



THE DECODE KNOWLEDGE PROJECT



Regenerating Acholi Traditional Knowledge

Wise Woman Uganda is planting seeds of hope to regenerate biodiversity, medicines & communities in Northern Uganda.



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I. DECODE African Region Webinar Overview

The DECODE project is led by the **UNESCO Chair for Community-Based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education**, with co-chairs Professor Bud Hall and Dr. Rajesh Tandon. Partner organisations include **Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA)** and the **Centre for Global Studies, University of Victoria**. The project is funded by the **International Development Research Centre (IDRC)**. What follows is a report from the African Region Case Study Webinar.

Date: 10 April 2025 | Attendees: 159 (264 registered)

Title: Acholi Wise Women: How Wise Women Uganda is Applying Acholi Knowledge to Regenerate Land and Communities in Northern Uganda

Research Team: Prof. George Ladaah Openjuru, Julie Adoch, David Ocan, David Monk, Carmen Koessler Smith (storymap)



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Webinar Hosts: Gulu University K4C African Regional training Centre in CBPR, Wise Women-Uganda, PRIA, NALEPPO, & UNESCO Chair in Community-Based Research

Summary Themes: Indigenous knowledge (IK) for climate resilience, language preservation, and decolonizing research.

StoryMap: <https://arcg.is/1eT5aj4>

Full Video Here: https://youtu.be/_Ed5TXnLPEw

Structure of the webinar

Time	Topic	Speaker/Lead
5 mins	Welcome, territorial acknowledgement and introduction to webinar	David Monk
5 mins	Official opening	Professor Openjuru
15 mins	Highlights of Emerging Key Messages from DECODE Project	Rajesh Tandon
20 mins	Wise Women-Uganda Case Study	David Ocan & Julie Adoch
15 mins	NALEPPO Case Study	Alois Porokwa
15 mins	Discussants Reflect on African knowledge and climate change resilience.	Wangoola Wangoola Ndawula & George Ladaah Openjuru
15 mins	Questions and discussion with audience	David Monk & David Ocan
5 mins	Closing of webinar	David Monk

Presenters Information

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Derrick P. Otim Gulu University provided live translation from Acholi to English.
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Reflections by participants

Overarching DECODE Project (from Dr. Rajesh Tandon):



Community indigenous knowledge is **not opposed to academic knowledge**; collaboration leads to improved knowledge products, actions, and policy impacts.

Indigenous knowledge is more than just practical "know-how"; it is **embedded in culture, identity, spirituality, and values** like sustainability and inclusion. Local language is therefore very important.

Community knowledge work addresses real-world challenges; partnerships with academic researchers can develop respectfully.





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Acknowledging the **different knowledge cultures** (how knowledge is produced, shared, stored, used) between community/indigenous and academic systems is key to building trust.

Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR) is a suitable methodology for these partnerships, linking community and academic knowledge for climate resilience.

Knowledge dissemination needs to use **diverse forms** that are accessible and understandable to the community to facilitate action.

Community knowledge is highly relevant to **climate issues**.

Women's knowledge and leadership are particularly significant for community resilience, as they are often keepers of knowledge related to protecting natural resources.

Ethical, trusting partnerships require clear agreements on knowledge sharing, ownership, and benefit sharing.

Co-management and co-governance between community and academic partners can enhance the impact of knowledge mobilization.

Investing in **capacity building** within communities and partnerships is vital for achieving policy and practice impacts related to climate resilience and livelihoods.

Acholi Case Study (Wise Women Uganda):



The aim is to **regenerate biodiversity, medicines, and communities** through Acholi traditional knowledge.

Wise Women Uganda conducts trainings using **Trainer of Trainers (TOT)** methods for growing indigenous trees and medicinal plants.





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Their work involves **reforestation, regeneration of land and community, advising institutions, and advocating for the environment.**

Impacts include land regeneration, livelihood development, and mindset transformation.

The core belief is **"To heal the people, we first heal the land"**.

Specific valuable indigenous trees like Afzelia Africana, Khaya grandifoliola, "Oluwa", "Kituba", Shea, Entandrophragma Excelsum, and "Lucoro" are **facing extinction** and need conservation due to their various ecological and medicinal uses.

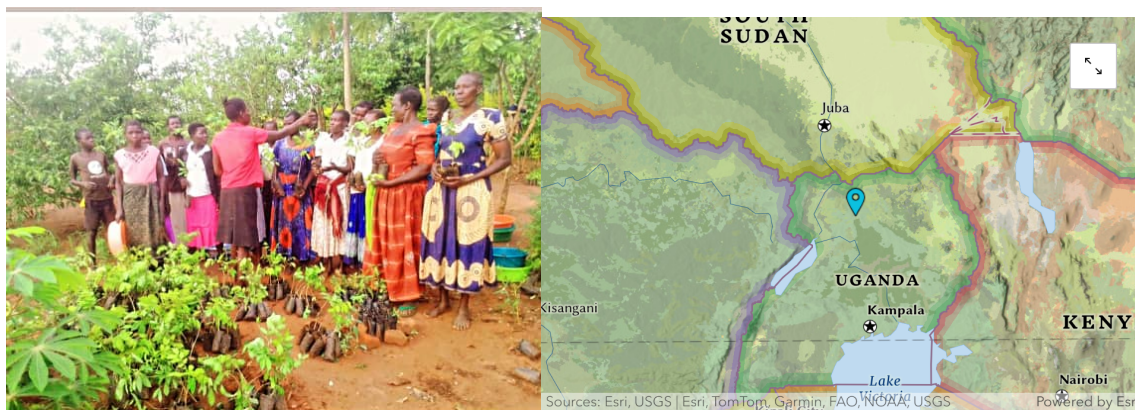
Indigenous knowledge, including on medicinal plants, is getting lost, even among older generations and cultural leaders.

Challenges include negative attitudes towards traditional practices, lack of resources, and **insufficient documentation** of indigenous knowledge.

Wise Women Uganda has influenced government policy regarding traditional medicine practices.

Collaboration between knowledge institutions (universities) and grassroots organisations like Wise Women Uganda is essential for generating and preserving indigenous knowledge.

Discrimination against indigenous people and their knowledge must end.



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Maasai Case Study (NALEPPO):



Climate change, especially unreliable rainfall, significantly impacts Maasai pastoralists, affecting pasture, water, and natural resources and increasing poverty.

Maasai people are **experts in their environment** due to their traditional way of life, possessing rich indigenous knowledge on plants, biodiversity, ecology, and climate.

Their language (Maa) is deeply linked to their landscape, culture, and spirituality.

Strengthening indigenous knowledge ingrained in their language is vital for maintaining resilience and connectivity with the ecosystem and spirituality.

Maasai are considered great environmentalists whose knowledge can support current mitigation efforts.

Elders (male and female) are the primary holders and transmitters of this knowledge. They are seen as indigenous scientists with deep knowledge of the environment, climate, weather signs (clouds, stars), natural resources, and ecology. Examples of rain signs include





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specific cloud formations ("ilopir"), appearance of certain birds/insects, flowering of acacia trees, ostrich roaring, wind direction, earthquakes, and the shape of the moon crescent.

Maasai culture integrates environmental conservation with traditional religion/spirituality through rituals, ceremonies, and taboos regulating resource use.

Maasai women are also crucial knowledge holders, acting as mobilisers, reminders, and trainers through songs, poems, and oral literature, promoting ethical practice and cultural unity.

Indigenous strategies for climate change adaptation and mitigation include **mobility** (following resources), **rotational grazing**, indigenous knowledge on resource management, **indigenous early warning signs**, and supplementing pastoralism with small-scale agriculture.

This valuable indigenous knowledge is in danger of extinction as it resides in the minds of elders.

There is an urgent need to **revive, revitalize, and document** this knowledge through research, particularly **serious CBPR**, before the elders pass away.

Co-creation of knowledge is needed, **mixing indigenous knowledge with formal modern knowledge** to decolonize it and apply it for community holistic development, policy



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informing, and duplication in other areas.



Professor Openjuru (Discussant)



Highlighted the importance of using indigenous knowledge to improve the lives of communities, countering the idea that all valuable knowledge must come from outside. He noted the challenge of articulate indigenous knowledge in English, suggesting that some authenticity is lost when thinking and explaining indigenous concepts through a non-local language framework. He proposed involving indigenous knowledge holders who do not speak English to present in local languages for translation to capture

authenticity.

He felt the struggle was deeper, requiring unlearning existing academic frameworks to include excluded knowledges.



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Responding to a question from Ramisha, he stated that global North institutions imposing their standards on global South indigenous knowledge work could be counterproductive. He urged for collaborative efforts that value all forms of knowledge without alienation, encouraging African universities to use local languages as languages of instruction.



Professor Wangoola Wangoola Ndawula (Discussant)

Reflected that indigenous knowledge is deeply intertwined with identity, livelihood, community, land, resources, ancestors, and power dynamics. He argued that it must not be divorced from its context.

He suggested a dedicated webinar for the indigenous nations of Uganda to discuss using indigenous knowledge for contemporary issues. He stated that indigenous knowledge will only truly flourish when indigenous peoples have power, which requires deconstructing neocolonial structures that hinder their progress.

Reflections from the Chat

Julie Adoch acknowledged the language challenge she faced, being born outside Acholi land. She stressed the need for **strong collaboration between universities (like Gulu University) and indigenous knowledge holders** to preserve indigenous knowledge, as this knowledge is at risk of getting lost. She also requested that institutions like universities support indigenous knowledge holders in the community.

Gopher expressed admiration for Professor Openjuru's reflection on language and thinking in English, hoping to see more African knowledge and languages gain prominence and show their impact.

Ramisha posed questions regarding the role of global North academic institutions in promoting indigenous knowledges given colonial legacies, questioning the appropriateness and potential ethical challenges.



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Jerome Bagenda raised a point about the limited scope of indigenous knowledge often discussed in webinars (often focusing on medicinal plants) and inquired about knowledge regarding spirits or shape-shifting.

Kedwin Odorch highlighted the challenge of connecting elders/original knowledge holders with the younger generation, noting that elders may be hesitant to share with younger, university-affiliated individuals, thus breaking the knowledge chain. He mentioned efforts by the K4C network, including theatre-based work, to bridge this gap.

Berett Shriber discussed the challenge in the SADC region where English often serves as a lingua franca, asking how indigenous knowledges can still be effectively shared when indigenous languages are not used, pointing out the disconnect between medium and content.

Key messages

1. Julie Adoch (Wise Women Uganda): Acholi Land Regeneration

a. Indigenous Trees as Lifelines

Acholi Proverb: “Pe romo konyo woto kom me nongo pii” (“Trees help us find water”).

Highlighted critically endangered species:

Afzelia africana (Beyo): Prevents soil erosion, medicinal bark.

Shea trees (Oluwa): Formerly used as natural bridges, now near extinction.

Entandrophragma excelsum (Opok): Sacred timber overharvested for profit.

b. Healing the Land to Heal People:

“Pe ducu wa mede ni pire tek. Tye ka wa dwogo cik me tim ber.”

(“We all need healing. The land must regenerate first.”)

Wise Women’s model: Train farmers to plant medicinal trees (e.g., Khaya grandifoliola for malaria treatment).

Impact: 500,000+ trees planted; partnerships with Gulu University to document IK.

C. Call to Action: “Universities must collaborate with us before this knowledge disappears with the elders.”

2. Alois Porokwa (NALEPPO): Maasai Indigenous Science

a. Climate Adaptation Strategies:





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Rotational grazing: Allows pasture regeneration.

Astro-meteorology: Predicting rains via star/moon patterns “Our word for God is the same as rain”.

b. Women’s Role in IK Preservation:

Maasai women compose songs/poems to transmit oral traditions.

c. Urgency:

“Elders are living libraries. If they pass, IK dies with them.”

3. Prof. George Openjuru : Decolonizing Knowledge

a. Language as Power:

Critiqued English-dominated academia: “Translating IK filters its essence. We must teach in Acholi first, then translate.”

Example: Gulu University’s new Acholi-language curriculum for IK studies.

b. Ethical Research:

“Global North institutions must stop imposing ‘ethical standards’ that erase indigenous ways of knowing.”

4. Prof. Wangoola Wangoola IK & Political Liberation

a. IK as Resistance:

“Indigenous knowledge is tied to land, ancestors, and power. You cannot separate it from the struggle against colonialism.”

Solution: “Africa needs autonomous institutions like Mpambo Multiversity to center IK outside Western frameworks.”

b. Call for Unity:

“The Acholi and Maasai must hold their own webinars. Decolonization starts with us.”

5. Universities Must Integrate Indigenous Knowledge Systems

Prof. Openjuru’s Call:

"Gulu University now teaches Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) in Acholi. This is not optional—it is epistemic justice."

Action Steps:

Partner with elders as co-lecturers (e.g., Mpambo Multiversity model).



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Offer degrees in Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) with local-language instruction.

Prof. Wangoola's Warning:

"Universities that tokenize IK as 'folklore' perpetuate colonialism. IK must be central, not marginal."

6. Climate Policy Must Be Co-Informed by Indigenous Evidence

Examples from the Field:

Acholi Wisdom (Julie Adoch):

"Our elders predicted this drought 20 years ago by observing Opok tree flowering patterns.

Science is now catching up."

Maasai Science (Alois Porokwa):

"NASA satellites cannot track pasture like our star-based rain calendars. But without funding, this knowledge dies."

Conclusion

This webinar has compellingly demonstrated the critical importance of indigenous knowledge (IK) in addressing contemporary challenges like climate change, drawing particular insights from the Uganda (Acholi Traditional Knowledge/Wise Women) and Tanzania (NALEPPO/Maasai IKS) case studies. These presentations align with the broader findings of the DECODE project, which examines community-led participatory research across diverse global contexts.

A key message emerging from these case studies, and indeed from the comparative analysis of the initial six projects under DECODE, is that community indigenous knowledge is not just a 'knowhow'; it is deeply embedded in a community's culture, identity, and spiritual worldview, with inherent values of sustainability and inclusion. The Maasai's dependence on land and nature has made them experts in their environment, their language is rich with terms connected to sacred sites and conservation, and their spirituality is linked to rain. Similarly, Acholi traditional knowledge, particularly held by the Wise Women, is focused on conserving the environment through practices like planting indigenous trees, which also have medicinal value. This knowledge includes detailed observations of nature as signs of approaching rain.

Both the Maasai and Acholi examples highlight that elders and women are primary holders and transmitters of this vital knowledge. Elders are seen as living libraries or community encyclopedias, their knowledge stored in their minds and passed down through language and oral traditions. Maasai women specifically act as mobilisers and trainers, using songs and oral literature to remind the community of their culture and ethics. The work of Wise





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Women Uganda exemplifies women's leadership and their role as a repository of knowledge and action for protecting the environment.

The case studies underscore that this Indigenous knowledge offers crucial strategies for climate resilience and adaptation. Maasai practices like mobility, rotational grazing, and indigenous knowledge on natural resource management are effective responses to environmental changes. The Acholi Wise Women's efforts in reforestation and regenerating biodiversity directly combat issues like desertification and the loss of important tree species. Insights from this knowledge can supplement modern science and initiatives to mitigate climate change effects.

A core tenet of the DECODE project, as highlighted in the webinar, is the critical role of community-university research partnerships based on participatory methods (CBPR). Collaboration is essential to revive, revitalise, document, and utilise this indigenous knowledge before it is lost, especially as the knowledge often resides in the minds of the elderly. The partnership between Gulu University and Wise Women Uganda demonstrates how such collaboration can lead to valuable insights and support community efforts. Co-creating knowledge by mixing informal indigenous knowledge with formal modern knowledge is seen as a way to decolonise research and apply knowledge for holistic community development and policy influence.

However, the webinar also shed light on significant challenges, particularly the need to overcome the legacies of colonialism which have often devalued or excluded indigenous knowledge and languages within academic and policy spheres. Ensuring that indigenous knowledge is respected, documented, and integrated authentically requires adjusting academic standards and fostering mutual respect between community knowledge holders and academic researchers.

In conclusion, the insights from the Acholi and Maasai case studies, resonant with findings from other DECODE projects, powerfully advocate for the indispensable role of indigenous-led evidence and the necessity of robust community-university research partnerships like CBPR. This collaborative approach is vital not only for preserving invaluable knowledge systems tied to culture, identity, and environment but also for developing more effective, locally relevant, and sustainable climate policies and enhancing community resilience in the face of environmental change. There is a clear call for greater recognition and support for



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indigenous knowledge systems within both research and policy domains to ensure a more inclusive and effective response to global challenges.



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