


# Chapter 11


## Nature as a Means of Preserving Siswati Indigenous Knowledge Systems

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter aims to highlight the importance of nature and describe how it sustains Siswati indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) in Eswatini. Grounded in the Biocultural Diversity Framework and descriptive qualitative design, data for analysis was collected from secondary sources. Thematic analysis was employed to explore how nature supports traditional Siswati practices, beliefs, and knowledge systems. The results revealed that traditional food, medicine, attire and religious practices are embedded in natural features. The study also found that challenges such as land deforestation, wildfires and overharvesting contribute to the scarcity of plants and trees as well as animal products used for traditional medicines and food. Strategies that could alleviate some of these challenges such as environmental acts, establishing botanical gardens and involving conservatory stakeholders were proposed. Therefore, this study contributes to a deeper understanding on the relationship between biocultural diversity and Siswati IKS, offering insights into their maintenance.*

### INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

In an era of rapid globalisation, cultural diversity faces increasing pressure as indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) become vulnerable to erosion (Blench, 2001; Magocha, et al., 2019). This has led to people adopting modernisation and technology while neglecting IKS practices. For many African communities, indigenous knowledge is a foundational element, encompassing generations of wisdom, beliefs, and practices developed through a close relationship with nature (Chikaire, 2012). IKS have played a

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critical role in enhancing the resilience of African communities in the face of health crises, serving as a vital resource across different historical periods, including during and after the end of colonial rule (Mzimela & Moyo, 2024).

These knowledge systems are deeply embedded in cultural practices, stories, languages, oral traditions, songs, dances, ceremonies, and daily life activities, shaping both individual identities and the shared heritage of communities (Bruchac, 2014). Key characteristics of IKS include affordability, cultural relevance, experiential creativity, inclusiveness, adaptability, support for local decision-making, and oral transmission across generations (Mokhutso, 2021). Within this framework, nature stands as both a repository and a vehicle for preserving indigenous knowledge. Through interactions with the natural world, communities such as those speaking Siswati are able to protect and pass down their cultural knowledge to future generations.

Siswati, one of the official languages of Eswatini and South Africa, holds an extensive store of indigenous knowledge woven into its language, rituals, and environment-based cultural practices (Muswazi, 2001; Manyatsi, 2011; Matfunjwa, 2022). For Siswati-speaking communities, nature is more than a mere setting; it is a vibrant force, rich with spiritual, medicinal, and practical importance that underpins human existence (Sherman, 2020). Social, economic and cultural life of a society is influenced by its immediate environment such as flora, vegetation, animals, rivers, waterfalls, their climate, the sea, the moon and the sun. It is through nature that inhabitants find meaning and healing through norms, cultural and religious practices. These natural elements influence belief systems, seasonal practices, livelihoods, and communal rituals. Through engagement with nature, individuals and communities derive meaning, healing, and identity, which are expressed and preserved through Siswati norms, cultural and religious practices.

## **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

The components of Siswati IKS, including traditional food, medicine, attire, cultural beliefs and practices, are deeply reliant on nature for their survival. Elements of natural environment, such as plants, trees, animals, waterfalls and rivers, serve as essential resources for sustaining these practices. In particular, plants, trees, and animals provide raw materials necessary for producing traditional medicine and facilitating healing practices. Despite the importance of IKS in Eswatini, there is limited documentation of indigenous knowledge, especially concerning the use of plants and trees for medicinal purposes (Dlamini, 2001). The dominance of oral tradition has played a major role in the under-documentation of IKS because it has been transmitted orally for several decades. Indigenous knowledge was generated through lived experiences such as rituals, songs, storytelling, and socio-economic practices, and it was preserved through word of mouth (Manyatsi, 2011). The heavy reliance on verbal transmission led to IKS not being written down (Malapane, Chanza & Musakwa, 2024). This factor was also accompanied by illiteracy as some people who practised IKS could not write, making it less likely to be written but preserved through lived experiences. Despite this, Africans have used traditional plants and wild animals as medicine for many years, long before modern medicine arrived. This interdependence between nature and Siswati culture has endured for centuries. However, irresponsible actions by members of communities, such as human settlement, deforestation, and overhunting, directly threaten the relationship between emaSwati and their ecosystems. Similarly, Vilakati (2001) observes that Eswatini's biodiversity faced degradation due to factors like commercial agriculture and deforestation. Stears et al. (2016) note

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