

Specialists in African indigenous knowledge

Cosmas Gonese

Within each rural community, small centres of excellence exist in the form of natural experts, such as farmer innovators, medical practitioners, hunters, architects, foretellers, conflict managers, rain makers, warriors and musicians. These custodians of traditional skills can, given the proper chances and recognition, accelerate the process of endogenous development. In the eco-cultural villages established by the Association of Zimbabwe Traditional Environmental Conservationists (AZTREC), these specialists are in a position to develop their practices and teach them to other community members.

According to African cosmivision, these different local specialists are linked to supernatural powers. For example, every traditional healer receives knowledge of how to use various trees and herbs from the spirit of his/her ancestors or other spirits. If you ask natural farming experts where their calculations come from, they all confirm that they dream or interpret natural signs, such as the movements of insects, birds or stars.

In most cases this valuable traditional knowledge is held in the minds of elderly people, and may be lost on their death if not imparted to new generations. It is this realisation that has been the basis for a strategy to bring together all types of experts so that they can pass on their knowledge to other community members.

Spiritual consent

An interesting feature of African cosmivision is that the spiritual world is systematically structured. The responsibilities of specific clusters of spirits are well defined: agricultural spirits take the lead in agricultural matters, hunters are advised by hunting spirits.

AZTREC carried out a survey within the Zimuto area to identify the natural experts in various sectors. The idea of constructing a demonstration-learning centre, or eco-cultural centre, was formulated in

close consultation with these experts. Having agreed on the idea with local leaders, it was further discussed at the various levels of spiritual authority, the spirit mediums. Contrary to the traditional cosmivision, the eco-cultural villages would enable the cross fertilisation of knowledge between different areas of expertise and their related spirits. The spirit mediums agreed to the idea.

Now these centres also serve as commercial centres for forest produce, and include activities to enhance endogenous development through organic farming, human and animal healthcare, rehabilitation of woodlands, as well as music, dance and theatre.

Three levels

Having agreed upon the idea, the next step was to design the eco-cultural villages. In Zimuto it is situated on a 10 ha. piece of land, along the semi-perennial Munyambe River. The physical layout includes designated areas for technology development, crop production, medical practices, wetland ecosystems, mountain and forestry ecosystems, culture and entertainment. This layout demonstrates the inter-connectedness between mortal beings, the spiritual and natural worlds according to the holistic nature of African cosmivision on one project site.

The organisational structure of the cultural village has three levels. At the top there is a Council of Elders, which includes chiefs, government rural district councillors, AZTREC council members, clan spirit mediums, and renowned elderly innovators. The second level comprises of selected committee members responsible for day to day running of the centre, who work hand in hand with the AZTREC extension staff, family spirit mediums, and innovative farmers. The third level consists of various specialised sub-committees: on natural medicine, culture, agriculture, technology development, entertainment and food processing. These subcommittees are responsible for documenting their own knowledge systems, exchanging their knowledge, testing their capacities, and imparting the same to local communities, visitors and tourists.

Cultural committee

This subcommittee is composed of three chiefs, senior spirit mediums, elders, and knowledgeable men and women. It is chaired by the female senior spirit medium, Chipinduramombe, and its responsibilities include conflict resolution, identifying the ritual performances of the centre, and maintaining contact with provincial and national spirit mediums.

This committee also has the responsibility of co-ordinating the different subcommittees in liaison with the overall Council of Elders. Together with the agriculture subcommittee, the calendar of agricultural ritual ceremonies is determined. The plant species to be planted within the eco-cultural village are selected with the natural medicine subcommittee. Visitors are invited to discuss with this committee on the origins of mankind from an African perspective, the inter-connectedness of the human, natural and spiritual worlds, and the importance of conserving natural resources on the basis of traditional rules and regulations.

Natural medicine committee

The natural medicine subcommittee is composed of experts in medicinal plants and other practices for human and animal survival. These experts exchange their knowledge and practices, to draw up and maintain a register of medicinal plants and their uses. This register now includes



Photo: AzTrec

The agriculture committee of the Zimuto Ecocultural village experiment with specific topics like soil fertility, animal husbandry and intercropping techniques

some 100 plants for common diseases and 180 plants for a variety of more complicated ailments.

A clinic of traditional healthcare practices for humans and animals has been established in the Zimuto eco-cultural village. To systematically integrate traditional medical practices into the mainstream health delivery system, networking with likeminded institutions is encouraged. For example, three members of this committee have received a two-year course on how to process natural medicine into tablets, capsules, oils and perfumes, at the department of medicine at the University of Zimbabwe.

Over the past three years collaboration with like-minded traditional medical practitioners within Zimbabwe and other South African countries has been established. Traditional medical practitioners from South Africa, Swaziland, Mozambique, Botswana, Malawi and Zambia have visited the cultural village during its inception in 1999. Striking similarities were observed between the practices related to traditional medical expertise. Moreover, in each of these countries, an eco-cultural demonstration centre similar to the Zimuto one in Zimbabwe is being established.

The agriculture committee

This important subcommittee has a membership of 30 men and women experts in different agricultural domains, such as soil and water conservation, seed varieties and selection, pest management in crops, and grain storage. The subcommittee is further divided into smaller groups with specific topics like soil fertility, animal husbandry and inter-cropping techniques. Like the natural medicine subcommittee, a register of the different traditional techniques has been made and experiments are being done to validate them. For example, the group has selected various varieties of indigenous crops that are drought resistant and are testing these varieties to monitor their performance.

The documentation of this process has been difficult, which is why Aztec has sought the collaboration of Pelum College. This is a union of twenty like-minded NGOs together with government research and specialist services, Agricultural Extension Service, and the University of Zimbabwe.

Technology committee

From time immemorial people in Zimbabwe have gathered a wealth of knowledge related to extracting mineral deposits of chrome, gold and copper, and processing them into finished products such as spears, hoes and plates. This reinforces the African belief that the discovery of a new technology does not require a college degree, but rather the influence of supernatural forces: an innovative technological genius gets his expertise through dreams.

AZTREC, in consultation with traditional authorities, has concluded that

technology development is an important sector that needs to be researched and developed further at the eco-cultural centre. At least 10 experts have been identified, who are manufacturing farming tools and turning out handicrafts, which are sold to local communities, visitors and tourists. Schools like the Masvingo Technical College and the Bulawayo Polytechnic have shown great interest in working with these natural technology experts, in view of finding ways to enhance their capacity by the use of specific modern technologies.

Entertainment committee

In African culture, entertainment is regarded as a very old area of specialisation. African communities cannot do without song and dance during happy events, funerals, marriages, and worship. It is an integral part of the African way of life. There are different categories of songs, such as hunting songs, war songs, revolutionary songs, funeral songs, rainmaking songs, and worship songs. Each song category has its own dancing style and different musical instruments.

The 10 traditional music experts who form the entertainment subcommittee have the responsibility of training people in traditional music and dance, explaining to them the meaning of each type of expression. Five entertainment groups have been formed and are taking turns to entertain visitors. The natural music experts also train foreigners who want to learn about and practice African music.

In fact, entertainment has turned out to be an extraordinarily sustainable activity. The entertainment groups perform for a fee at the eco-cultural centre and are often hired by interested parties. A drama group formed by several school leavers and trained by the music experts is now in high demand in urban centres of Masvingo, Harare and Bulawayo. Of late, two natural music experts have been contracted by the teachers colleges of Morgenster and Masvingo to train the teacher-trainees.

Food processing committee

In the past decade AZTREC has put a lot of effort in establishing woodlands and orchards around homes and villages in the Zimuto area. Processing and marketing the fruits of these orchards now proves to be one of the most successful activities coordinated at the eco-cultural centre. People benefit economically from the conserved and rehabilitated natural resources by processing and marketing its products. The subcommittee is also responsible for food processing. Having carried out a feasibility study, a food processing plant to produce tinned and dried fruits was set up. This plant is processing fruits for the



Photo: AZTREC

Wood-saving stove, promoted by Aztec

local and international market. This activity is supported by the food processing division of the Bulawayo Polytechnic.

Language: a necessary bridge

AZTREC and the experts of the Zimuto eco-cultural centre believe that the current socio-economic problems that mankind is facing cannot be solved by adhering to a single worldview. The Zimuto communities are determined to continue documenting and testing their knowledge systems, to validate their natural wisdom without romanticising it. But, in order to communicate about traditional practices and cosmologies, the issue of language needs to be seriously looked at.

AZTREC has experienced that effective communication between outsiders and the communities is hampered because of two levels of language difference. One level is the difference in languages between various ethnic groups or countries. The second level is the difference in language between farmers and academics within the same ethnic group. Traditional experts with a wealth of experience are often looked down upon because they cannot express themselves in the language of academia.

This language problem really needs to be addressed if others around the globe are to benefit from the knowledge available within the communities. The Zimuto eco-cultural village, with its numerous subcommittees of local experts, provides the opportunity for in-depth research in the important domains of indigenous knowledge. It is a methodology to face this language barrier, and to support the livelihoods of the local communities by experimenting with all spheres of their indigenous knowledge.

AZTREC
Private Bag 9286
Masvingo
Zimbabwe
Tel: 263 66006
E-mail:aztrec@mweb.co.zw