

Indigenous Knowledge Systems Booklet

Compiled by Dabane Water Workshops



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The indicators described are traditional forecasts, not guarantees, and should be understood as cultural guidance.

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FOREWORD

Dabane Water Workshops have produced this booklet as part of our ongoing commitment to preserving and celebrating Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) in Matobo District under the Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) project. It seeks to safeguard the wisdom, practices and traditions that underpin Ndebele cultural and traditional systems.

The booklet is written for communities of Matobo District, researchers, educators and all who seek honor, learn from and carry forward the living heritage of Ndebele IKS. Thus, it is intended to serve as both a cultural archive and a resource for dialogue.

Indigenous knowledge is a living guide for present and future generations. It embodies resilience, ecological stewardship and community values that continue to shape everyday life. By documenting these practices, we honor the voices of the community who have carried this knowledge forward through oral traditions, memory and lived experience.

Information for this booklet was gathered through consultations with communities in Wards 6, 7, 8 and 9 of Matobo. It is not exhaustive, as IKS is not embodied in a single person, group, or community. As such, this is a living document, one that will continue to evolve as new insights emerge, ensuring that the heritage of Matobo endures.

Development and sustainability are strongest when rooted in the wisdom and knowledge of local communities. We hope that readers will approach this booklet with respect, curiosity and a recognition of the richness of indigenous knowledge as a vital part of shared heritage.

NB: History that is not documented is easily lost.

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GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Ndebele	English	Scientific names
Amabhethshu	Traditional hide garments	-
Amacimbi	Mopane-worms	-
Amakawule	Women's cleansing ritual	-
Amathobela	Traditional dancers	-
Amathole	Calves	-
Amayile	Sacred rain dancing	-
Ichithamuzi	Weeping Wattle	<i>Peltophorum africanum</i>
Igonde	Msasa	<i>Brachystegia spiciformis</i>
Ihosana	Ancestral deities	-
Ijuba	Dove	<i>Oena capensis</i>
Iphane	Mopane	<i>Colophospermum mopane</i>
Imisisi	Traditional hide adornments	-
Indizamtshina	Airplane	-
Inhlaba	Aloe	<i>Aloe ferox</i>
Inhloko	Cow's head	-
Inkanku	Jacobin cuckoo	<i>Clamator jacobinus</i>
Inkungu	Mist	-
Insingizi	Ground hornbills	<i>Bucorvus leadbeateri</i>
Intolwane	Eland's bean	<i>Elephantorrhiza elephantina</i>
Inyeza	Cicadas	-
Isavunguzane	Whirlwinds	-
Isafice	Ozoroa	<i>Ozoroa insignis</i>
Isidleke	Nest	-
Isigangatsha	Lannea tree	<i>Lannea-discolor</i>
Isihaqa	Sickle bush	<i>Dichrostachys cinerea</i>
Itenela	Men's cleansing ceremony	-
Itshabela	Mufuti	<i>Brachystegia boehmii</i>
Izulu	Rain	-
Njelele	Sacred shrine	-
Ogweja	Gold panners	-
Udiwo	Clay pot	-
Ugagu	Chinese lantern	<i>Dichrostachys cinerea</i>
Ukwenoliswa	Appeasement ritual	-
Umbuyiso	Ritual of bringing back spirits	-

Umbuze	Redwood	<i>Brachystegia glaucescens</i>
Umganu	Marula	<i>Sclerocarya birrea</i>
Umgeno	Harvest festival	-
Umgugudu	Bushveld saffron	<i>Elaeodendron transvaalense</i>
Umhagawuwe	Snowberry	<i>Flueggea virosa</i>
Umhlahlampethu	Green-twigs quar	<i>Psydrax livida</i>
Umhobohobo	Wild loquat	<i>Uapaca kirkiana</i>
Umkhaya	Knobthorn	<i>Senegalia nigrescens</i>
Umkhiwa	Mulberry-fig	<i>Ficus sycomorus</i>
Umkhomo	Baobab	<i>Adansonia digitata</i>
Umkhuna	Mobola plum	<i>Parinari-curatellifolia</i>
Umlotha	Ash	-
Umphafa	Buffalo thorn	<i>Ziziphus mucronata</i>
Umsusu	Red milkwood	<i>Mimusops obovata</i>
Umtewa	Donkey-berry	<i>Grewia-flavescens</i>
Umthombo	Well	-
Umthunduluka	Monkey plum	<i>Ximenia caffra</i>
Umtshwankela	Chocolate-berry	<i>Vitex-payos</i>
Umtswiri	Camel thorn	<i>Vachellia erioloba</i>
Umwawa	Black monkey orange	<i>Strychnos</i>
Uxakuxaku	Snot-apple	<i>Thespesia-garckeana</i>

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This booklet was made possible through the invaluable contributions of the people of wards 6, 7, 8 and 9 in Matobo. We extend our deepest gratitude to the community members, elderly men and women, village heads and councilors, who generously shared their wisdom, lived experiences and sacred knowledge. We also appreciate the contributions of Matobo Rural District Council stakeholders during validation meetings. By opening their hearts and minds, they have ensured that this heritage remains alive, relevant and accessible for future generations.

We also recognize that some of the information presented here was gathered and clarified through further online research, to make sense of practices and beliefs that have evolved. This combination of lived experience and systematic research enriches the documentation, ensuring that the knowledge is both authentic and comprehensible.

The collection of data through various community meetings and the printing of this booklet were made possible through the generous support of **BMZ Bengo, through Action for World Solidarity**. Their partnership has been instrumental in ensuring that this knowledge is documented, preserved and shared widely. To all who contributed, directly or indirectly, we extend our sincere gratitude. This booklet stands as a testament to your commitment, your knowledge and your enduring role as custodians of our shared cultural legacy.

DISCLAIMER

This booklet is intended as a documentation of indigenous knowledge in Matobo. The information presented herein reflects the wisdom, practices and experiences shared by community members during meetings and consultations. Much of this knowledge was conveyed verbally, relying on memory and collective recollection. As such, it may contain inherent limitations or variations.

While every effort has been made to ensure accuracy through triangulation of interviews, key informants and focus group discussions, the content should be regarded as cultural knowledge rather than scientific or technical prescriptions. Thus, as community insights deepen and new information emerges, the content may be updated to ensure continued relevance, accuracy and inclusiveness.

The photographs and images included in this booklet are not original to Dabane. They were retrieved from publicly available sources on the internet and remain the property of their respective owners. They are used here solely for illustrative purposes, to complement the documentation of IKS, without any claim of ownership.

NB: The IKS information in this booklet serves primarily as guidance for forecasting. It does not imply that when an indicator is observed, the event will occur immediately. In many cases, signs may point to changes that unfold in the following season or even a year later. This variability is especially true today, as landscapes and natural cycles have been altered by climate change.

OVERVIEW

This booklet forms part of the outputs of the IWRM project, which seeks to increase the resilience of 2,352 farming households in Matobo against climate change. By documenting and celebrating IKS, the booklet underscores the vital role that cultural wisdom plays in sustaining water resources, strengthening community participation, and ensuring climate resilience.

The voices and practices captured here complement technical interventions such as improved IWRM committee efficiency, aquifer storage and recovery systems, adoption of IWRM practices by smallholder farmers, and enhanced agroforestry and fodder production. Together, these outputs demonstrate that sustainability is achieved not only through technology and infrastructure but also through the living heritage of indigenous knowledge that continues to guide and inspire communities.

IKS is the living repository of wisdom, practices and beliefs developed over generations. Rooted in cultural, social and ecological contexts, they reflect a deep relationship with land, water and community life. In Matobo, where Ndebele and Kalanga traditions converge, IKS guides farming, water management, rain prediction, healing and conflict resolution.

Sacred sites such as *Njelele* Shrine embody its spiritual dimension, reinforcing respect and continuity. These practices sustain livelihoods, conserve biodiversity and strengthen social cohesion. Rain forecast methods prepare communities for climate extremes, while traditional medicinal knowledge provides accessible healthcare.

Conservation practices, protecting trees, avoiding overharvesting and using natural indicators for planting, promote ecological balance and resilience. Socially, IKS fosters pride, communal responsibility and cultural identity, anchoring sustainable development.

Through the IWRM project, local insights into hydrology, weather and land use enrich scientific approaches, showing that IKS is not separate from science, it enriches it. Yet modernization, migration and the passing of elders threaten the knowledge's survival. Documenting and preserving IKS is therefore both a cultural duty and a developmental necessity, ensuring that community wisdom continues to inform adaptation, policy and sustainable resource management.

THE SIGNS OF DROUGHT

PLANT INDICATORS

Withering of *umtshwankela* fruits

“Premature drying of the umtshwankela fruit is a traditional indicator that rainfall will likely bypass the area.”



Fresh umtshwankela fruit

This local observation reflects a well-founded ecological insight. Early withering of *umtshwankela* (chocolate-berry/ *Vitex-payos*) is typically caused by moisture stress, an environmental condition where both soil and atmospheric water availability are insufficient. Such stress signals a high probability of limited or delayed rainfall.

Blooming of Mopane leaves

“If mopane bursts into leaf before the rains, it’s a false promise; the land will likely stay dry.”



*Iphane/ mopane/Colophospermum mopane.
Mopane leaves on a branch*

This traditional observation carries ecological weight. Early leafing of mopane (*iphane/Colophospermum mopane*) trees is a self-protective response to heat and moisture stress, where the trees bloom prematurely to reduce water loss and shield themselves from

harsh conditions. Such behavior signals arid environmental patterns.

Abundant fruit on *umwawa* & mopane trees

“Too much fruit means the earth is trying to correct herself; drought likely follows.”



Abnormal fruiting on *umwawa* (black monkey orange/*Strychnos madagascariensis*) and mopane trees is often a stress response triggered by dry conditions. Such excessive yields signal ecosystem imbalance and foreshadow dry spells ahead.

ANIMAL INDICATORS

Excessive donkey breeding

“When donkeys multiply, we know the dry season will likely rule the land.”



Increased breeding among donkeys is often a response to ecological imbalance, an instinctive adaptation to anticipated scarcity. Such patterns serve as a natural indicator of impending drought.

Multiplying of birds, i.e. doves and ground-hornbill

“When birds cry without rest, the sky has turned its back on the land.”

An unusual increase in doves (*ijuba*)/ ground hornbills (*insingizi*) is taken as a natural warning of approaching drought, reflecting disturbed feeding and nesting patterns caused by shrinking water sources.



Abundant caterpillars & crickets

“When insects speak louder than the winds, the land is preparing for thirst.”

An unusual surge of caterpillars and the onset of crickets' songs serve as nature's omen, a warning of drought, as rising heat and parched air unsettle the balance of the ecosystem.



An increase in the number of male calves born

“A surge of bull calves is more than a blessing; it is a message inscribed in nature's womb.”

An unusual rise in calf births is read as nature's signal of looming drought, for



livestock instinctively multiply under environmental stress, securing survival against the harshness to come.

Bird nests facing east

“When birds turn their nests toward the rising sun, they are escaping the breath of coming drought.”



When birds build their nests (*izidleke*) facing east, it is considered a natural sign of impending drought. This orientation shields them from harsh western winds and rising heat, reflecting shifts in temperature and wind patterns.

ATMOSPHERIC INDICATORS

Winds blowing from many directions

“When the wind cannot decide its path, the rains lose their way too.”



Shifting wind patterns often signal unstable pressure systems and disrupted weather cycles. Such conditions are commonly associated with low rainfall.

THE SIGNS OF IMMINENT RAIN

PLANT INDICATORS

Heavy morning dew observed on vegetation

“Dew is the earth’s first breath of rain, whispered to those who know how to watch.”



The thick morning dew that settles softly upon plant leaves is regarded as a sure sign of approaching rains.

Dew formed overnight reveals air heavy with moisture. As the ground cools and droplets gather on leaves in the early hours, it signals rising humidity, nature’s quiet preparation for rainfall. At dawn, people awaken to glistening fields and shining grass, aware that such mornings often herald showers later that day or in the days to come.

Shoots on *isigangatsha*, baobab & *umkhiwa* trees

“When the first green shoots rise, the earth is telling the sky it is ready.”



When fresh shoots emerge on the *isigangatsha* (*Lannea-discolor*), baobab (*umkhomo*) and *umkhiwa*

(mallberry-fig/*Ficus sycomorus*) trees, they carry a joyful message from nature: the season of rain is approaching. The trees are usually regarded as trusted heralds of change, their tender greenery a sign that the earth has awakened and stands ready to receive rainfall. The trees sense the shift in the air long before the first drops descend.

The presence of mist

“When valleys sleep in mist, the sky is gathering its tears.”

When thick mist (*inkungu*) settles over the valleys and hills in the early morning, it is usually taken as a sure sign that rain is close. The air becomes cool and still, and the land seems to breathe quietly under the white veil, a sign that clouds are gathering and rainfall will soon follow.



Mist over the hill

New leaves on *igonde*, *itshabela* & redwood trees

“When the trees dress in new leaves, the heavens prepare to open with rain.”

When *igonde* (*msasa/ Brachystegia spiciformis*), *itshabela* (*mufuti/ Brachystegia boehmii*) & redwood (*umbuze/ Brachystegia glaucescens*) trees begin to show bright, fresh leaves, it usually signals that the soil is gaining moisture and the rains



Left: igonde, middle: itshabela, right: redwood

are drawing near. The vibrant colors reflect nature’s renewal, hinting that the land is preparing for the coming showers.

ANIMAL INDICATORS

Appearance of rain storks, snails, spiders, millipedes

“When the earth’s small travelers awaken, the sky prepares to pour.”

The sudden appearance of rain storks, snails, spiders and millipedes is usually seen as a strong sign that rain is on the way. These creatures thrive in moist conditions, and their movements signal rising humidity in the air, nature’s quiet announcement that rainfall is near.



Calls of Frogs, crickets, inkanku & insingizi

“When frogs, crickets, and birds call without pause, the clouds are likely gathering.”

As the weather changes and air pressure falls, frogs, crickets and birds such as the *inkanku* (Jacobin cuckoo) and *insingizi* grow more vocal. Their resonant calls fill the landscape, heralding the approach of rain. These sounds form part of nature’s rhythm, long regarded as a reliable sign of the wet season’s arrival.



Cicadas' Sounds

“When the cicadas sing endlessly, the air is heavy with rain yet to fall.”

When cicadas (*inyeza*) fill the air with their loud buzzing, it signals that the days are growing hotter and more humid. Their steady song is a familiar sign to many, a natural warning that the rain is likely fast approaching.



Cicadas/inyeza

ATMOSPHERIC INDICATORS

Red clouds at sunrise

“When the morning sky burns red, the clouds are gathering their strength.”

When the morning sky glows red or orange, it signals that rain is likely approaching. Traditionally, this glow is seen as the sky warming the earth before rainfall. Scientifically, the effect occurs when sunlight passes through moisture-laden air, scattering shorter wavelengths and leaving a reddish hue. The presence of this color at sunrise indicates rising water vapor in the atmosphere, affirming what traditional observers have long recognized: the environment is shifting toward rainfall.



Red clouds at sunrise

Emergence of Whirlwinds

“When the dust spins on the earth, the sky reedies its first drops.”

Small dust spirals (whirlwinds/*isavunguzane*) rising from the ground are usually

observed as signs of unstable air patterns. Locally, they are seen as nature’s playful warning that rain may follow. Scientifically, these whirlwinds form when warm air near the ground rises quickly into cooler air above, creating spinning columns of air, a phenomenon often linked to approaching storms and rainfall.



Halo around the moon

“When the moon wears a ring, the clouds are gathering their water.”

A faint halo around the moon has long been interpreted as a sign of impending rain. It is usually regarded as a

message from the sky that moisture is gathering. From a scientific perspective, the halo occurs when moonlight passes through high-altitude ice crystals in cirrostratus clouds, signaling that a weather front bringing rain is likely within the next two to three days.



In general, the appearance of a full moon is traditionally seen as a sign of an impending dry spell. Once the moon disappears, it is believed that rainfall often follows.

THE SIGNS OF ABUNDANT RAIN

PLANT INDICATORS

Trees like *umwawa*, *umtewa* and *marula* bear fewer fruits than expected

“When fruitful trees hold back their bounty, the rains are likely preparing to fill the land.”



When trees that typically yield abundant fruit, such as *umwawa*, *umtewa*

(donkey-berry/ *Grewia-flavescens*) and *marula* (*umganu*), suddenly bear little or none, it is usually interpreted as a sign of an approaching season of heavy rainfall. Elders believe that nature restores balance in this way: by withholding fruit, the trees conserve their strength for the rains ahead. From a scientific perspective, reduced fruiting often results from increased humidity and shifts in soil moisture, both of which signal that the environment is preparing for a wetter-than-usual season.

Trees like *umhagawuwe* yield abundant fruit

“When umhagawuwe trees overflow with fruit, the sky readies its bounty.”



When trees such as *umhagawuwe*

(snowberry/ *Flueggea-virosa*) bear fruit in abundance, it is usually traditionally interpreted as a sign that heavy rain is imminent. Elders understand this as nature’s preparation for renewal; the trees give generously before the rains replenish the land. Scientifically, abundant fruiting is often triggered by shifts in temperature and humidity that stimulate plant reproduction, both of which are indicators of an imminent and fertile rainy season.

Blooming of *isigangatsha* trees

“When isigangatsha blooms, the earth sings of coming rains.”



The sudden burst of blossoms is usually recognized as a clear sign that plentiful rains are near. Elders describe it as the earth’s joyful announcement of renewal, with flowers appearing just before the sky opens.

From a scientific perspective, this flowering is triggered by rising soil moisture and humidity, reliable natural indicators that a season of abundant rainfall is approaching.

ANIMAL INDICATORS

Frequent sightings of *inkanku* and *insingizi*

“When inkanku and Insingizi call often, the land is readying its bounty.”

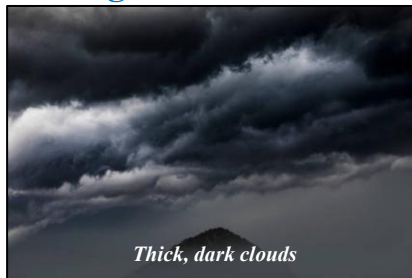


When *inkanku* and *Insingizi* are seen more often and heard calling repeatedly, it is traditionally interpreted as a sign of coming rain and fertile conditions. Locals believe their songs encourage the growth of crops and signal the land’s readiness for the wet season. From a scientific perspective, these birds increase activity in response to rising humidity and shifts in air pressure, which often precedes sustained rainfall.

ATMOSPHERIC INDICATORS

Thick, dark clouds forming over sacred hills

“When sacred hills are crowned with dark clouds, the rains are likely coming strong and long.”



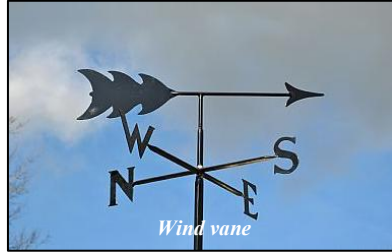
When thick, dark clouds gather over sacred hills, local communities view this as a powerful sign of heavy and long-lasting rains ahead. These clouds are seen as nature’s promise of abundant water

for the land and crops. Scientifically, the formation of such clouds occurs when warm, moist air rises and cools rapidly, condensing into dense cumulonimbus clouds, capable of producing heavy rains.

Steady cool breeze from the east

“When the eastern wind blows cool, the skies bring lasting rain.”

A steady, cool breeze blowing from the east is traditionally taken as a sign of continuous rainfall. Elders associate it with the arrival of moisture-laden winds that nourish the land. Scientifically, easterly winds can carry humid air from nearby water bodies or lowlands, promoting cloud formation and sustained rainfall over the region.



Continuous presence of mist

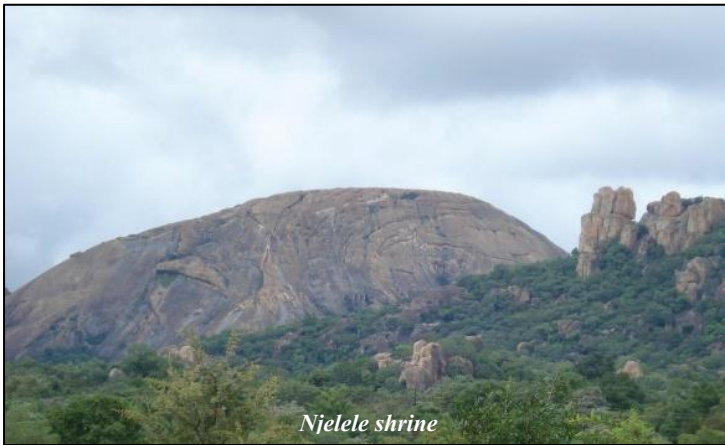
“When the land is wrapped in mist, it carries the promise of plentiful rains.”

The steady presence of mist over the landscape is traditionally viewed as fertile moisture in the air and the assurance of good rains. Elders interpret it as the earth exhaling humidity that nurtures life. Scientifically, continuous mist indicates high moisture levels and stable humidity in the lower atmosphere, conditions that support rainfall and healthy vegetation growth.



SACRED PRACTICES USED TO INVOKE RAIN

NB: Some practices are presented in the present tense while others are described in the past tense. This distinction reflects that certain traditions are still actively observed, whereas others have ceased to be practiced.



Njelele shrine

Rain-making rituals on Wednesdays

Wednesdays were revered as sacred days when the spiritual and physical worlds came into alignment. It was believed that on Wednesdays, ancestral ears were most attuned to human petitions. In particular, during the month of October, communities gathered to perform rainmaking rituals, offering prayers, songs and sacred acts to the spirits of the ancestors. Through collective prayer and ritual, people sought to restore harmony and call forth the rains to bless their fields and rivers.

The journey to eNjelele

The *Njelele* Shrine is a sacred cave in the Matobo Hills revered as a rainmaking shrine where dedicated people gather annually before the rainy season. The annual journey to *eNjelele* is a

sacred pilgrimage undertaken to invoke rain and renew harmony between the people and their ancestors. Chosen individuals, selected for their spiritual connection, *iHosana*, embark on a demanding journey on bare feet that usually lasts up to seven days. This pilgrimage embodies endurance, sacrifice, devotion and deep spiritual readiness, marking the community's collective appeal for ancestral blessings. As part of their spiritual preparation, the *ihosana* is required to observe a period of abstinence for approximately two weeks.

Upon arrival, the shrine is safeguarded by men who uphold spiritual protection and ensure that the rituals proceed undisturbed. At the heart of the ceremony are the performances of *amahosana* (ancestral deities) and *amathobela* (traditional dancers). These groups appear half-dressed in *imisisi* (traditional hide adornments) and *amabheshu* (traditional hide garments), a sign of humility and purity before the spirits. Through rhythmic dances and resonant chants, they awaken ancestral presence, channeling prayers into powerful invocations for rain.

The rituals combine physical endurance, symbolic humility and communal devotion. After completing the rainmaking ceremony and returning to the community, clouds gathering in the sky would often be witnessed immediately. Soon after, gentle drizzles would begin, eventually building into a downpour.

CLEANSING CEREMONIES

Itenela ritual

The *itenela* (men's cleansing ceremony) is a sacred rite held in October, before the onset of the rains, performed in the forest to restore balance and prepare the community spiritually,

emotionally, physically and mentally for the season ahead. On this particular day, no one is permitted to carry out field work, as the ceremony requires full respect and observance. A horn is sounded to alert the community, marking both the route taken by the cleansing team and the commencement of the ritual.

Elderly men lead the procession, moving through the landscape to gather dried bones, fallen trees, dead wood and any litter found in the surroundings. These items, symbolically linked to impurity, misfortune and lingering negativity, are burned together in a communal fire. This act of renewal clears away harmful energies and opens space for fresh blessings, reaffirming men's role as custodians of the land. During the process, any animals caught are roasted and consumed on site, never taken home, to preserve ritual purity and strengthen the bond between participants and the environment they safeguard.

The ceremony concludes with men bathing in nearby rivers, completing the cycle of cleansing and renewal. Through endurance, discipline and collective action, the *itenela* reinforces harmony between people, nature and ancestral spirits, ensuring that the community enters the new season with renewed strength, unity and spiritual readiness.

***Amakawule* ritual**

The *amakawule* (women's cleansing ritual) is a sacred rite performed in October, in preparation for the coming rains, conducted in parallel with the *itenela*. It extends far beyond ordinary cleaning, serving as a spiritual gesture of unity, renewal and readiness for ancestral blessings. Women symbolically sweep away misfortune and negativity by tidying their homes, removing dust, litter and disorder, ensuring that both household and land are purified before the rainy season begins.

This ritual affirms women's role as guardians of domestic harmony and nurturers of life, restoring balance between family, community and the natural world. The ritual is carried out by younger women who remain at the homesteads, sweeping the yards and burning household waste. In doing so, they sanctify domestic spaces in harmony with the natural environment, while the men undertake the *itenela*. This division of labour reflects complementary roles: men purify the wider landscape through the *itenela* ritual, while women sanctify homes and communal spaces through *amakawule*.

***Amayile* ritual**

“When the earth was dry, the people sang. When the people danced, the clouds remembered.”

The *amayile* was a sacred rain dance performed exclusively by elderly women (often the ones at menopause), carried out with deep reverence and spiritual intention. It was regarded as the culminating act in the rainmaking sequence, believed to hold immense ancestral power to summon life-giving rains, fertility and abundance. During the ritual, women danced unclothed, their bodies covered in *umlotha* (ash), a potent symbol of humility, surrender and readiness to commune with the spirits.

This ritual simplicity signified their willingness to speak on behalf of the entire community, petitioning for rain to bless the land. Men were strictly prohibited from witnessing the ceremony, a prohibition that safeguards its sanctity and preserves the spiritual privacy necessary for its effectiveness. The *amayile* embodied purity, openness and collective devotion, channeling ancestral guidance through rhythm and movement. By dancing in this state of vulnerability and spiritual readiness, women reaffirmed their role as intercessors between the community and the ancestral realm, ensuring renewal and abundance for the season ahead.

GENERAL IKS IN MATOBO

Cultural Norms and Social Practices

- In traditional households, women are not permitted to host visitors in the absence of the husband, a practice that upheld respect for family hierarchies.
- The preparation and consumption of *inhloko* (a slaughtered cow's head) was reserved exclusively for men, symbolizing cultural rites of men as the head of the household, showing responsibility and reverence.
- The communal practice of “*Isiphala senkosi*,” meaning ‘the chief’s granary,’ among the *Ndebele* involves collective labor in the chief’s fields, from planting to harvesting. The yield is later distributed to the vulnerable, such as the sick and elderly, thereby reinforcing social solidarity.
- Certain tree species are traditionally observed as indicators of water presence in a given area. If such trees are found growing there, it signifies that underground water is available. Examples include *umkhaya* (knobthorn), *umkhiwa* and *umtswiri*.
- During intense rainstorms, it is customary for the firstborn or the lastborn to take a pick or a hoe and strike deeply into the ground. This act is believed to have the power to immediately halt the storm before it can cause damage.

Sacred Trees and Environmental Stewardship

- Certain trees, including the *Umkhuna* (Mobola plum/*Parinari-curatellifolia*), *Umhobohobo* (Wild loquat/*Uapaca kirkiana*), Snot-apple (*uxakuxaku/Thespesia-garckeana*) and Marula (*Unganu*), were strictly protected. These practices preserved natural resources while serving practical purposes: wild-harvested foods

provided essential nutrition during dry seasons and wild fruit trees diverted wildlife from damaging crops.

- Ceremonies around sacred trees protected fields from wild animals, illustrating the spiritual and ecological linkages in traditional practices.
- Specific medical trees are valued for their healing properties (*See page 30*).
- Bark for medicinal use is only harvested from the east side, for the sustainability of the tree.

Water and Agricultural Practices

- Wells (*imithombo*) were traditionally dug exclusively by men, as cultural beliefs prohibited women from participating in well-digging. It was thought that because women's reproductive cycles eventually cease, their involvement could symbolically cause the water to stop flowing. Men, on the other hand, were seen as continuous producers, which gave them significance as the rightful custodians responsible for digging wells.
- Rainwater collection from rooftops into large clay pots (*udiwo*) and channeling water into wells are critical methods to retain moisture for crops.
- Communities practiced moderation in harvesting daily needs for vegetables, fruits, firewood and fish, to prevent over-exploitation. Dead branches were used for firewood, ensuring living trees remained unharmed.
- During the farming season, pests that destroyed crops were rarely referred to by their actual names. Instead, they were spoken of through indirect expressions. For example, instead of directly saying, *birds are feeding on small grain crops*, or *rats are feeding on groundnuts*, they would rather say *indizamtshina*

(airplanes) for birds, or *ogweja* (gold panners) for rats. It was believed that naming these forces directly would cause them to multiply even more, so euphemisms served both respect and protection.

- Wetlands were traditionally not to be fenced off or dug up, as it was believed that natural resources function best in their original settings. Interference was thought to diminish their effectiveness and vitality.

Rituals and Ceremonial Practices

- Firewood selection respected spiritual customs: *Umtswiri*, *Umphafa* and *Ichithamuzi* are not used as fuel due to their ritual significance.
- *Umgeno* (Harvest Festival) celebrated the successful harvest with community festivities.
- *Umbuyiso* (ritual of bringing back the spirit of the deceased) involves welcoming the spirit of a deceased family member back into the home temporarily.
- *Ukwenoliswa* (appeasement ritual) is performed as a purification ritual to remove misfortune and restore harmony.
- Mountains held sacred significance and climbing some was strictly forbidden.

Sustainable Practices in Daily Life

- People only gathered food that was necessary for daily survival, showing respect for nature and promoting sustainable living.
- Fishing and firewood collection were carefully moderated to maintain ecological balance.
- Traditionally, *amacimbi* (Mopane-worms) were cooked in open pots, as it was believed that preparing them this way would ensure their continued abundance each season when they were due.

- The above practices reflected a belief that caring for the environment encouraged rainfall and spiritual favor.

Medicinal Plants & Healing Practices

Some of these plants and trees are highly valued for their medicinal properties and continue to be widely utilized.

Plant	Use
<i>Isihaqa</i>	Stomach ailments. It is also termed the African Antibiotic
<i>Unganu</i>	Detoxification and gut cleansing
<i>Intolwane</i>	Gut cleansing
<i>Umgugudu</i>	Gut cleansing
<i>Iphane</i> roots	Sexually Transmitted Illnesses (e.g. Syphilis)
<i>Umsusu</i> and <i>Isafice</i>	Stomach ailments
<i>Ugagu</i> and <i>Umthunduluka</i>	Sexually Transmitted Illnesses
<i>Umhlahlampethu</i> root	Wounds
<i>Iphane</i> leaves	Steaming for flu
<i>Inhlaba</i>	Given to sick chickens
<i>Ithetshane</i>	Coughing
<i>Umwawa</i> seeds	Eye infections in livestock
<i>Umkhomo</i> fruit	High blood pressure
<i>Uphoko</i>	Gut cleansing

WHY THESE PRACTICES ARE DECLINING

“Echoes Fading: The Vanishing Voice of Tradition”

Cultural Changes

Indigenous knowledge is increasingly shaped by the blending of diverse cultures. Intermarriages, urbanization and cultural hybridity have merged traditions, often weakening the continuity of rituals and practices that were once rooted firmly within specific communities.

Certain trees once central to medicinal practices have been exploited and cut down for economic gain. This unsustainable use has diminished their presence and availability, largely due to the absence of properly enforced bylaws to safeguard them.

Another reason for the reduced reliance on indigenous medicinal practices is the absence of standardized dosages. Remedies are often prescribed vaguely, such as being told to ‘drink a bit,’ yet the quantity is difficult to define. This lack of precision can lead to overdosing, which may be harmful, or underdosing, which may render the treatment ineffective. The issue remains unresolved, though it is hoped that proper dosage data will eventually be documented once systematically established.

Shifting Beliefs

Modern science and technology are increasingly regarded as more reliable than traditional methods for predicting weather and managing agriculture. At the same time, certain religious institutions discourage cultural practices, further limiting their acceptance. Consequently, many young people grow up

without fully engaging with the knowledge once held by their elders, leading to a widening gap in cultural transmission.

The introduction of modern policies and human rights frameworks has contributed to a reduced reliance on IKS. Certain cultural practices, such as rituals that required participants to walk unclothed, were regarded as significant acts within traditional contexts. However, these practices have been curtailed, as human rights standards often prohibit or disregard them.

Impact of Technology and Modern Life

The advent of weather forecasting tools, modern farming techniques and widespread access to scientific information has diminished reliance on traditional practices. Knowledge that was once indispensable for survival is increasingly regarded as supplementary or symbolic, rather than as a practical foundation for daily life. Science has also altered our minds to disregard IKS.

Loss of Knowledge Bearers

Indigenous medicinal plants and healing practices have long been preserved and transmitted through oral tradition. While this method has sustained communities for generations, the greatest risk today is that oral transmission alone has led to distorted views and fragmented understandings of these practices.

The elderly custodians of this wisdom, those who hold the deepest knowledge of plant uses, rituals and healing methods, are passing on, and much of their insight is not being systematically documented. Without these knowledge bearers, many practices risk disappearing entirely, leaving communities vulnerable to cultural erosion and the loss of vital ecological and medicinal heritage. Documenting, harmonizing and

safeguarding this knowledge is therefore not only a matter of cultural pride but also of health, sustainability and intergenerational continuity.

CONCLUSION

This booklet has sought to document and celebrate the richness of the Matobo community's indigenous knowledge, its language, rituals, plants and practices that continue to shape community life. By translating traditional terms into English and scientific names, we bridge the gap between ancestral wisdom and modern understanding, ensuring that these treasures are not lost but carried forward. Indigenous knowledge is more than heritage; it is a living resource for sustainability, identity and resilience. In a world facing ecological and cultural challenges, these traditions remind us of the value of balance, respect and interconnectedness. As custodians of this knowledge, we are called to honor it, practice it and share it with future generations. In doing so, we affirm that indigenous wisdom is not a relic of the past, but a guiding light for the present and the future.

CONTACT

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Indigenous Knowledge Systems of the Matobo people

A cultural treasure and a practical resource —
inspiring readers to learn from and carry forward
the living wisdom of Matobo.

Synopsis

Indigenous knowledge of Matobo is a living archive of wisdom passed down through generations. Rooted in Ndebele and Kalanga traditions, this booklet captures the signs of drought, imminent rain, and abundant rainfall through plants, animals, and atmospheric indicators, blending cultural insight with ecological science. These signs are not absolute promises but forecasts, gentle signals from nature that guide communities to prepare and adapt. From the sacred rainmaking rituals at Njelele Shrine to cleansing ceremonies and everyday sustainable practices, the booklet highlights how heritage and resilience intertwine.



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