



## Viewpoint

# Indigenous Concepts, Institutions and Practices in Response to Environmental Degradation and HIV/AIDS

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### *Abstract*

*This Viewpoint paper is inspired by the attention given to indigenous concepts and practices in the search for solutions to the problems of HIV/AIDS and environmental degradation. The paper focusses on the review and description of various indigenous concepts with respect to their relevance in the fight against HIV/AIDS, in particular, and environmental degradation in general. This opinion paper has been inspired by the contributions of Lungi Goduka, Soul Shava, Clayton Zazu, Jones Nkole, Charles Chikunda, Caleb Mandikonza and Mary Chintu-Chilele and others, who made a moving presentation in the 2005 EEASA conference in Lusaka around the concepts of litiko and lilima emphasising their potential role in fight against HIV/AIDS. The paper finds litiko to be a limited forum hence the suggestion that sibuya could actually be appropriate since it is more elaborate than litiko. The importance of lilima is recognised, particularly in the dissemination of information and as a support forum for those already affected by HIV/AIDS. However, lilima may not really be of great help in the education aspect. The paper further introduces the concepts of lisango and indlunkhulu as fora for the involvement of males and the whole community in the fight against HIV/AIDS and its impacts.*

### *Preamble*

Southern Africa is experiencing formidable and persistent environmental problems, diseases and hunger. Prominent are the land degradation of massive proportion and the ever-increasing prevalence of HIV/AIDS infections and deaths due to HIV/AIDS related infections. These problems have brought about a lot of suffering and deprivation among the southern African people, i.e., decline in food production and increasing number of orphaned and vulnerable people. The implementation of conventional methods and ideas seems to be scoring very marginal successes, if any, hence the prevalence and persistent HIV/AIDS and land degradation. The creativity of the human mind when faced with formidable problems, as noted by critics of the Malthusian school of thought (Nickerson, 1975), has begun to show in the region, particularly in the fight against HIV/AIDS. The region is now turning its focus to our traditional and cultural institutions and practices for answers to the marauding HIV/AIDS scourge. Indigenous concepts and practices have come under intensive investigations to establish their relevance and contribution to the fight against HIV/AIDS and environmental degradation. This paper has been written without access to any references on the mentioned concepts, but based mainly on the oral presentation of the mentioned individuals during the 2005 EEASA

conference. The paper reviews the concepts of *litiko* and *lilima* with respect to their relevance and adequacy in the fight against HIV/AIDS. The paper also introduces the concepts of *lisango* and *indlunkhulu* as a contribution to the ideology of utilisation of indigenous concepts in the fight against HIV/AIDS. The paper is of the view that the mentioned concepts can be harnessed into crucial fora for dissemination of information and mounting of community education on HIV/AIDS and other issues.

### *The Concept of Litiko*

*Litiko* is one of the most crucial and fundamental household facilities as far as food preparation is concerned. It may be understood either as a fireplace or a cooking place. *Litiko* is a female-based traditional concept, which naturally excludes males, as well as other people not directly involved in the cooking process such as elderly women. The major activity taking place *etiko* (at the fireplace) is cooking; however, another meaningful activity taking place *etiko* is sharing of cooking ideas and recipes. As it is becoming accepted that diet plays a significant role in the fight against HIV/AIDS infections, it could be recognised that women, while *etiko*, may have an opportunity of exchanging cooking styles and recipes. *Litiko's* potential as a forum for exchanging broad ideas on HIV/AIDS is doubtful because women, while *etiko*, are usually preoccupied with food preparation and the liberty of engaging in other activities may be constrained. This, therefore, limits the effectiveness of *litiko* as a forum to respond to problems of HIV/AIDS.

One therefore, suggests the utilisation of *sibuya* or *liguma* to address the noted shortcoming in the *litiko*. *Sibuya* may promote female activities, particularly, discussions, beyond just food preparation. *Sibuya* is a reed enclosure in front of *lidladla* (a cooking hut) and *litiko* is one of the facilities inside a *sibuya*. *Sibuya* is exclusively for females and it is a boardroom for females within a homestead. Unlike *litiko*, *sibuya* includes women not directly involved in the cooking process. Whenever there is a special issue to be discussed or event to be organised, women retreat to *sibuya* to hold their deliberations and plans. While *esibuyeni* (inside *sibuya*) women discuss a variety of issues including those pertaining to relationships with the opposite gender. One may project that the girl child is prepared *esibuyeni* for adulthood. It could be concluded *sibuya* may be more ideal as a forum for education and information dissemination on HIV/AIDS among women than *litiko*. However, this is mentioned with utmost respect of the current opinions advanced on the significance of *litiko*. Now how do we bring men into the scene as far as talking about issues of HIV/AIDS is concerned? Below we suggest the utilisation of *lisango* as a way of involving men.

### *The Concept of Lisango*

Literally, *lisango* means an entrance or a gate for entry and exit. However, as an Nguni traditional concept, *lisango* is an *ad hoc* wooden or grass enclosure situated next to or in front of the entrance of the cattle byre (Kuper, 1961; Matsebula, 1988). *Lisango* is exclusively for male members of the household and it is usually utilised at nightfall where the males sit around a fire to eat *imbasha*

(roasted drier maize grains). *Imbasha* is taken as a snack mainly for its hardness, which toughens the jaws of the 'warriors'. *Lisango* is where 'men talk' takes place on a variety of topics. The most common topics include courtship, hunting, cattle herding and others, all intended to prepare the young adolescents for adulthood. A lot of education about life and its experiences is passed by the elderly males to the growing-up boys. As we are looking for better and effective ways to educate and disseminate information on HIV/AIDS, the *lisango* may be worth looking at, as it seems to have a potential to play a significant role.

The concepts of *litiko*, *sibuya* and *lisango* are essential for education, dissemination of information and sharing of ideas on community and national issues. However, they are gender discriminatory and may also be deficient as fora for material support to those already affected by HIV/AIDS. Indigenous concepts involving all members of community could provide an adequate support to *litiko*, *sibuya* and *lisango* for a successful response to the problems of HIV/AIDS. Below is the description of *lilima* and *indlunkhulu* as fora for the involvement of men, women and the youth in the fight against HIV/AIDS.

### *The Concept of Lilima*

As noted in the 2005 EEASA conference, *lilima* is quite common in southern Africa. Derived from the word *kulima*, meaning to farm, *lilima* is fundamentally the voluntary joining of efforts by individual members of a community to help cultivate each other's fields. *Lilima* is also used in other chores requiring collective effort such as house construction. *Lilima* brings together all gender and age groups to perform a common chore. In the Swazi context, *lilima* is practised in two formats. Firstly, there is *lilima* that is requested through community announcements, by an individual homestead seeking assistance to perform a certain chore. People responding to the announcement converge into the homestead where the work is performed to the rhythm of song and dance. Thereafter, food and traditional beverages are provided often in plenty, as well as a continuation of the song and dance. The song and dance usually reflect on important socio-economic issues and problems afflicting the community and the nation at large. Community events are usually announced during *lilima* to the benefit of everybody. Observations also indicate that the destitute rely on *lilima* for food supply as noted by their ever presence in all *lilima*.

The other form of *lilima* is usually motivated and sponsored by influential members of the community on behalf of their destitute neighbours who cannot afford to offer the refreshments expected during *lilima*. This form of *lilima* usually benefits homesteads headed by very old people or those disabled in one way or the other. Activities associated with this *lilima* are quite basic including cultivation of fields and construction of shelter. The *lilima*, as pointed out elsewhere, could be crucial in offering support to homesteads already affected by HIV/AIDS. Sickly household heads and orphaned children could be assisted by community members to cultivate subsistence crops, as well as in the provision of shelter. On the other hand, *lilima* could be a forum for spreading information on community problems, as well as for an exchange of ideas on how to combat the problems. A forum of this nature is crucial in disseminating information on HIV/AIDS, as well as strategies of combating the pandemic.

### *The Concept of Indlunkhulu*

*Indlunkhulu*, literally meaning the big hut, is the traditional residence of the chief and traditional administration point for the community. *Indlunkhulu* allocates land to the needy and offers shelter and food to those experiencing misfortunes or victims of disasters. The *indlunkhulu* is actually a sanctuary for the destitute and orphans of a community where the whole community takes care of their basic needs. In Swaziland, the *indlunkhulu* has taken a centre stage in the caring of the orphaned and vulnerable children, as well as other destitute people. The *indlunkhulu* donates arable land, which is cultivated through community effort, *lilima*, to feed the orphaned and vulnerable children. The idea is to eventually convert some structures within the *indlunkhulu* into community kitchens where the orphaned and vulnerable children will receive their daily meals while utilising food from the *indlunkhulu* fields and donations. The assessment of the effectiveness of the *indlunkhulu* initiative, especially in reaching out to all the orphaned and vulnerable children, has not been undertaken since it is still its infancy stage of implementation. However, on paper it appears to offer a big opportunity as a support structure for people already affected by the HIV/AIDS scourge.

### *Conclusion*

As we grapple with the problems of HIV/AIDS and environmental degradation we must appreciate that HIV/AIDS, in particular, needs to be fought by all means necessary. Hence it is not proper for us to adopt an armchair critique stance and seek to shoot down other people's contributions, but to critique them in a way to enrich and contribute to their successful implementation. This paper has amplified the importance of indigenous concepts in the fight against HIV/AIDS. It has also made an attempt to describe *litiko* and *lilima* to enhance our understanding while seeking to introduce *sibuya* as more relevant to bringing women together than *litiko*. Moreover, the paper has brought the concepts of *lisango* and *indlunkhulu* to the fore mainly for academic scrutiny and interrogation.

These ideas and concepts are based on Swazi understanding; differences may arise when they are discussed in contexts of other ethnic groups, especially those not belonging to the Nguni-speaking groups. The author is not an authority in Swazi or Nguni cultures but everything written is based on the author being a member of the Swazi ethnic group. Moreover, this article is not intended to belittle or offend any individual or ethnic groups. As proponents of application of indigenous systems to solve modern-day problems we need to avoid to be seen as romanticising indigenous concepts and practices. Our challenge is to be seen venturing into the implementation practicalities of the indigenous systems we write about. We need to share experiences of the implementation of the indigenous systems in the fight against some of our problems, beyond just ideas on the potential roles they could play.

### *Notes on the Contributor*

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