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## ***Revealing the Potency of Ancient Wisdom: Traditional amaXhosa and amaZulu Indigenous Practices Before Modernity***

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**Abstract:** It cannot be overlooked that the indigenous amaXhosa and amaZulu people always had unique traditional ways of living that are significantly entrenched in their respective epistemologies and ontologies. Nevertheless, with the advent of imperialism, apartheid, globalisation and modernity, many of these indigenous practices have been distorted under the guise of civilisation. That said, this article revitalises and celebrates some of these local practices by unearthing their sociocultural and indigenous significances, and usages among amaXhosa and amaZulu. To achieve this aim, cultural relativism is applied as a theory to drive the discussions, while data information is elicited from the (in)direct experiences of researchers, as well as the existing body of knowledge. Three notable findings emerge. First, the indigenous amaXhosa and amaZulu communities greatly relied on indigenous techniques for health and security, blending spiritual, medicinal and community-based practices. Second, before modernity, the two ethnic groups had multifaceted social and governance systems that were established in indigenous structures. Third, these indigenous practices were labelled by imperialist mentalities as uncivilised and required re-invention. Against the pervasive challenge of distorting and erasing indigenous practices and associated schools of thought, there is a necessity to regain them, particularly for purposes of decoloniality, historical consciousness and memory as well as transformation.

**Keywords:** amaXhosa; amaZulu; cultural relativism; indigenous practices; modernity

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### **Introduction**

The amaXhosa and amaZulu peoples, belonging to the broader Nguni linguistic and cultural family, are indigenous to South Africa and other parts of the global community, and reflect rich cultural legacies greatly grounded in indigenous African knowledge systems (IAKS). Prior to the advent of modernity, which is understood as a historical process characterised by industrialisation, urbanisation, rationalisation, secularisation and the privileging of Western epistemologies, these two ethnic groups were defined by a profound interconnectivity with the land, community-oriented practices, and a holistic philosophy that harmonised ancestral spirituality, health, agriculture and social governance (Mndende, 2022, p. 426). However, the distortion of these indigenous practices among amaXhosa and

amaZulu, as with many other African societies, may be attributed to intersecting forces such as colonisation and apartheid in South Africa, the imposition of European education and missionary religious systems, as well as socioeconomic transformations induced by globalisation and the disruptive imperatives of modernity.

In clarifying this reality, Ngubane and Thabethe (2013), p. 5 proffer that European colonisers, principally the British and the Dutch, expropriated vast tracts of land from indigenous South African communities, thus severing their connection to the very foundations of cultural practices that were central to their indigenous activities and epistemological orientations. In this process, colonial authorities deliberately classified indigenous systems as primitive or heathen, subjecting them to active oppression through colonial and apartheid policies. Missionary enterprises cemented this suppression by forcefully converting African peoples to Christianity, particularly within the South African context. Beyond land dispossession and religious imposition, Le Grange (2007, p. 577) observes that colonial and apartheid powers entrenched Western-style education systems, which elevated European knowledge and languages while marginalising indigenous African ones. This deliberate privileging of Western epistemologies resulted in the distortion and erosion of traditional knowledge systems and cultural practices. Accordingly, the combined forces of colonial and apartheid authoritarian rule, coupled with Eurocentric education systems, profoundly unsettled indigenous epistemologies and ontologies, supplanting them with Western ideologies and practices that devalued and prohibited traditional ways of life (Iya, 1998; Naidoo & Rajab, 2005; Wilson, 2013). The consequences of this displacement included the forfeiture of cultural heritage and legacy, the weakening of social cohesion and communal consciousness, and a marked decline in the utilisation of traditional agricultural and medicinal knowledge.

It is against the backdrop of these challenges that Saule (1998) and Maseko (2017) maintain that amaXhosa and amaZulu suffered profound difficulties as a result of colonisation and apartheid. Specifically, Saule (1998, p. 15) underscores that these historical processes exerted a crushing weight on traditional practices. They then sabotaged the preservation of ancestral knowledge, significantly interwoven within the cultural fabric of these ethnic groups. Central to this marginalisation was the systematic exclusion of indigenous knowledge from formal education systems, which facilitated its distortion, silencing and eventual distortion. In contemporary contexts, this legacy not only exacerbates existing social and epistemic disparities but also obstructs the rightful recognition of amaXhosa and amaZulu intellectual contributions. Nevertheless, according to Diko (2023, p. 602), two influential colonial and apartheid policies that solidified the marginalisation of indigenous practices in South Africa were the Bantu Education Act of 1953 and the 1925 Language Ordinance. The Bantu Education Act of 1953 institutionalised Afrikaans and English as the exclusive languages of instruction in schools, colleges and universities designated for Black South Africans. By design, this policy deliberately downplayed indigenous languages, literature and cultural heritage, while preparing Black learners for subservient roles within the colonial-apartheid economy rather than empowering them to advance their communities or safeguard their ancestral practices. Similarly, the 1925 Language Ordinance, as indicated by Diko (2023), mandated the use of Afrikaans and English in public administration and education, thus systematically displacing indigenous South African languages from official domains (Xaba & Khumalo, 2023). This policy contributed substantially to the reduction of cultural identity and heritage by curtailing the transmission, preservation and development of indigenous knowledge through ancestral languages.

It is therefore unsurprising that Rudwick and Shange (2006) argue that in contemporary contexts, the continued subjugation of indigenous practices, particularly those of amaXhosa and amaZulu, has contributed to the gradual dissolution of these groups' cultural legacies and identities. This concern rests on the premise that younger generations risk growing up detached from ancestral traditions and customs, and in the process of this, lose access to unique cultural knowledge and practices. Supporting this view, Mohlabane (2023) observes that indigenous practices and knowledge systems are recurrently silenced within legal and political frameworks. A prominent example of this marginalisation is evident in the handling of land rights in South Africa (Cousins, 2009; Hall, 2004; Pinfold & Mokhele, 2023). Here, traditional land management systems, such as communal ownership practised by amaXhosa and amaZulu, remain largely unrecognised in formal legal contexts (Cousins, 2009). However, the reality of the matter is that communal ownership reflects a philosophy of collective responsibility and stewardship, as encapsulated in the isiXhosa biblical or religious proverb: *amazulu ngakaThixo kodwa umhlaba ngowabantu* ("the heavens belong to God, but the earth belongs to people").

In contrast to this indication, South African land reform policies have historically privileged individual land titles (private ownership) and Western notions of property rights (Saule, 1998). This incongruity has produced significant tensions, resulting in conflicts and the displacement of indigenous communities whose traditional

systems of land management remain unacknowledged and legally unprotected. Detailing this incongruity, Matseke (2021) suggests that the national development policies prioritise industrial agriculture and mining over the sustainable land use practices of indigenous communities in South Africa. Indeed, these policies result in the destruction of sacred sites and environmentally sensitive areas, which are central to the cultural and ecological knowledge systems of indigenous peoples. In conservation strategies, the exclusion of indigenous epistemologies may potentially undermine the effectiveness of the concerted efforts designed to recover them. To the same degree, indigenous communities have a profound comprehension of their local ecosystems and have developed practices that promote biodiversity and sustainability. Thus, by not incorporating these practices, conservation initiatives may fail to achieve their goals and may even harm the very ecosystems they aim to protect.

In a nutshell, the persistent exclusion of indigenous philosophies extinguishes efforts to integrate them meaningfully into national development policies, land rights frameworks and conservation strategies. This exclusion, therefore, explains the continued contestation and political debates surrounding land rights in South Africa. As underscored earlier, safeguarding indigenous practices within contemporary contexts is essential for maintaining cultural pluralism and heritage, resisting the forces of assimilationism, and ensuring that unique traditions, customs and knowledge systems established in indigenism are not abandoned by future generations. Importantly, indigenous practices mirror sustainable approaches to resource management and environmental stewardship, which offer critical philosophies for addressing pressing global challenges such as climate change, poverty, hunger and biodiversity loss. Equally, the recognition and valorisation of indigenous practices maximises social justice and inclusion by liberating historically marginalised communities, specifically amaXhosa and amaZulu in this context, while guaranteeing that their voices are represented in both national and global decision-making processes.

With this contextual background in mind, this article addresses two interrelated objectives. First, it seeks to document and critically probe selected traditional amaXhosa and amaZulu indigenous practices that predate the advent of modernity, with particular emphasis on health, eating utensils and house-cleaning materials. The rationale behind this objective lies in the recognition that uncovering these practices highlights the sophistication, intricacy and sustainability interwoven within local African knowledge systems, while simultaneously demonstrating their continued relevance to contemporary global challenges such as sustainable development and cultural preservation. Second, this article seeks to preserve and revitalise these indigenous practices by elevating consciousness of their sociocultural significance and practical applications within modern contexts and beyond. This entails advocating for their systematic integration into educational curricula, legal frameworks and development policies to ensure that indigenous practices of amaXhosa and amaZulu not only survive but also thrive as vital contributors to social cohesion, cultural identity and the welfare of future generations. Against these two objectives, it is important to observe that there is a theory that drives the discussions of this scholarly discourse, hence the next section.

## **Cultural relativism**

As pointed out, this article applies cultural relativism as a theory to its discussions. By definition, cultural relativism is an anthropological theory that posits that one should understand and evaluate cultural practices, belief systems and norms within their context rather than through the lens of another culture (Spiro, 1986, p. 263). This theory asserts that no culture is greater than another and that each culture has its intrinsic value and logic (Teira 2021, p. 1081). As a direct consequence of this pronouncement, it is evident that this theory challenges ethnocentrism, which is the tendency to view one's own culture as superior and to judge other cultures by one's cultural standards. Cultural relativism has origins that underpin it and have influenced its scholarly development. In explaining this view, Alkış 2024, p. 47) argues that Franz Boas is considered the father of American anthropology, who was a central figure in the development of cultural relativism. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Boas (1989) argued against the then-hegemonic ideas of social evolutionism, which ranked cultures on a linear scale from primitive to civilised.

In view of this indication, we argue that this ranking was highly problematic as it imposed a biased, ethnocentric hierarchy that devalued and misrepresented non-Western cultures, overlooking their complexity and intrinsic value. For this reason, Boas (1989) emphasised the significance of understanding cultures on their terms and stressed the demand for fieldwork and direct observation to gain an accurate understanding of cultural practices such as those of amaXhosa, amaZulu, VhaVhenda, Basotho and many others. Over and above Boas's efforts to

develop cultural relativism as a theory, his two students, namely, Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead, contributed significantly to its progression. In particular, Benedict's (2005) scholarly discourses highlighted the multiplicity of cultural practices and argued against ethnocentric judgements. On the other hand, Mead's (2005) scholarly discourses on adolescence and gender in different cultures demonstrated the variability and contextuality of human behaviours (Fernando, 2022; Russeng, 2024; Rudaku & Daku, 2023). For the scope and purposes of this article, cultural relativism should be understood as the perspective that a person's belief systems and practices should be interpreted based on that person's cultural context, rather than being mediated by the rules of another culture. It underscores the importance of understanding cultural differences and avoiding ethnocentric judgements. In a multilingual and multicultural country such as South Africa, cultural relativism is particularly important owing to the fact that it promotes understanding and respect for the country's diverse cultural practices, traditions and customs, which all nurture social cohesion and reduce ethnocentric prejudices in a nation with a complex history of apartheid and cultural oppression.

In this scholarly discourse, cultural relativism is applied to critique the amaXhosa and amaZulu traditional practices by comprehending them as integral and functional components of these ethnic groups before modernisation. It is crucial to accept that, rather than comparing the amaXhosa and amaZulu traditional practices to modern or Western standards, they should be celebrated for their unique values and contributions to these two ethnic groups. By the same token, in unmasking the amaXhosa and amaZulu traditional practices, it is important to circumvent ethnocentric judgements. For instance, a cultural practice that may seem primitive or superstitious from a Western standpoint holds significant spiritual, social and practical value within the indigenous contexts of amaXhosa and amaZulu. Inevitably, cultural relativism promotes an open-minded approach that honours and seeks to understand these traditional values. This means that by applying cultural relativism as a theory, this article effectively draws attention to the potency and relevance of ancient wisdom as mirrored among the two ethnic groups. As previously outlined, this theory acknowledges that traditional practices offer potential solutions or insights that are as valid as, or even complementary to, modern practices (Rudwick & Shange, 2009, p. 66). In other words, indigenous knowledge, for example, in agriculture, medicine and social organisation are seen as effective and intricate systems developed over generations (Rudwick & Shange, 2009, p. 68). Accordingly, one could contend that cultural relativism, as a theory, supports the preservation and veneration of indigenous African cultures and their wisdom. This is based on the reality that this theory is vital in archiving and valuing amaXhosa and amaZulu traditional structures, which may be at risk of being distorted or overshadowed by modern influences. In a nutshell, cultural relativism provides an outline that respects and values the traditional practices of amaXhosa and amaZulu. It encourages a profound and empathetic discernment of these cultural practices within their socio-historical and cultural contexts, advancing an appreciation for the richness and wisdom of ancient native African knowledge systems. Given that the theory of discussions has been explained, it is prudent to now focus on the thrust of this scholarly discourse, hence the next section.

## **Celebrating the legacy of amaxhosa and amazulu indigenous practices**

This section discusses indigenous practices as they pertain to health, eating utensils and house-cleaning materials. All these indigenous practices, which are grouped into three subsections, are discussed by applying cultural relativism.

### ***Health***

The amaXhosa and amaZulu peoples have historically sustained their health and mitigated health challenges through a range of traditional practices firmly grounded in their cultural and environmental contexts (Shizha & Charema, 2011; Ngubane, 1981). Their food systems were purposefully designed to maximise nutritional value while remaining adaptive to local ecological conditions. For instance, preservation techniques such as drying guaranteed reliable food supplies during periods of scarcity while retaining essential nutrients. In this regard, Ngubane (1981, p. 363) emphasises that traditional diets were characterised by locally sourced ingredients, including diverse vegetables, grains and proteins, that collectively promoted balanced nutrition and long-term food security. Such practices reflect a sophisticated understanding of local ecosystems and dietary requirements, carefully refined across generations. Beyond nutrition, amaXhosa and amaZulu embraced holistic approaches to health that blended physical, spiritual and social dimensions. Traditional medicine was central to this philosophy, with herbal remedies and ritual practices employed to avert and treat illnesses. Within this context, indigenous healers, referred to as *izangoma*, *iinyanga* or *amagqirha*, possessed specialised knowledge of medicinal plants

and natural therapies, which they utilised to address a wide spectrum of health challenges. This holistic orientation not only treated physical ailments but also nurtured spiritual balance and emotional security, underscoring the profound interconnection between health, environment and cultural practice.

Similarly, community and social structures have historically played a central role in sustaining health by improving strong social networks and support systems. These practices manifested through communal activities, ceremonies and rituals that solidified social cohesion, consciousness, collective responsibility and inter-generational knowledge transfer. Among these, *ulwaluko* (traditional male circumcision) has been particularly significant, and contemporary biomedical research has confirmed its role in reducing the risk of contracting Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) (Vincent, 2008). Other practices historically observed, and in some cases still maintained, include traditional virginity testing (*ukuhlola* in isiZulu or *inkciyo* in isiXhosa), *imbeleko* (childbirth rituals), as well as funeral rites and mourning practices. As stated earlier, such practices extend far beyond physical health to encompass spiritual protection and communal welfare, thus guaranteeing the collective security of families and communities. These traditions also function as mechanical logistics for transmitting knowledge about health, wellness and resilience across generations. Indeed, by solidifying a strong sense of belonging, reciprocity and mutual care, these social structures have mitigated psychosocial pressures and their associated health risks, ultimately echoing the overall resilience of amaXhosa and amaZulu communities. Importantly, while these indigenous health methodologies retain unceasing significance and contemporary relevance, it is crucial to acknowledge that certain modern medical methodologies were themselves adapted or derived from these traditional practices, attesting to the epistemological sophistication of traditional knowledge systems. In order to understand these pronouncements, it is imperative to observe *iqoyi* (isiZulu) or *idyasi yomkhwenyana* (isiXhosa) in Figure 1 below:



**Figure 1.** *Iqoyi* (isiZulu) or *idyasi yomkhwenyana* (isiXhosa) (condom)  
(Source: <https://twitter.com/ZuluSweG/status/1587375995983626240>)

The condom depicted in Figure 1 is attributed to King Shaka, one of the most influential monarchs of the amaZulu, who, together with his advisors, is said to have devised this invention as a means of curbing the sexual arousal of his warriors when they encountered women and young girls bathing in rivers or collecting firewood in forests (Golan, 1990; Hamilton, 1990; Ngema, 2020; Kelly, 2024). The creation of this indigenous device, known as *iqoyi* in isiZulu or *idyasi yomkhwenyana* in isiXhosa, was a direct response to the distraction and misconduct of warriors whose attention was continually diverted by women and young girls. Consequently, *iqoyi* was institutionalised as a compulsory component of military attire, functioning both as battle gear and as a behavioural regulation mechanism during warfare and inter-tribal conflicts. From a cultural relativist standpoint, we argue that King Shaka's invention may be interpreted as a contextually appropriate and pragmatic solution to a specific socio-military challenge. On the one hand, it addressed the demand to uphold discipline and concentration among warriors during critical moments such as battles and invasions, where lapses in focus could have sabotaged military success. On the other hand, it served as a protective mechanism for women and young girls, who otherwise faced the risk of sexual exploitation at the hands of undisciplined soldiers. Therefore, it is our view that the primary objective of this "African" condom was not only to regulate sexual desire but also to protect the

cohesion and effectiveness of the military forces. Viewed through this ideology, *iqoyi* reflects a culturally specific strategy for managing human behaviour, balancing social ethics with military necessity and driving the broader sociopolitical hierarchy of amaZulu. Such innovations demonstrate the adaptability and ingenuity of indigenous practices, challenging reductionist assumptions of “primitivism” and instead foregrounding their sophistication and contextual relevance.

In the same vein, we contend that the use of the “African” condom may be interpreted as a deliberate measure to uphold social ethical codes and moral standards within amaXhosa and amaZulu communities. This implies that by mandating this cultural practice, indigenous leadership sought to discourage behaviours considered dishonourable or disruptive to the cohesion of the community. On a psychological level, *iqoyi* or *idyasi yomkhwenyana* may also have contributed to reducing pressures and anxiety among warriors. This means that by curtailing distractions and minimising potential conflicts arising from sexual stimulation, the practice permitted warriors to sustain focus, mental clarity and discipline, factors that directly sustained their welfare and combat effectiveness. Beyond its immediate practical value, the institutionalisation of *iqoyi* as a compulsory element of battle attire cemented a greater sense of cultural identity, solidarity and unity among the warriors. As a collective practice, it cemented group cohesion and instilled a shared sense of purpose, both of which are essential components of military strength and force. In this regard, the condom functioned not merely as a utilitarian device but as a sociocultural innovation that aligned moral governance, psychological security and militaristic discipline into a single integrated practice.

Applying cultural relativism to this scholarly discourse necessitates considering the roles and lived experiences of women and young girls in amaXhosa and amaZulu communities. This direction underscores that appreciating their realities provides a more inclusive and balanced discernment of indigenous practices and the broader socio-cultural forces at play. From this vantage point, we contend that the cultural invention of this condom may be celebrated not just as a male-oriented artefact but as a protective mechanism designed to shield women and young girls from unsolicited advances and potential harassment. Mandating this indigenous innovation thus operated as a cultural strategy for intensifying safer environments in everyday activities such as bathing in rivers or collecting firewood. In this view, such a practice reflects a form of gender-conscious cultural pragmatism, wherein communal ethical codes were deployed to conserve the security, dignity and autonomy of women and young girls. While directed primarily at men, its indirect consequences were empowering. Interpreted through cultural relativism, this practice illustrates how indigenous communities employed moral traditionalism and communitarianism to regulate gender relations and ensure respectful social interactions. Certainly, this indigenous practice highlights the gendered dynamics of cultural preservation, which shows how indigenous ethical philosophies were mobilised to maintain equilibrium between men and women. Rather than viewing such customs through the narrow view of Western ethnocentrism, situating them within their cultural milieu reveals their complexity, intentionality and social utility. Ultimately, this philosophy invites a more multifaceted appreciation of how indigenous practices were not static but actively negotiated in ways that foregrounded communal dignity, gender respect and social cohesion.

### ***Eating Utensils***

Indigenous eating utensils among amaXhosa and amaZulu people are intricately intertwined with their cultural legacy, daily practices and environmental contexts. These utensils are not merely functional items. They are significant cultural artefacts that embody the ingenuity, resourcefulness and traditional knowledge systems of these communities. For example, amaXhosa and amaZulu traditionally used spoons carved from wood or fashioned from animal horns (Rampedi & Olivier, 2013, p. 203). These spoons, frequently decorated with intricate carvings, demonstrate a fusion of aesthetics and creativity, where artistry and practicality coexist harmoniously. Primarily employed for eating porridge and other staple foods, such craftsmanship underscores the cultural emphasis on creativity implanted in everyday life. Similarly, baskets, woven from natural materials such as grass, reeds and palm leaves, were widely used for serving and storing food, a practice that remains prevalent in contemporary amaXhosa and amaZulu settings. The skilful weaving of these baskets reveals not only profound knowledge of local ecology but also a commitment to the recognition of the environment and sustainable resource use. These utensils and containers, therefore, exemplify the intersection of culture and ecology within indigenous knowledge contexts. Equally important is the recognition that traditional utensils empowered communal eating practices, which occupy a central place among amaXhosa and amaZulu. Meals were typically shared, with individuals gathering around communal dishes, symbolising principles of togetherness and

collective responsibility (Masekoameng & Molotja, 2019, p. 2). In this sense, eating together was not only a nutritional process but also a cultural performance that nurtured social cohesion, strengthened kinship ties and perpetuated traditional structures as a lived philosophy. To fully understand these scholarly pronouncements, it is crucial to observe Figures 2 and 3 below:



**Figure 2.** *Izinkezo* (isiZulu) or *Amacephe* (isiXhosa) (Spoons)  
(Source: <https://www.google.com/url?sa=i&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.acsilver.co.uk%2Fshop%2Fpc%2FHistory-of-the-Spoon-d302.htm&psig=AOvVaw2IZfjAuhxaI7AEv1kvhC0U&ust=1721575071525000&source=images&cd=vfe&opi=89978449&ved=0CBEOjRqxqFwoTCMiMtYrItYcDFQAAAAAdAAAAABAJ>)



**Figure 3.** *Isiqabetho* (isiZulu) or *ingobozi* (isiXhosa) (African basket)  
(Source: <https://market.designafrika.co.za/product/xhosa-ingobozis/>)

Considering Figures 2 and 3 above, and applying cultural relativism, the craftsmanship of wooden and horn-carved spoons, as well as baskets known as *iziqabetho* (isiZulu) or *iingobozi* (isiXhosa), emerges as more than mere utility. These artefacts mirror the cultural significance of artistry and aesthetic value interwoven in everyday objects historically and presently used by amaXhosa and amaZulu. From this perspective, such utensils are not simply functional but rather expressions of cultural identity, symbolism and tradition. This stands in contrast to industry and consumer standards, where utensils are mass-produced and stripped of personal or cultural meaning. The continued use of baskets woven from natural materials such as grass, reeds and palm leaves illustrates not only ecological consciousness but also environmental acknowledgement and sustainability, which highlights an indigenous ethic that harmonises culture and nature. Within a cultural relativistic framework, these practices should thus be interpreted as ecologically rational and multifaceted rather than “primitive.” This is permeated by the fact that the skilful weaving and multifunctional use of these baskets reveal the ingenuity and resourcefulness of amaXhosa and amaZulu, resisting the logic of disposability that dominates modern culture. Even more so, the communal eating practices facilitated by these utensils underscore the cultural prioritisation of collectiveness over individualism. Sharing meals from common dishes is not solely practical but a profound social act that nurtures solidarity, belonging and mutual responsibility. This practice, continually marginal in Western contexts where individualism and materialism prevail, reveals an indigenous philosophy that privileges social harmony and collective welfare.

### ***House-cleaning materials***

Applying cultural relativism to the discussion of indigenous house-cleaning practices employed by amaXhosa and amaZulu prior to modernity allows these practices to be understood within their cultural, ecological and social settings. As underscored earlier, cultural relativism insists that cultural practices must be evaluated according to the values and norms of the communities from which they emerge, rather than through the viewpoints of external mindsets. Here, such an approach not only draws attention to the indigenous epistemologies entrenched in these practices but also highlights the resourcefulness and environmental awareness of these communities. In addition to these declarations, the two ethnic groups relied on natural materials available within their immediate ecosystems, such as ashes, clay and specific soils, valued for their abrasive and absorbent properties. These substances were not solely utilitarian choices but were reflective of an eco-cultural reality that assured functionality, sustainability and coordination with local cosmologies. Accordingly, by employing such practices, these communities demonstrated both technological ingenuity and a notable atonement to the natural environment, further illustrating how indigenous material culture embodies cultural significance that should not be reduced through the filters of modernist perspective. In support of these views, Saule (1998, p. 11) puts forward that the use of these natural materials minimises the demand for manufactured cleaning products, promoting sustainability. It also affirms that their cleaning methodologies are environmentally friendly, avoiding the introduction of detrimental chemicals into their ecosystems. These traditional practices have, indeed, been passed down orally through generations, preserving cultural heritage and knowledge.

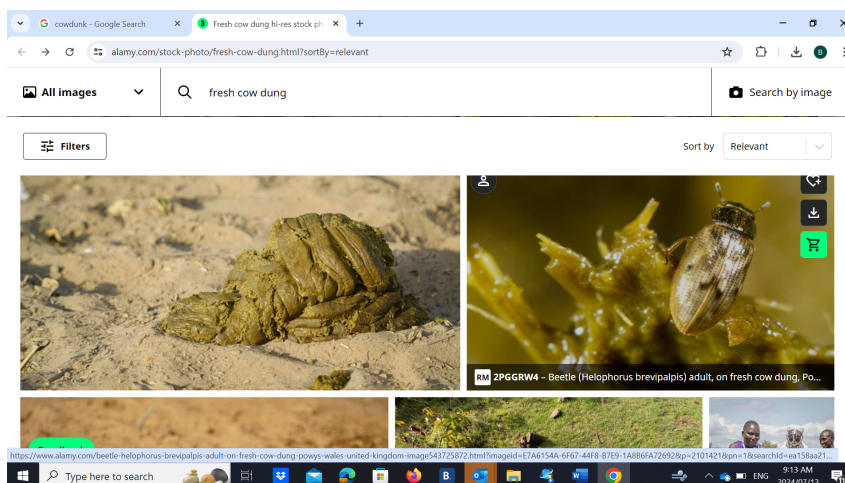
Over and above these scholarly discourses and grounded in both our (in)direct experiences and existing scholarship, it is important to acknowledge that indigenous communities employed various plants and herbs renowned for their antibacterial and aromatic properties. For instance, leaves from plants such as wild garlic (*Tulbaghia violacea*, illustrated in Figure 4 below) and other fragrant herbs were crushed and used to clean and deodorise living spaces. These natural solutions not only ascertained sanitation but also enhanced domestic environments with pleasant scents, which reflects the delicate integration of traditional ecological knowledge and local flora. From a cultural relativist window, we submit that such practices cannot be downplayed as rudimentary methods of hygiene. Rather, they embody a refined and contextually intelligent use of natural resources that demonstrates a profound environmental consciousness. The antibacterial qualities of plants such as *Tulbaghia violacea* actively reduce harmful microbes, mitigating threats of infection, while their aromatic properties create a naturally deodorised atmosphere within homes. Cultural relativism thus contests ethnocentric assumptions that modern cleaning products are inherently superior, instead highlighting how amaXhosa and amaZulu adapted indigenous flora to address both sanitary and atmospheric needs. The dual functionality of cleansing and deodorising exemplifies a sustainable, health-promoting and aesthetically elevating solution. As indicated just above, Figure 4 below shows wild garlic or *Tulbaghia violacea* that the two ethnic groups used as a deodorant:



**Figure 4.** Wild garlic or Tulbaghia violacea

(Source: <https://www.google.com/url?sa=i&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.zanedaniel.com%2Ftulbaghia-violacea-society-garlic-mm-5220336&psig=AOvVaw2PiKQjF7mRyJwCIZh3NO3J&ust=1721618481407000&source=images&cd=vfe&opi=89978449&ved=0CBEQjRxqFwoTCPDZruKWt4cDFQAAAAAdAAAAABAJ>)

Keeping in mind these scholarly perspectives, cow dung, illustrated in Figures 5 and 6, emerges as an indispensable material in wet and dry forms. When wet, it is traditionally used as floor polish, particularly in huts or homes, where it produces a smooth, durable surface. When dry, it serves as fuel for cooking and heating, especially during cold seasons. Historically, and even today, amaXhosa and amaZulu communities have made extensive use of cow dung due to its unique and beneficial properties. Notably, cow dung possesses natural antiseptic qualities that repel insects and bacteria. When blended with water and applied to floors or walls, it creates a surface that is cool in the summer and warm in the winter. This enhances indoor comfort. Its availability, sustainability and cost-effectiveness further mirror the ecological ingenuity and resourcefulness of these two ethnic groups. Additionally, cow dung is employed as a natural deterrent against snakes by offering an additional layer of household safety. Its strong odour and chemical compounds, such as sulphur and ammonia, act as repellents. They make the environment less attractive to these potentially dangerous reptiles (Mukadam & Gautam, 2016, p. 3072). Here, by spreading cow dung around the perimeter of homes or blending it with other materials, communities construct an effective natural barricade that discourages snake intrusion. To fully understand this scholarly debate, it is important to observe Figures 5 and 6 below:



**Figure 5.** Ubulongwe (isiZulu and isiXhosa) (Wet Cow Dung)

(Source: <https://www.shutterstock.com/search/indian-pet-buffalo?page=4>)



**Figure 6.** *Ilongwe* (isiZulu and isiXhosa) (Dry Cow Dung)

(Source: [https://www.facebook.com/102601181433317/photos/a.108596600833775/600645424962221/?type=3&source=48&paipv=0&eav=AfYxlKXYApJ9KRkOmutqZ7g5A67iZiGLd0vZc0OCW0EbEK5z5KPffORA58lgtsz\\_48U&\\_rdr](https://www.facebook.com/102601181433317/photos/a.108596600833775/600645424962221/?type=3&source=48&paipv=0&eav=AfYxlKXYApJ9KRkOmutqZ7g5A67iZiGLd0vZc0OCW0EbEK5z5KPffORA58lgtsz_48U&_rdr))

With these scholarly perspectives in mind, using indigenous practices of amaXhosa and amaZulu in contemporary contexts offers valuable lessons in sustainability, communalism, traditionalism, cultural preservation and resilience. These traditional methodologies, importantly established in the local environment and cultural values, provide perspectives that are increasingly relevant in today's rapidly changing world. Such practices embody forms of ecological awareness and environmental consciousness, as they accentuate a profound understanding of local resources and environmental stewardship. Techniques such as using natural cleaning agents, crafting utensils from renewable materials, and employing traditional food preservation methodologies underline an integrated approach to sustainability and conservation. In contemporary contexts, these traditional practices offer a compelling model for reducing reliance on synthetic materials and minimising environmental impacts. For instance, the long-standing use of cow dung in rural households may raise critical questions about its adaptability in urban settings. Indeed, this highlights the need to explore its potential modification and adaptation. Through innovations such as hygienic processing, odour-neutralising treatments and incorporation into eco-friendly construction materials or bio-fuel production, cow dung may potentially be re-contextualised for urban use. This demonstrates how indigenous practices can be re-engineered through innovation without losing their cultural touch. This aligns with modern urban demands for green technologies and sustainable solutions. In any case, it is imperative to now focus on the concluding remarks of this article as well as its future scholarly implications. These are presented in the next final section.

## **Conclusion and future scholarly implications**

In this article, it has been argued that traditional amaXhosa and amaZulu practices reflect multifaceted philosophies on sustainability, resourcefulness and cultural richness within pre-modern societies. Rooted in a profound ecological consciousness, these practices utilised natural materials and local knowledge systems to address daily needs effectively. For example, the use of cow dung for cleaning and repelling snakes or the application of plants with antibacterial properties illustrates an advanced blend of environmental wisdom into everyday life. These methodologies not only provided practical benefits, including sanitation and pest control, but also advanced a harmonious coexistence with the natural environment. The wealth of these practices underscores the urgency of preserving and valuing indigenous knowledge in contemporary contexts and beyond. As modern societies confront escalating environmental crises such as climate change and resource depletion, the sustainable strategies of amaXhosa and amaZulu offer vital lessons. Their practices exemplify a delicate appreciation of local ecosystems that should inform present-day sustainability and conservation efforts. Beyond ecological value, these indigenous methodologies draw attention to the broader significance of cultural heritage in addressing global challenges. Integrating such traditional wisdom into contemporary educational curricula, legal frameworks and development policies could bridge cultural divides, fuel environmental acknowledgement and revalidate the enduring relevance of African knowledge systems. Ultimately, documenting and revitalising these practices not

only honours the cultural identities of these ethnic groups but also contributes meaningfully to global discourses on sustainable living and ecological balance.

As we approach the finality of this discourse, we suggest that future scholarly interrogations should critically examine how the traditional practices of amaXhosa and amaZulu may be adapted and integrated into contemporary sustainability frameworks. This necessitates systematic inquiry into the scientific foundations of these practices and an evaluation of their applicability within modern contexts, with the potential to yield innovative approaches to resource management and environmental conservation. Crucially, interdisciplinary discourses that bring together anthropology, environmental science and cultural studies could provide meaningful insights into the value of traditional knowledge and its capacity to address pressing global environmental challenges. At the core, a significant avenue for future research resides in comparative analyses of indigenous practices across diverse cultural contexts. Investigating how analogous approaches are employed in various indigenous communities worldwide could illuminate universal principles of sustainability and resourcefulness. Such a comparative direction has the potential to broaden human understanding of how culturally embedded practices collectively contribute to global strategies for environmental and sustainable development.

### Declarations

**Interdisciplinary Scope:** This article blends anthropological, environmental and cultural perspectives, as it interrogates indigenous amaXhosa and amaZulu traditional practices within their cultural, social and ecological contexts. Here, by integrating these schools of thought, the article not only situates traditional practices in their historical and cultural significance but also evaluates their scientific and environmental utility.

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