching and learning of IK concepts.

Teachers indicated that the elderly in the community, the custodians of most cultural values, found it difficult to articulate some concepts largely because some did not originate from the area. Only two pupils indicated that they did not have challenges in learning RS largely because they only concentrated on the material that appeared to have much weight in terms of mark allocation in the final examinations, which are the Biblical stories. The study found that students were worried about those components which would make them pass RS rather than concentrate on knowledge for the sake of it.

This research also investigated ten students' responses who wrote a test on the Biblical stories and Indigenous Knowledge concepts to ascertain whether or not there is an association in performance between Biblical stories in RS and IK. The Pearson Product Moment was used in this section largely because it uses all the scores in the distribution. The following table shows the performance of ten students in BS and IK.

Table1: Performance of ten students in BS and RS exercises.

Pupils	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J
IK	23	14	35	30	40	20	08	26	33	17
B.S	69	78	74	78	66	72	75	81	77	80

Null hypothesis: There is no correlation between students' performance in Biblical Stories and Indigenous Knowledge in RS.

X	Y	x ²	y ²	xy
23	69	529	4761	1587
14	78	196	6084	1092
35	74	1225	5476	2590
30	78	900	6084	2340
40	66	1600	4356	2640
20	72	400	5184	1440
08	75	64	5625	600
26	81	676	6561	2106
33	77	1089	5929	2541
17	80	289	6400	1360
Σ246	Σ 750	Σ 6968	Σ 56460	Σ 18296

$$r_{xy} = \frac{n\sum XY - \sum X \sum Y}{\sqrt{[n\sum X^2 - (\sum X)^2][n\sum Y^2 - (\sum Y)^2]}}$$

$$r = \frac{10 \times 18296 - 246 \times 750}{\sqrt{[10 \times 6968 - (246)^2][10 \times 56460 - (750)^2]}}$$

$$\frac{182960 - 184500}{\sqrt{[69680 - 60516][564600 - 562500]}}$$

$$\frac{-1540}{\sqrt{9164 \times 2100}}$$

$$\frac{-1540}{\sqrt{19244400}}$$

$$\frac{-1540}{4386,843968}$$

$$= -0.351049641$$

-0.35

Scale for Pearson Product Moment Correlation.

Value of ρ	Strength of relationship
-1.0 to -0.5 or 1.0 to 0.5	Very Strong
-0.5 to -0.3 or 0.3 to 0.5	Moderate
-0.3 to -0.1 or 0.1 to 0.3	Weak
-0.1 to 0.1	None or very weak

Comment

There was a very weak negative correlation between marks obtained in Biblical stories (BS) and Indigenous Knowledge components. High marks in BS were matched with low marks in IK. The written work showed that students really struggled with IK related issues while being conversant with BS. Thus, we failed to reject the null hypothesis noting that there is no correlation in performance between BS and IK.

Discussion of Findings

Indigenous Knowledge to begin with, did not have adequate place and space in the current RS syllabus in the Zimbabwean secondary school system. Pupils were immersed into Christianity. From the students' responses, it was clear that IK was not an important element in their lives, thus the traditional practices of the Ndebele have taken a back seat among the owners of the knowledge due to the influence of Christianity through the RS curriculum. In support of this, Mehta, Sharma and Negi (2010: 547) aver that the dominance of the Western knowledge has led to a prevailing situation in which IK is grossly ignored and neglected. The Western form of education with its influence has displaced local knowledge despite the known value of this local knowledge to child moral development. Everything was interpreted along Christian faith lines, thereby relegating the IK to the periphery of important academic knowledge. This concurs with Eyong's (2007:89) views that IK has suffered for decades from several strategies of disinformation embedded in Western religion, and colonial and post-colonial education practices. Furthermore, Everts (2013: 5) argues that IK is often perceived as an alternative to the overpowering, ubiquitous economic and moral system of the West which is blamed for damaging our planet and undermining not only the quality of life of future generation but even their survival. This problem was exacerbated by many factors which were operational via teachers and students' negative attitude on IK, through the lack of textbooks.

One of the major problems that continue haunting the RS curriculum in the secondary school is that the syllabus used in colonization is the same syllabus currently in use in secondary schools with superficial changes, maybe to appease a few dissenting voices. The implication was that RS philosophy has remained the same despite attempts to change the subject. This notion concurs with Zvobgo (1986) who argues that RS has only changed in its name but not in its content and methodology. Museka (2012:57) further avers that the teaching of RS has seemingly undergone numerous changes from the pre-colonial period to the present, yet in reality the changes are cosmetic as ideological of liberation development, African nationalism, renaissance and Black consciousness have failed to a larger extent to exorcise RS from the colonial jinx.

The responses from teachers indicated that the RS curriculum attached value to the multi-faith approach, yet in reality, little or no attempts are put in place to incorporate IK and other religions. The inclusion of the Muslim Qua'ran and African Traditional Religion in the aims of the syllabus, not in content, was a clear indication that these religions do not have space in the Zimbabwean secondary curriculum. Furthermore, no attempts have been made by the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education to provide Qua'ran or textbooks which cover IK in Zimbabwean secondary schools. It was clear that curriculum planners had problems with IK and other religions' share in the curriculum. Dealing with issues of religion and IK seemed to evoke emotions which translate to political issues such as the powerful and oppressed people.

IK as it stood was a contested pedagogy which unfortunately might be fighting a losing battle given that students and teachers had little or no interest in IK. In other ways, IK has suffered displacement in favour of Christian approaches impeding the politics of identity and recognition among secondary pupils of Bubi district.

Since the syllabus did not indicate what was to be learnt and to what extent it could be learnt, it left some students not clear about the rationale of teaching IK. Other syllabuses such as in Integrated Science and History were clear on the content to be learnt and the extent. It is for this reason; we strongly felt a relook into the syllabus was necessary to synchronize it with practices in other subjects in the secondary school curriculum. An ideal syllabus must have clear aims, content and methodology rather than leaving teachers and students to speculate what must be taught and learnt. In this regard, the syllabus has a weak frame which allows teachers to interpret and apply content subjectively making RS curriculum prone to abuse by churches, teachers, and educational stakeholders to push their personal, political and ideological agenda, and thus, IK becomes relegated in curriculum mainstream practices. Hoadley (2006: 4) shades light on framing by noting that it is through interaction (framing) that boundaries between discourses, spaces and subjects are defined, maintained and changed.

The rise and influence of radical Pentecostalism has rendered all prospects of reviving IK a futile exercise in that direct attacks are directed at IK, and all what it stands for, hence the greatest pitfall that African children face is the dichotomy of knowledge acquired from religious institutes and that of school. In essence, curriculum efforts to empower IK for now are met with resistance through strong opposing messages sent by the church and the school. Lack of relevant literature went a long way to show the lack of commitment of preserving and transmitting IK by educational stakeholders. Relying only on living libraries, the traditional leaders in the community, short changed students in the understanding of their own cultural heritage. The question which was critical was why so little or nothing has been written on IK? Why would educational technocrats at Curriculum Development Unit (CDU) and the Zimbabwe School Examinations Council (ZIMSEC) want IK to be taught in schools when little or no efforts to develop literature on IK and content related to IK is present? In an attempt to answer the above questions, we contend that educational stakeholders have seriously thought about accommodating IK in the curriculum, maybe are still grappling about the fundamental question of who's IK?

Learning of cultural issues should not be left to chance given the value embedded on IK. There should be deliberate attempts to teach IK in every possible place of the secondary school curriculum, it is against this reason that the research disagrees with Rogers (2003:17-18) that most of the learning we do is the acquisition learning, that traditional lifelong cultural learning takes place in societies regardless of its inscription in texts.

This kind of learning is voluntary or within the parameters of a task, the learning is concrete, immediate and confined to a specific activity. Rogers (2003:17-18)'s view is the fastest way of slaughtering IK in the Zimbabwean schools given that teachers and pupils have little or no interest in the teaching and learning IK, hence when learning is left to voluntary basis, it will be a recipe for disaster which makes Zimbabweans lose their identity and cultural heritage.

Indigenous Knowledge is a very important aspect in people's lives as it provides the framework for problem solving strategies with the context of local communities. The quest for this research was that IK be given a rightful place in the curriculum given its importance. If this is not taken seriously, IK in the curriculum hangs by a very thin thread, thereby producing children who by birth are Zimbabwean, yet by conduct are Western minded. IK endeavors to unite pupils with their cultural heritage which is part and parcel a quest of identity and recognition among the Bubi pupils. Just a tree has roots for its survival, IK plays an integral part in community sustainability in the use of local remedies which have been tested and passed through generations as a valid science for survival the people.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study concludes that along the line of Gupta (2011: 60) who eludes that IK is nowadays considered very critical because it provides so much information about traditional environmental techniques necessary for sustainable development. However, it is sad to note that IK in the secondary school curriculum does not have adequate space for its recognition among students, and faces a brutal end due to a lack of interest and knowledge among students and teachers, as the availability of literature, and a general Christian background of most students and the examination system that has allocated very few marks to IK components. And most interesting, the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education has not helped matters either, as most teachers have no requisite qualifications to teach RS as they were trained in English, Ndebele, Geography and other subjects, yet the Ministry of Education expects them to teach RS.

Further, the situation has been worsened by the fact that the syllabus is silent about what must be taught in RS. It is only through the examination that one notes that IK has to be taught. Such an anomaly affects the teaching of IK in the secondary schools in Zimbabwe. Without a stipulation of what must be taught and the extent, it means that IK remains an optional component in RS, thereby affecting the adoption of IK in the curriculum. This may explain why RS has been used to meet the needs of particular groups of people, depending on who is controlling the teaching and learning of RS.

The recognition that IK is crucial for economic and cultural empowerment of individuals (Domffer, 2007: 41) this study recommends that:

- Curriculum planners should think about introducing IK as an independent subject at the secondary school level, given its importance to child and societal development.
- The Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education should provide people to effectively teach IK in secondary schools in the same way they did with National and Strategic Studies. The idea is to have a secondary school graduate who can easily be integrated in society.
- Textbook writers should be identified and funded to produce requisite literature in IK so that the subject can be taught effectively.

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