



Decolonising research:

An interview with Bagele Chilisa

Bagele Chilisa, interviewed by David Denborough

Bagele Chilisa is a Professor at the University of Botswana where she teaches research methods and evaluation courses. Her recent books include Educational Research: Towards Sustainable Development, Research Methods for Adult Educators in Africa, and Indigenous Research Methodologies. Indigenous Research Methodologies is the first textbook that situates research in a larger, historical, cultural and global context and draws on Indigenous knowledge from the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Africa, and Asia. Her research focuses on the development of research methodologies that are relevant, context specific and appropriate in African contexts and other culturally complex communities. She writes about and practices research methodologies that make visible the voices of those who continue to suffer oppression and discrimination on the basis of sex, race/ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, or social class. Bagele Chilisa can be contacted c/o CHILISAB@mopipi.ub.bw

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Abstract

In this interview, Motswana postcolonial scholar Professor Bagele Chilisa discusses strategies for decolonising research, resisting the domination of Western knowledge, working with Indigenous worldviews, and introducing accountability and collaboration with people and communities who are the subjects of research. This piece has been created from two sources – a conversation between Bagele Chilisa, Cheryl White and David Denborough that took place in Gaborone, Botswana on 23 August 2018 and Bagele's keynote presentation, *Equality in diversity: Indigenous research methodologies*, at the 2015 American Indigenous Research Association Conference.¹

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DD: Can we begin by you speaking a bit about your history in relation to decolonising research?

BC: For me, decolonising knowledge systems is a part of resistance against the domination of Western knowledge. I believe research needs to have a clear stance against the political, academic and methodological imperialism of whatever time and place we are in. I went to the University of Botswana for my first degree, and at that time, South Africa was fighting for independence. A lot of our lecturers were actually freedom fighters. At secondary school we learnt from the history textbooks that Cecil John Rhodes had discovered and founded Rhodesia. At University the lecturers were quick to tell us that Cecil John Rhodes was an imperialist and that his naming of Rhodesia was a form of cultural imperialism. I started learning a lot about imperialism.

I then went to the University of Pittsburgh to do my doctoral degree and the lecturers there were really interesting. One day a professor started talking about American heroes and forefathers, and started talking of George Washington. And I said, 'okay, so he was a hero, how come he kept slaves?' Everybody was so shocked that I would ask such a question. The good thing was that the University of Pittsburgh didn't think there was anything wrong with me asking. They thought it was a standpoint, that I was talking from a certain point of view and they encouraged critical thinking.

At that time, there was a big debate between two research paradigms – the qualitative paradigm, sometimes called the interpretive or constructivist paradigm, and the postpositivist paradigm, which is quantitative. The professors would debate to an extent that I would think, oh my god, they are going to physically fight! This helped me to realise that you can always debate your standpoint.

When I left the University of Pittsburgh to return to Botswana, I was confronted with the huge problem and devastation of the HIV pandemic. One of the first research projects I was involved in was on the impact of HIV/AIDS on the education system. I found myself doing research partnered with some people from the UK who were providing the funds. The person who called himself the 'principal investigator' came up with a review of literature. This review of literature was about how the pandemic was getting worse because according to the report, the Batswana love sex and so on and so on. It had all the stereotypes you could imagine.

I said to him, 'Oh my god, I'm a part of this research and people are going to read this'. I said, 'When you are talking about "Botswana", you are talking about me. All these stereotypes you are citing from the literature, it's about me, I can't possibly write about myself in that manner'. In response he said, 'No, no, no ... this is what is in the literature. We are going to cite verbatim from the literature. We cannot ignore the literature'.

This was my starting point. I saw how mainstream Western research was describing us in Botswana, how the problem of HIV/AIDS was being portrayed. From that day on, I said to myself, there has to be other ways of doing research!

I started thinking hard about how I could be involved in research that would describe people in a manner that they would recognise themselves.

DD: Your descriptions of that initial colonising literature review was very powerful to me. Can I ask you about the ways you conceptualise a 'literature review' now? In many contexts there remains a dominant idea about what sorts of literature should be included in a formal literature review and which should not, and decisions are made about this according to Western concepts and standards. I know that you speak powerfully about honouring diverse forms and literature, and also about ways of critiquing formal literature. I'd be very interested in hearing your thoughts on both of those themes.

BC: For Indigenous people, our literature is in our songs, our language, our proverbs, our architecture, our baskets – have you seen the baskets in Botswana? They tell stories through their patterns. These artefacts are literature. Sometimes folklore, folk tales, can also be considered literature depending on how you wish to use them.

What is important is the rigour of the review. For me, a literature review, first of all, involves an overview of a particular *type* of literature that you want to use. For example, if you wish to use only written published literature then explain why. If you wish to use oral traditions (because perhaps formal written literature does not exist about a particular concept you wish to focus on), then start with an overview about the concept of oral traditions, how they exist in different cultures and so on, and then narrow the focus to the particular oral traditions or legends you wish to use and how you wish to do so. Similarly, if you are using artefacts.

There are complexities, however. Sometimes when you draw upon knowledge that is transmitted through the oral tradition, it can be made to appear like it's newly created literature when, in actual fact, it has existed for so long.

So, what do you do when you do a literature review? Is published written literature the only literature you are going to include? Or are you going to use other sources as literature, such as songs, artefacts, oral tradition and folklore? These are not only questions for Indigenous researchers. These are questions that everyone can ask themselves if we want to mainstream Indigenous research methodologies and if we want to resist academic imperialism. Academic imperialism is when we conceptualise our research based only on the literature of the West.

The other thing that I speak and write about relates to critiquing the deficit-based literature that often dominates the formal written literature.

DD: Yes, this is real issue for a number of researchers I know. In attempting to do their formal literature review, they find themselves reading so many pathologising or colonising descriptions, at times it can be rather overwhelming and dispiriting.

BC: Yes, what if the formal literature that the researcher reviews is deficit-based, and infused with negative stereotyping? And what if the language used is exclusive of some of the concepts that you'd find in the local people's language system? We can't remain captive to what is contained in existing literature. When you do your review, are you challenging the prejudices that arise from the literature that you read? What is the body of Indigenous knowledge that can resist or challenge the dominant theories?

The good news is that the researcher does not have to be isolated in this. You don't have to be the only one critiquing; the community can also critique. For instance, you can bring what has been written about Botswana by outsiders, including some statements that are loaded, and read this out to the community that is being described, so that they can speak back. Depending on how you want to do it, perhaps you can involve five or ten elders and read them some parts of the literature. This means the critique of the colonising or pathologising literature is not only coming from you, the academic, but from the actual people who

have been talked about. What do *they* think about what has been written? Do they think it's a true image of who they are and what they do and what is happening? This helps to bring in this concept of co-research, researching *with* the community, because you bring in their views on what the literature is saying.

DD: I love that! Can I turn also to what's called in Western paradigms, 'data analysis'? You have written about how, within any culture, there are traditions of processing and producing knowledges, whether it's the Chief's palace, the shrines, the religious centres and so on. I'd be interested in hearing more about using cultural forms of processing and producing knowledge, and also how researchers can involve the people who are researched in 'analysis' and in 'validating' research findings.

BC: When researchers consider data analysis there is always talk of validity. I am interested in the concept of Indigenous or multicultural validity. I think it's an important concept that helps us to think through how data is analysed. Indigenous or multicultural validity, to me, means considering how your findings will be validated by the research participants. Some people say, 'Hey, I have interviewed the person, and I've then I've read out what I have written about the interview (the analysis), and I've asked them if that is what they meant and so on, isn't this sufficient?'

I say no, that is not sufficient. To me, the concept of validity also speaks to the question of whether the people feel that what has been produced is *relevant* to them, to their problems, to their challenges. So this sort of validity involves not only 'this is what we found' but also responding to the question, 'Is what I'm reporting still addressing what is relevant to the community and helpful to the community?' From an Indigenous perspective, when we start to acknowledge communities as arbitrators of quality, this brings validity.

This way of conceptualising validity forces you to communicate findings in a way that addresses the prioritised challenges of the community. Validity is therefore about relevance and resonance: how do your findings resonate with the culture of the people?

Speaking of culture and validity, I am also very interested in Indigenous concepts of validity. For

instance, we can draw from the Swahili – an African language and culture – to talk about validity as:

- ukweli, which is truth
- kujetolea, which is commitment
- utulivu, which is peacefulness and harmony
- uhaki, which is justice and fairness
- ujamaa, which is all about community (Reiverre, 2004).

Most Indigenous communities are interested in relationships. So a key question in relation to validity from an Indigenous perspective is 'Do the results build relationships?' Do the findings build relationships? Do the findings make the community stronger?

Imagine research that brings conflict between communities. That is not valid research. From a Swahili tradition, validity is when there is truth, commitment, peace, harmony, justice, fairness and a concern for community relationships.

DD: Can you share an example that illustrates the significance of involving local community, the 'researched' in the 'data analysis'?

BC: Let me tell you a story about an intervention in Africa. The intervention was on mosquito nets and there are many such interventions. An organisation gave mosquito nets to a certain community in Kenya, because they wanted to prevent deaths of newborn babies from malaria. The mosquito nets were given to the mothers without consulting the fathers. Some of the fathers took the mosquito nets and used them for fishing because they wanted to feed the family and the family needed protein.

How should we analyse this data? Analysis is about interpretation. Some might say, okay, these fathers, they took the nets because this is representative of patriarchy, they are in control and so on. But another person who respects the worldviews of the community might say, 'Well, were the fathers consulted when these mosquito nets were being given away? Did the giving of mosquito nets build relationships in communities?' Certainly they caused a lot of fighting.

If a researcher is coming from a deficit model, the findings may be written to denigrate the fathers.

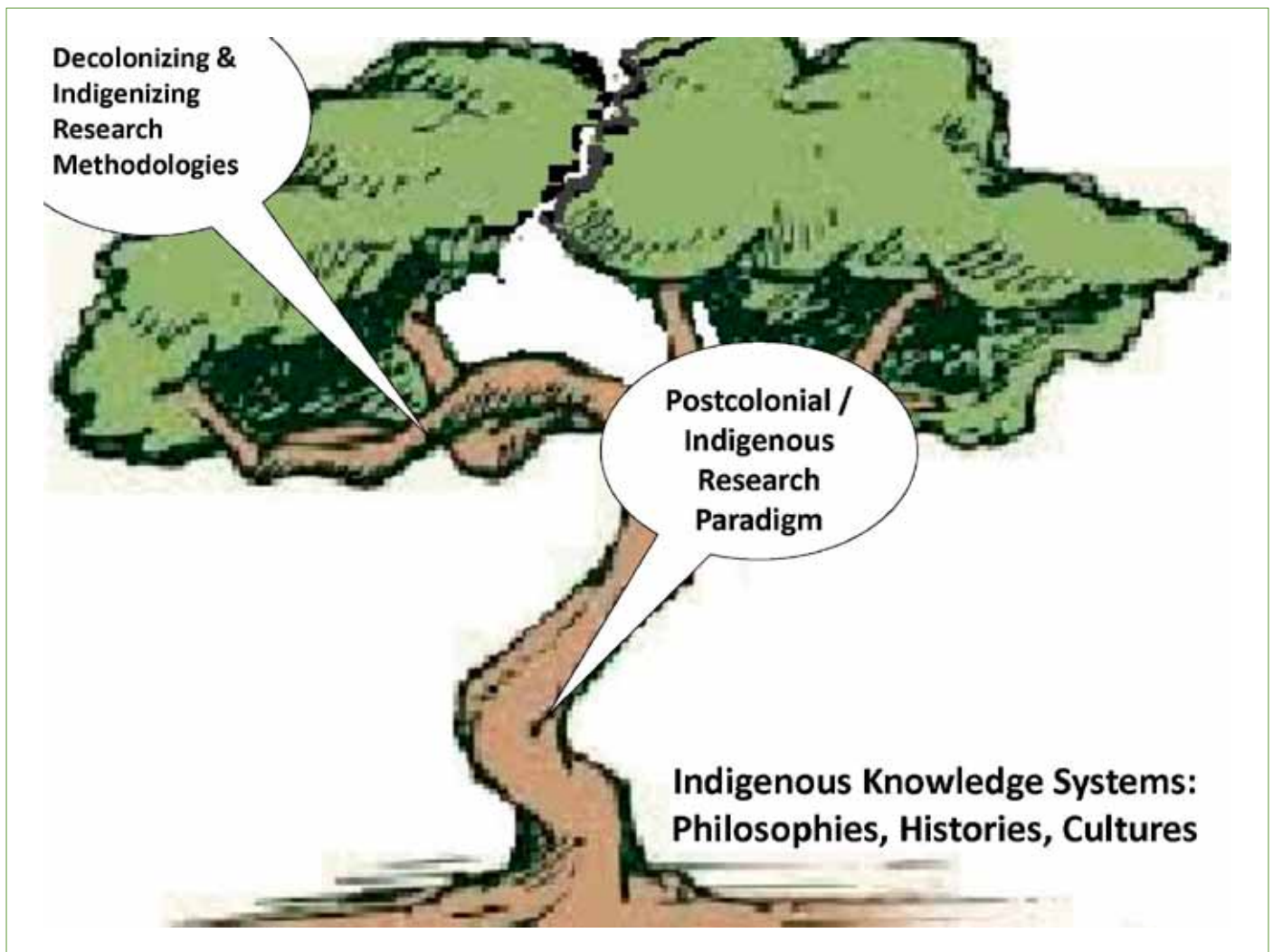
The ways the intervention influenced relationships, on the other hand, may not be part of the analysis. This example illustrates to me the necessity of bringing in the worldviews of the people to help us in data analysis. The interpretation of findings should be helped by an understanding of the worldviews of the people being researched.

If the researcher only used the technical numbers – so many mosquito nets were given out, so many men are using these mosquito nets for fishing – then so much meaning will be lost. In the majority of African communities, building and sustaining relationships is a very important aspect of community life. And so it should be a part of what is reported in research findings – what influence did this research have on relationships?

This focus on relationships brings us to considerations of accountability – accountability of yourself as a researcher, and accountability of the communities. How are you accountable? How is the community accountable? How does this research build relationships? And how is this research relevant to the concerns of the community? I believe that these are key questions when it comes to data analysis and the validity of research findings.

DD: I am already looking forward to sending this interview to our colleagues! On another note, I've heard you speak using a tree metaphor to evoke the flourishing of Indigenous research.

BC: Yes, I am starting to imagine an Indigenous research tree that depicts a family of research methodologies that draw from Indigenous knowledge, and the histories, languages, metaphors, worldviews, philosophies and experiences of formerly colonised, historically marginalised communities. I'm thinking that one day this tree will have so many branches, and each of those branches will illustrate a model, a methodology. It may be from the Native Americans, it may be from Australia, it may be from New Zealand or Botswana. The roots of this tree are Indigenous knowledge systems – the philosophies, the histories, the cultures; the stem/trunk relates to the postcolonial or Indigenous research paradigm that provides the foundation for many diverse methodologies (branches). Why don't we paint this tree of many branches to illustrate what we are doing?



DD: Can I also ask you about bringing together different worldviews in research, combining Indigenous and Western methods? I recall you describing how Indigenous peoples know all about exclusion and that perhaps one treasured value of many Indigenous cultures is inclusiveness. I'm paraphrasing here, but you made a link to how Indigenous research doesn't seek to be exclusive, and how it has the potential to bring together different worldviews. While dominant Western research paradigms have excluded Indigenous views, you speak about how many Indigenous researchers include both Indigenous and Western perspectives.

BC: Yes. We Indigenous peoples, we formerly colonised, we know how it is to be excluded, therefore an Indigenous research methodology is not exclusive of other knowledge systems, because if it is, then it loses the value, our values as Indigenous people, as First Nations, as African people, of embracing others. Indigenous research methodologies can be integrative, that is, combine

Western and Indigenous theories. And they can also be predominantly Indigenous.

I think we're very lucky today because there are many models of bringing Indigenous and Western approaches together. For example, in Canada, Mi'kmaq Elder Albert Marshall describes the 'Two-eyed seeing/Etuaptmumk' approach (Bartlett, M. Marshall & A. Marshall, 2012; Bartlett, M. Marshall, A. Marshall & Iwama, 2015).

This is a way of accepting that there are limitations in the Western perspective, but there may also be limitations in an Indigenous perspective, so we bring this together to take the best from each, to give a comprehensive picture of what can be. Because, you see, when we do research, we are not only talking about what is, but we are also talking about what can be. We are talking about hope. We are talking about the future. And when you talk about hope and you talk about the future and about what can be, then bringing knowledge systems together and taking the best from each is perhaps the best thing that can happen.

I recall a biomedical study by Berger-Gonzalez, M. et al. (2016) that involved traditional healers and Western doctors. It carefully explored how particular problems were framed, conceptualised and handled from both perspectives. The article really intrigued me. In parts it is quite funny because the Western doctors were so incredulous about the beliefs of the traditional healers: 'Really? You really do this?' And then the traditional healers were so astonished at the beliefs and actions of the Western doctors: 'Really? Do you really do this?' And then they talked together, respected each other's worldview and acknowledged there was something to be gained from both in order to come up with what is best for the future.

DD: Finally, is there anything in particular you would like to say to Indigenous Australian practitioners who are just beginning their research?

BC: I don't know what I would say, but I would have questions I would like to ask them. For anyone involved in Indigenous research methodologies, there must be a story that is driving you to do what you want to do. I would be interested in asking them, 'what is your story?'

And if they asked me about my stories, I might tell them I was lucky because as I was growing up, my father started the decolonisation of my mind and it has helped me to see beyond what the Western paradigm would allow me to see.

I might also tell them that I have a totem. My totem is a crocodile, so I cannot kill a crocodile and instead revere it. I see myself, I associate myself,

with the crocodile. In Botswana, everybody has a totem. These sorts of connections and relationships with other people, with the universe, with the environment are precious. When we do research, and when we do interventions, we have to make sure that those interventions don't interfere with such connectedness.

Perhaps I would also pose them some further questions. How can our research accommodate the spiritual and the material reality? Among some people, before you start research, you may have to perform some ritual. How can our research access the nonmaterial, that is, what methods are we going to use to access the nonmaterial reality that is part and parcel of the people? And how can our research advance the material and spiritual interests of our communities? How can our research contribute to the African or Indigenous renaissance?

I'll end with this quotation from one of my heroes Kwesi Prah (1999) who says:

We cannot in all seriousness study ourselves through the eyes of other people's assumptions. I am not saying we must not know what others know or think of us, I am saying we must think for ourselves like others do for themselves. (Prah, 1999, p. 37)

Note

1. To view the entire lecture, see: www.youtube.com/watch?v=B-SYnx8kRFU

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