

## *Ngano* as a Method: Reclaiming African Indigenous Epistemologies in Research

*Enet Mukurazita, University of Minnesota ([mukur002@umn.edu](mailto:mukur002@umn.edu))*

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# *Ngano* as a Method: Reclaiming African Indigenous Epistemologies in Research

*Enet Mukurazita, University of Minnesota ([mukur002@umn.edu](mailto:mukur002@umn.edu))*

## **Abstract**

*Ngano* is a traditional Shona storytelling practice used as an Indigenous research method in African culture, seeking to bring back African ways of knowing often overlooked by Western research that focuses on individualism, data collection, and written records. *Ngano* relies on relational validity, meaning that truth and meaning are created together through social connections and group participation, and is built on three main principles: storytelling as a way to pass down history and knowledge, relational knowledge utilizing cultural practices to build trust, and oral and embodied practice valuing songs, gestures, and emotions as valid information sources. These ideas are put into practice through *Rungano Rwako* (individual storytelling) and *Gungano* (group gatherings), which makes participants into *Sarungano*, or keepers of knowledge. Guided by *Ubuntu* ethics, *Ngano* offers a decolonial, relational, and people-focused way to do research.

## **Key words**

*Ngano*, Shona Epistemology, Indigenous Research Methodologies, Ubuntu, Storytelling, Decoloniality, Zimbabwe.

## Introduction

Epistemological foundations fundamentally shape how we define and validate knowledge, guiding our research methods. Research is inherently cultural. Ignoring these foundations risks applying unsuitable approaches to different communities, as assumptions about valid knowledge affect our methods. Historically, Western epistemologies have marginalized alternative knowledge systems by promoting an individualistic approach to inquiry. Within this framework, knowledge is frequently conceptualized as an object to be extracted, discovered, or owned by researchers, with a strong emphasis on the written word and statistical significance as primary indicators of truth.

Traditional African knowledge systems, particularly those of the Shona people in Zimbabwe, conceptualize knowledge as dynamic and communal in nature. According to Owusu-Ansah and Mji (2013), knowledge and its investigation are deeply embedded in historical and cultural contexts, making them inseparable from the lived experiences of the community. While Western research often prioritizes objective detachment, Shona epistemology emphasizes relational validity, which holds that knowledge is legitimate if it resonates with collective experience, fosters social harmony, and aligns with the community's moral values. In this framework, truth is not isolated and discovered independently; rather, it is remembered and negotiated through communal relationships.

The dominance of Western paradigms has historically influenced policies and programs that promote Western norms while neglecting or discarding Indigenous and local knowledge. It shapes which voices are heard, determines which problems are prioritized, and legitimizes which solutions, transforming knowledge creation into a tool controlling narratives, resources, and power instead of promoting inclusion and mutual understanding. These paradigms often

overlook local language, symbolism, and norms such as ‘unhu’ (being human) that shape how participants respond to research protocols and questions. Methods that ignore local traditions may misrepresent results and reduce participant engagement. Wen et al. (2025) highlight that when research ignores local traditions, it risks low validity and participant alienation.

In Western epistemology, knowledge is often seen as something linear and limited that can be stored, patented, or owned. In contrast, Shona epistemology sees knowledge as always changing and cyclical. For the Shona, researchers are knowledge stewards who work with a shared inheritance, rather than just individuals collecting data. Here, ignorance is not simply a lack of information; it is a break from the community, ancestors, and the natural world. Western research can misrepresent these local realities, which is not only an academic mistake but can also be an act of epistemic violence that weakens the important connections between the community and their shared truth.

Ideally, research methodologies should align with the community’s epistemological frameworks. To challenge dominant paradigms, Smith (2012) proposed prioritizing marginalized voices through storytelling. Storytelling offers a culturally grounded methodology that centers participants' narratives to produce knowledge reflecting a holistic worldview (Archibald, 2008; Chilisa, 2012). Owusu-Ansah and Mji (2013) contend that, within African knowledge systems, storytelling functions as an oral, relational, and community-based method. It serves both as a data collection tool and as an ethical practice that fosters trust and co-creation between researchers and participants.

This paper explores *Ngano*, a traditional African storytelling practice, as a culturally grounded research methodology. By aligning interviews with local understandings of story and

communal wisdom, *Ngano* challenges Western epistemic dominance and promotes a research framework where the pursuit of truth is inseparable from the pursuit of human connection.

### ***Ngano*- the Shona Folktale as Epistemic Foundation**

*Ngano* is a communal storytelling tradition of the Shona people of Zimbabwe. As a performative and participatory approach, it engages listeners through active involvement and shared meaning. As Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1986) and Vambe (2001) note, storytelling is a social, spiritual act of knowledge production. Similarly, Kayanja (2021) agrees that African identities connect to stories that act as knowledge sources and collective memory. *Ngano* aligns with social constructivist principles by co-creating meaning through community and culture. Grounded in Indigenous ontologies prioritizing collective wisdom, *Ngano* uses storytelling for knowledge production. In doing so, it challenges deficit-based paradigms and roots research in African realities and relationships.

*Ngano* refers to oral folktales full of advice and cultural wisdom. The term itself is etymologically linked to *zano* or *mano*, meaning advice (Mapara, 2018). *Ngano* can also be informally translated to mean stories in general. *Ngano* plays a crucial role in Shona society, serving as both a teaching tool and a means of socialization. It serves as an informal court for judging justice and morality, a classroom for sharing knowledge about survival, medicine, and history, and a safe space for preserving culture during challenging times. By avoiding the usual keepers of written history, who often focus on Western views, *Ngano* keeps the community's laws, values, and history alive and accessible. In this way, storytelling is not just for entertainment but is essential for the community to continue.

Traditionally, stories are delivered in the third person by a *Sarungano* who uses proverbs, parables, imagery, cosmology, and collective memory to pass down values and intergenerational knowledge (Mapara, 2018; Tuwe, 2016). *Ngano* is both performative and participatory. The *Sarungano* uses song, dance, and rhythmic call and response to bring several characters to life, typically supernatural creatures as well as personified animals and plants (Chinyowa, 2004; Vambe, 2001). Wisdom is not only spoken about but felt and acted upon. This broadens the scope of data to incorporate symbolic meaning, emotional resonance, and embodied experience.

*Ngano* is preserved through rituals and repetition, rather than relying on written records. Traditionally, elders, such as grandparents, share knowledge with younger generations during evening gatherings around a fire. Unlike printed texts, *Ngano* is a living archive that changes over time. While the main advice stays the same to keep cultural traditions alive, the *Sarungano* often adjust the stories to reflect current issues in the community. This flexibility helps Shona knowledge stay meaningful for each new generation, allowing cultural identity to grow and change over time.

The *Sarungano* contributes to ethical research by creating relational consent and guaranteeing that knowledge is co-created in a respectful and authentic community setting. *Ngano* serves as both a research method and an ethical guide for African-centered inquiry. By recognizing these dimensions, *Ngano's* approach validates *Ubuntu*, the belief in the sacredness of human experience and the significance of nurturing relationships in the pursuit of truth. It provides an ethically grounded and culturally rooted framework for African-centered research. The relational ontology echoes Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1986) and Vambe's (2001) assertion that African storytelling is a communal practice through which beliefs, knowledge, morality, and

history are transmitted. The *Sarungano*, frequently an elder, *Ngano*'s relational ontology exemplifies *Ubuntu*'s principle: 'I am because we are'. Knowledge is not an individual possession but a shared, lived experience.

### Three Interrelated Principles of *Ngano* Methodology

*Ngano* methodology advances research through three core principles:

1. ***Epistemology through Storytelling***: Stories are considered living knowledge repositories rather than anecdotal evidence. They convey moral lessons, historical memory, and community identity. In research, participants become *Sarungano* through their own journeys, anchoring personal experiences within larger cultural narratives. In this relational contract, the researcher enters into a relationship of respect and must be open to participative and embodied forms of storytelling. In this relationship, the participants are knowledge holders instead of subjects. In *Ngano* storytelling, knowledge holders refer to individuals, particularly children, who help preserve, shape, and share cultural knowledge. They do more than just listen; they join in through call-and-response, remember details, and interact with the story. This makes them living keepers of stories, songs, and values. Their involvement helps shape the meaning and style of each story, showing that knowledge is created together, led by the *Sarungano*, and supported by the group. In the community, knowledge holders are expected to listen carefully, learn the lessons, and retell the stories, taking on the role of keeping the culture alive. After the storytelling, they are also responsible for using and protecting this knowledge, making them future guardians of cultural heritage, and helping pass it on to the next generation. This redefines narrative as theory and centers indigenous epistemologies at the heart of research design.
2. ***Relational Knowledge***: Culturally mediated relationships help to co-create knowledge. Totem sharing, ancestral origins, and familial links are examples of protocols used by researchers and participants. Through these cultural protocols, research becomes participatory, identity is established, the researcher is placed within a known relational structure, and obligations of mutual respect and accountability are established. This targets positionality as it answers the question: "Who are you, and what is your place in

relation to this community?" The relational approach is rooted in *Ubuntu* ethics, which emphasizes respect, reciprocity, and interconnection, challenging hierarchical frameworks by highlighting mutuality and cultural accountability.

3. ***Oral, Embodied, and Participatory Practice:*** Ngano methodology privileges oral traditions and idioms. Songs, proverbs, and integrates embodied forms of expression such as gesture, rhythm, and performance. This expands the definition of data to include emotion, imagery, and symbolic meaning. It invites researchers to listen with the whole body and honor the performative dimensions of knowledge transmission.

### **The Unique Value of *Ngano* Methodology**

The *Ngano* Framework is unique, complete, based on Shona epistemology, emphasizing relationality, epistemology, and embodied practice as well as practical techniques (*Rungano Rwako, Gungano*). *Ngano* creates a structured and reliable structure that combines a rich cultural tradition with African-centered approaches to fill a significant gap. It goes beyond criticism of extractive research and reclaims narrative authority by offering a practical, community-rooted alternative that focuses on local knowledge and lived experience, and at the same time positions communities as knowledge creators instead of subjects of the study. The flexibility and accessibility of the *Ngano* method are its adaptability to diverse literacy levels and contexts. Since *Ngano* is shared orally, it allows for inclusive participation by bypassing barriers related to reading and writing, such as unfamiliarity with academic language, discomfort with written consent, and limited literacy. For people in many communities, reading lengthy documents, expressing themselves in writing, or understanding technical vocabulary may be difficult due to insufficient education or language mismatch. Shame and anxiety could surface when asked to write because of fear of judgment and exclusion. The need for formal education is reduced when cultural familiarity is privileged through voice, rhythm, and connection, whilst building trust through engagement, resulting in research that is more accessible, respectful, and accurate.

### Operationalizing *Ngano* Methodology

*Ngano* methodology is operationalized through two interwoven strategies that center relational and participatory knowledge production:

***Rungano Rwako (Your Story)***: Participants narrate their life histories in Indigenous languages, weaving in proverbs, idioms, and spiritual reflections. The researcher reciprocates by sharing their own ancestry and totems, fostering mutual recognition. This positions participants as *Sarungano* (storytellers) who frame their experiences within broader cultural narratives (Chilisa, 2012).

***Gungano (The Gathering)***: Functioning similarly to focus groups, *Gungano* convenes participants together to share stories communally. Inspired by traditional Shona gatherings such as *nhanga* (women's gatherings) or *dare* (men's councils), it cultivates collective meaning-making while surfacing shared values, tensions, and divergences (Ncube & Tomaselli, 2020).

Together, *Rungano Rwako* and *Gungano* embody *Ngano* methodology's emphasis on relational, participatory knowledge production, grounded in cultural integrity and communal wisdom.

### Conclusion

*Ngano* redefines research as a co-creative, community-driven process anchored in *Ubuntu*. Through its core principles, epistemology through storytelling, relational knowledge, and oral, embodied, and participatory practice, this method is more than storytelling. *Ngano* serves as an epistemic framework rooted in African relationality, ethics, and collective wisdom. It challenges extractive research methods by emphasizing mutual respect, shared meaning-making, cultural accountability, and positioning participants as knowledge holders. As

a decolonial method, *Ngano* promotes equitable and inclusive knowledge practices and respects Indigenous ways of understanding the world, and restores narrative authority to communities that have been historically marginalized.

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