



# Leveraging community partnership: The case of Meraka Cultural Village

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## ABSTRACT

Community involvement in post-apartheid South Africa is marked by symbolic engagement and persistent power imbalances that marginalise Indigenous viewpoints and epistemologies. Drawing on decolonial theory, Indigenous Research Methodologies (IRMs), Ubuntu philosophy and Foucauldian discourse analysis, the article discusses how Indigenous epistemology can help reimagine community engagement. In this study, the Meraka Cultural Village in the Free State, South Africa, was used as a case study to demonstrate how practices embedded in the community, rooted locally and involving everyone, can disrupt existing knowledge hierarchies and secure epistemic justice. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and participant observation, and thematically analysed with an emphasis on power/knowledge dynamics. The results indicate that Meraka is a community where members take back control of their lives and the wisdom of the older generation is celebrated, and partnerships between the university and the community are strengthened through respect and sharing. Ubuntu provides a theoretical and practical basis for co-creation, trust, and collective well-being. Notwithstanding the persistence of institutional obstacles and discursive silences, Meraka helps create resistance, reflexivity and alternative ways of engagement that challenge the traditional top-down system. The idea of “pockets of hope” reflects how using Indigenous methods and Ubuntu thinking can bring decolonial prospects into community engagement. This study promotes a shift towards relational ethics and pedagogical transparency, positioning Indigenous individuals as equal partners in knowledge production and societal transformation. This enhances broader dialogues on decolonising academia and advancing socially equitable, inclusive engagement strategies within and beyond South Africa's higher education framework.

**Keywords:** Partnership, Community Engagement, Epistemic Justice, Meraka Cultural Village

## INTRODUCTION

Community engagement across the globe is still hampered by significant differences in power, unfairness in knowledge, and limited and competing interests. Marginalised communities are often left out of serious decision-making processes, and all they are offered are tokenistic meetings where information comes almost entirely from dominant sources.<sup>1</sup> These changes have increased the challenge

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<sup>1</sup> Gregory Davids et al., “A Rural Perspective on the Practice and Challenges of Community Participation in Post-Apartheid South Africa Insights from Rural Beaufort-West Municipality,” *Public Policy and Administration Research*, 2021; Jacqueline Teresa

for community development by supporting models in which decisions are made without communities instead of by them, yet they have also allowed for new inclusive and shared processes.<sup>2</sup>

South African law, reflecting the principle "The People Shall Govern" as set out in the preamble of the Freedom Charter and reaffirmed in the Constitution, acknowledges the importance of promoting community participation in the post-apartheid era. However, this involvement is usually limited by "spectator politics," which allows citizens to participate in the decision-making process but end up not making any real decisions in the end.<sup>3</sup> Indigenous knowledge, largely Ubuntu, focuses on relationships, respect among people and the good of the group, leading to greater collaboration and reciprocal action in engagement participation.<sup>4</sup> In education, restorative justice and community development, Ubuntu has worked well, demonstrating its ability to help decolonise knowledge and help empower minorities.<sup>5</sup> This study aims to show how communities, and the Meraka Cultural Village in particular, may help find solutions by using their culturally specific methodology and approaches. Although the framework shows that mainstream knowledge tends to ignore the attempts of Indigenous peoples at expression, it also points out areas where Indigenous viewpoints can be heard, leading to more inclusive and effective problem-solving strategies.<sup>6</sup>

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Decolonial Theory and Epistemic Justice in Community Engagement

Decolonial theory critically analyses the colonial legacies embedded in global knowledge production, revealing the ongoing supremacy of Western epistemologies that marginalise Indigenous and collective cognitive frameworks.<sup>7</sup>

This epistemic dominance operates through structural mechanisms that prioritise Eurocentric knowledge systems, often marginalising or devaluing Indigenous epistemologies.<sup>8</sup> In the case of South African higher education, these legacies are evident in curricula and institutional practices that sustain Western knowledge hierarchies, marginalising African knowledge systems and hindering substantive community participation.<sup>9</sup> In spite of the changes made after 1994, Eurocentric ways of thinking are still

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Charmaine Bock, Indepentia de Waldt, and Davy Julian du Plessis, "University-Community Engagement: Challenges and Mitigation Strategies. A Systematic Literature Review and Future Research Directions," *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science* VIII, no. XII (2025): 3192–3206, <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2024.8120265>.

<sup>2</sup> Deborah Lynch, Catherine Forde, and Athena Lathouras, "Changing Contexts of Practice: Challenges for Social Work and Community Development," *Australian Social Work* 73, no. 2 (April 2, 2020): 245–53, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0312407X.2019.1694047>.

<sup>3</sup> John J Williams, "The Politics of Social Change and the Transition to Democratic Governance: Community Participation in Post-Apartheid South Africa," *African Politics: Beyond the Third Wave of Democratisation*. Cape Town: Juta, 2008, 172–97; Davids et al., "A Rural Perspective on the Practice and Challenges of Community Participation in Post-Apartheid South Africa Insights from Rural Beaufort-West Municipality."

<sup>4</sup> Maren Seehawer, "South African Science Teachers' Strategies for Integrating Indigenous and Western Knowledges in Their Classes: Practical Lessons in Decolonisation," *Educational Research for Social Change* 7, no. (J2018): 91–110, <https://doi.org/10.17159/2221-4070/2018/v7i0a7>; Diana Hornby and Savathrie Maistry, "Developing Relationships for Community-Based Research at Rhodes University: Values, Principles and Challenges," 2022, 121–38, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-86402-6\\_6](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-86402-6_6).

<sup>5</sup> Mikateko Mathebula and Carmen Martinez-Vargas, "Ubuntu as a Valued Capability for University Students in South Africa," *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* 11, no. 2 (December 13, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.24085/jsaa.v11i2.3624>; Mofihli Teleki and Serges Djoyou Kanga, "Recognizing the Value of the African Indigenous Knowledge System: The Case of Ubuntu and Restorative Justice," in *Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Development in Africa* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020), 303–27, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-34304-0\\_16](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-34304-0_16).

<sup>6</sup> Lia Levin, "Perspective: Decolonizing Postmodernist Approaches to Mental Health Discourse toward Promoting Epistemic Justice," *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 13 (October 6, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2022.980148>; Bagele Chilisa, "Decolonising Transdisciplinary Research Approaches: An African Perspective for Enhancing Knowledge Integration in Sustainability Science," *Sustainability Science* 12, no. 5 (September 29, 2017): 813–27, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-017-0461-1>.

<sup>7</sup> Walter D Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Duke University Press, 2020); Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (Zed Books Limited, University of Otago Press, 1999); H S Bhola, "Ngugi Wa Thiong'o. Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature. London: James Currey; Nairobi: Heinemann Kenya; Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann; Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1986. 114 Pp. \$10.00. Paper.," *African Studies Review* 30, no. 2 (1987): 102–3.

<sup>8</sup> Juman Simaan, "Olive Growing in Palestine: A Decolonial Ethnographic Study of Collective Daily-Forms-of-Resistance," *Journal of Occupational Science* 24, no. 4 (October 2, 2017): 510–23, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14427591.2017.1378119>; Sarab Abu-Rabia-Queder, "Epistemology of Surveillance: Revealing Unmarked Forms of Discipline and Punishment in Israeli Academia," *The British Journal of Sociology* 73, no. 2 (March 7, 2022): 387–401, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.12924>.

<sup>9</sup> Savo Heleta, "Decolonisation of Higher Education: Dilemmas and Contradictions," *South African Journal of Higher Education* 30 (5): (2016): 1–12; Wilson B Asea, "Epistemic Decoloniality of Westernised Higher Education: A Discourse on Curriculum Justice and

present. According to Walker, this forms epistemic injustice, which indicates that Black students and communities are not treated as credible knowers and their ways of knowing are limited.<sup>10</sup>

This marginalisation includes the devaluation of indigenous epistemologies, such as those of individuals whose sustainable environmental knowledge and cultural practices are undermined by formal education and policy frameworks.<sup>11</sup> Institutional resistance to decolonial transformation obstructs the attainment of epistemic justice, as universities often demonstrate reluctance or strategic co-option rather than genuine engagement with Indigenous knowledge systems.<sup>12</sup>

Calls for epistemic justice and knowledge pluralism have intensified, aiming to dismantle entrenched knowledge hierarchies and foster more inclusive, equitable community engagement. This involves embracing Indigenous methodologies that prioritise relationality, communal knowledge, and co-production.<sup>13</sup> South African literature underscores the imperative of reinstating community participation as a core institutional objective, on a par with teaching and research, to enable genuine collaboration that respects and integrates indigenous knowledge systems.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, transdisciplinary and hybrid knowledge production models offer effective frameworks for mitigating power disparities and fostering communal epistemic settings that advance sustainable development and social justice.<sup>15</sup> These advancements are needed to ensure South African higher education becomes decolonised and includes the community in ways that are ethically, culturally and epistemically just.

### Indigenous Methodologies and the Role of Ubuntu

Indigenous Research Methodologies (IRMs) are centered on decolonisation, cultural values and community involvement to challenge more dominant Western approaches. These methodologies integrate Indigenous and Western techniques such as the 'research at the interface' model—to empower communities and foster self-determination. Reflexivity, identity, and power-sharing are fundamental to IRMs, frequently articulated through narrative and participatory methodologies.<sup>16</sup> In African contexts, Indigenous Research Methodologies (IRMs) employ Indigenous philosophies to authenticate local knowledge systems and resist methodological imperialism, thereby enabling ethical and contextually pertinent research that aligns with community realities.<sup>17</sup>

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Knowledge Integration at Historically White Universities in South Africa,” *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 21, no. 4 (October 23, 2022): 375–93, <https://doi.org/10.1177/14740222221104343>; Elvis Fon Tata et al., “Decolonizing African Science: Efforts, Challenges, and Future Directions,” *International Journal of Science and Research Archive* 10, no. 1 (October 30, 2023): 823–33, <https://doi.org/10.30574/ijrsra.2023.10.1.0840>.

<sup>10</sup> Melanie Walker, “Failures and Possibilities of Epistemic Justice, with Some Implications for Higher Education,” *Critical Studies in Education* 61, no. 3 (May 26, 2020): 263–78, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2018.1474774>.

<sup>11</sup> Natasha Louise Constant and Milongoni Peter Tshisikhawe, “Hierarchies of Knowledge: Ethnobotanical Knowledge, Practices and Beliefs of the Vhavenda in South Africa for Biodiversity Conservation,” *Journal of Ethnobiology and Ethnomedicine* 14, no. 1 (December 23, 2018): 56, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13002-018-0255-2>; Elvis Fon Tata et al., “Decolonizing African Science: Efforts, Challenges, and Future Directions.”

<sup>12</sup> Farzana Shain et al., “From Silence to ‘Strategic Advancement’: Institutional Responses to ‘Decolonising’ in Higher Education in England,” *Teaching in Higher Education* 26, no. 7–8 (November 17, 2021): 920–36, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2021.1976749>; Taqdir K. Bhandal et al., “Decolonial, Intersectional Pedagogies in Canadian Nursing and Medical Education,” *Nursing Inquiry* 30, no. 4 (October 28, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1111/nin.12590>.

<sup>13</sup> Juliet Raphael, “Decoloniality in the Psychedelic Research Space,” *BJPsych Open* 8, no. S1 (June 20, 2022): S68–69, <https://doi.org/10.1192/bjo.2022.237>; Amy Wright et al., “The Unexpected Benefits of a Decolonized Knowledge Translation Initiative for Indigenous Mother Participants,” *Qualitative Health Research* 33, no. 7 (June 14, 2023): 638–46, <https://doi.org/10.1177/10497323231167308>.

<sup>14</sup> Lester Brian Shawa, “The Public Mission of Universities in South Africa: Community Engagement and the Teaching and Researching Roles of Faculty Members,” *Tertiary Education and Management* 26, no. 1 (March 3, 2020): 105–16, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11233-019-09040-1>.

<sup>15</sup> Teklu Abate Bekele, Denis Thaddeus Ofoyuru, and Emnet Tadesse Woldegiorgis, “Assessing University-Society Engagements: Towards a Methodological Framework,” *Innovative Higher Education* 49, no. 2 (April 17, 2024): 201–21, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10755-023-09678-1>; Camilla Adelle et al., “Co-Production of Knowledge in Transdisciplinary Communities of Practice: Experiences from Food Governance in South Africa,” *Science and Public Policy* 48, no. 2 (June 23, 2021): 145–53, <https://doi.org/10.1093/scipol/scaa069>.

<sup>16</sup> Alexandra S Drawson, Elaine Toombs, and Christopher J. Mushquash, “Indigenous Research Methods: A Systematic Review,” *International Indigenous Policy Journal* 8, no. 2 (March 10, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.18584/iipj.2017.8.2.5>.

<sup>17</sup> Chilisa, “Decolonising Transdisciplinary Research Approaches: An African Perspective for Enhancing Knowledge Integration in Sustainability Science”; Mahlogonolo S. Thobane and Shandre Kim Jansen van Rensburg, “Transforming Methods for Research With Indigenous Communities,” 2022, 190–203, <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-7998-8844-4.ch010>.

Ubuntu, an African relational philosophy encapsulated in the maxim *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (a person is a person through others), provides a decolonial ethical framework rooted in compassion, interdependence, and reciprocity.<sup>18</sup> It modifies the interactions between researchers and participants by highlighting relational ethics, trust, and mutual accountability.<sup>19</sup> As revealed by Borti et al., Ubuntu's emphasis on working together as a community is very helpful for marginalised people, as it encourages them to participate more equally in group activities, including remote research.<sup>20</sup> In fields such as artificial intelligence and genomic research, Ubuntu encourages joint progress and appropriate conduct by following interactive and equal methods.<sup>21</sup>

Despite challenges presented by existing Western practices, integrating Ubuntu into institutional frameworks facilitates the attainment of decolonised, justice-focused research.<sup>22</sup> Successful examples, including the 500 Schools Project and library partnerships in South Africa, illustrate Ubuntu's capacity to foster trust and co-creation.<sup>23</sup> Systemic change requires institutional commitment and ongoing capacity-building, whereas Ubuntu promotes ethical collaborations between academia and the community that enhance epistemic diversity and underscore Indigenous values in research and practice.<sup>24</sup>

### Power, Knowledge, and Discourse in Community Engagement

Foucault's views on power, knowledge and discourse are useful for exploring the many aspects of collaboration between universities and the community. In power relations, Foucault pointed out that power and knowledge work together to form systems that shape the view of truth and who counts as a valid source of information.<sup>25</sup> In community engagement, Golob and Giles revealed that institutional information often prevails over local or experiential knowledge, reinforcing unequal power dynamics.<sup>26</sup> These alliances are socially constructed through discourses shaped by institutional contexts and societal viewpoints on social concerns.<sup>27</sup> Discourse, therefore, both restricts and enables, shaping identities and duties within these relationships.<sup>28</sup> Identifying these discursive frameworks provides an opportunity to

<sup>18</sup> C Ewuoso and S Hall, "Core Aspects of Ubuntu: A Systematic Review," *South African Journal of Bioethics and Law* 12, no. 2 (December 17, 2019): 93, <https://doi.org/10.7196/SAJBL.2019.v12i2.00679>; Unifier Dyer, "Ubuntu and the More-Than-Human: Lessons from African and African Diaspora Feminists," *Feminist Formations* 36, no. 3 (December 2024): 119–37, <https://doi.org/10.1353/ff.2024.a950664>.

<sup>19</sup> Neil Bilotta, "Confronting Social Work Worldviews: Ubuntu and Procedural Research Ethics with Persons Experiencing Refugee Status," *International Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics* 19, no. 2 (August 19, 2022): 124–52, <https://doi.org/10.55521/10-019-209>; Azwihangwisi Helen Mavhandu-Mudzusi, "Application of Ethics in the South African Rural Context," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 22 (October 12, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069231193592>.

<sup>20</sup> Adeline M. Borti et al., "Using Ubuntu as a Research Paradigm to Unpack How Ghanaian Novice Teachers and Their Collaborators Engaged Virtually in Collaborative International Qualitative Research," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 23 (January 20, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069241241149>.

<sup>21</sup> Nchangwi Syntia Munung, Jantina de Vries, and Bridget Pratt, "Genomics Governance: Advancing Justice, Fairness and Equity through the Lens of the African Communitarian Ethic of Ubuntu," *Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy* 24, no. 3 (September 2, 2021): 377–88, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11019-021-10012-9>.

<sup>22</sup> Raavee Kadam and George Frempong, "Decolonizing Management Education: A Bibliometric Analysis of Ubuntu," *International Journal of Educational Management* 39, no. 1 (January 27, 2025): 178–97, <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJEM-09-2023-0439>.

<sup>23</sup> S. Mohapi, "Experiences of Ubuntu-Infused Research Processes: Educational Research Project in South Africa," 2019; Siviwe Bangani and Luyanda Dube, "South African Academic Libraries as Contributors to Social Justice and Ubuntu through Community Engagement," *IFLA Journal* 49, no. 3 (October 27, 2023): 541–53, <https://doi.org/10.1177/03400352231166751>.

<sup>24</sup> Joy Tauetsile, "Employee Engagement in Non-Western Contexts: The Link between Social Resources *Ubuntu* and Employee Engagement," *International Journal of Cross Cultural Management* 21, no. 2 (August 16, 2021): 245–59, <https://doi.org/10.1177/14705958211007874>; Keymanthri Moodley and Chad Beyer, "Tygerberg Research Ubuntu-Inspired Community Engagement Model: Integrating Community Engagement into Genomic Biobanking," *Biopreservation and Biobanking* 17, no. 6 (December 11, 2019): 613–24, <https://doi.org/10.1089/bio.2018.0136>.

<sup>25</sup> Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977* (Vintage, 1980).

<sup>26</sup> Matias I. Golob and Audrey R. Giles, "Challenging and Transforming Power Relations within Community-Based Participatory Research: The Promise of a Foucauldian Analysis," *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health* 5, no. 3 (November 2013): 356–72, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2013.846273>.

<sup>27</sup> Roni Strier, "The Construction of University-Community Partnerships: Entangled Perspectives," *Higher Education* 62, no. 1 (July 1, 2011): 81–97, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-010-9367-x>.

<sup>28</sup> Mingyue Michelle Gu and Lu Yu, "An Investigation of Citizenship Construction among Students in Higher Education: A Foucauldian Perspective," *Higher Education* 84, no. 1 (July 1, 2022): 51–65, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-021-00754-z>.

contest hierarchical norms and foster ethical, reciprocal recognition between institutions and communities.<sup>29</sup>

Community engagement programs often exacerbate existing power imbalances when organisational frameworks neglect to rectify these inequities, leading to the marginalisation or tokenisation of community voices.<sup>30</sup> Engagement can be transformative by fostering equitable participation and contesting prevailing power structures. Bhatt et al. underscore how community collectives use specific cultural adaptations and autonomy to negotiate and resist marginalisation.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, incorporating techniques such as implicit bias training and positionality reflection into research collaborations can reallocate power and cultivate mutual respect.<sup>32</sup> Structural and budgetary constraints often hinder these initiatives, requiring ongoing discourse to ensure genuine widespread engagement.<sup>33</sup>

Discourse significantly shapes the information recognised in interaction processes by privileging dominant epistemologies and marginalising alternatives. Rashid and Griffin demonstrate that modernisation narratives in global medical education sustain Western epistemic dominance, marginalising knowledge from the Global South.<sup>34</sup> Kittleson and Southerland highlight that an emphasis on technical skills, while neglecting diverse perspectives, can impede collaboration within engineering education.<sup>35</sup> The integration of diverse information types within hybrid discourse environments has the potential to disrupt existing hierarchies, as evidenced in science classrooms and the knowledge practices of marginalised groups.<sup>36</sup> These discursive frameworks shape identities and participation dynamics, determining who feels empowered or marginalised.<sup>37</sup> Assessing these power-focused narratives is crucial to promoting inclusive and equitable community engagement.

### Transformative and Participatory Approaches in Engaged Scholarship

Transformative and participatory methodologies in engaged research foster collaboration and the co-creation of knowledge with communities. According to Cornish et al., in Participatory Action Research (PAR), individuals work together to resolve social issues, develop trust, reflect and drive change in

<sup>29</sup> Clare Woolhouse et al., "Collaborative Research as Community Learning in a Higher Education Context, or 'What Would Rod Stewart Do?,'" *Studies in Higher Education* 45, no. 3 (March 3, 2020): 477–91, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2019.1630808>; Michael Dillon, "A Foucauldian Analysis of Power Relations in an Action Research Study," *Action Research* 12, no. 2 (June 4, 2014): 209–23, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1476750314529598>.

<sup>30</sup> E. De Weger et al., "Achieving Successful Community Engagement: A Rapid Realist Review," *BMC Health Services Research* 18, no. 1 (December 13, 2018): 285, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12913-018-3090-1>; Sarah E. Dempsey, "Critiquing Community Engagement," *Management Communication Quarterly* 24, no. 3 (August 9, 2010): 359–90, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0893318909352247>.

<sup>31</sup> Babita Bhatt et al., "Prefiguring Alternative Organizing: Confronting Marginalization through Projective Cultural Adjustment and Tempered Autonomy," *Organization Studies* 45, no. 1 (January 24, 2024): 59–84, <https://doi.org/10.1177/01708406231203295>.

<sup>32</sup> Lauri Andress et al., "Addressing Power Dynamics in Community-Engaged Research Partnerships," *Journal of Patient-Reported Outcomes* 4, no. 1 (December 5, 2020): 24, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41687-020-00191-z>.

<sup>33</sup> Bridget Pratt, Tanya Seshadri, and Prashanth N. Srinivas, "Overcoming Structural Barriers to Sharing Power with Communities in Global Health Research Priority-Setting: Lessons from the Participation for Local Action Project in Karnataka, India," *Global Public Health* 17, no. 12 (December 2, 2022): 3334–52, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17441692.2022.2058048>; Helen Jarvis, "Community Organising in Higher Education: Activist Community-Engaged Learning in Geography," *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* 48, no. 3 (May 26, 2024): 368–88, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03098265.2023.2250996>.

<sup>34</sup> Mohammed Ahmed Rashid and Ann Griffin, "Is West Really Best? The Discourse of Modernisation in Global Medical School Regulation Policy," *Teaching and Learning in Medicine* 36, no. 4 (August 7, 2024): 504–15, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10401334.2023.2230586>.

<sup>35</sup> Julie M. Kittleson and Sherry A. Southerland, "The Role of Discourse in Group Knowledge Construction: A Case Study of Engineering Students," *Journal of Research in Science Teaching* 41, no. 3 (March 26, 2004): 267–93, <https://doi.org/10.1002/tea.20003>.

<sup>36</sup> Christine Lee Bae et al., "Hybrid Discourse Spaces: A Mixed Methods Study of Student Engagement in U.S. Science Classrooms," *Contemporary Educational Psychology* 71 (October 2022): 102108, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cedpsych.2022.102108>; Vanessa L. Kitzie et al., "Advancing Information Practices Theoretical Discourses Centered on Marginality, Community, and Embodiment: Learning from the Experiences of <sc>lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual</Sc> (LGBTQIA+) Communities," *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology* 73, no. 4 (April 23, 2022): 494–510, <https://doi.org/10.1002/asi.24594>.

<sup>37</sup> Wei Zeng and Letitia Fickel, "Exploring Collective Identity of a Group of Teaching-Oriented Academics amid Research Discourse: A Chinese Case," *Higher Education* 82, no. 3 (September 4, 2021): 651–68, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-021-00728-1>; James S. Wright and Taeyeon Kim, "Reframing Community (Dis)Engagement: The Discursive Connection between Undemocratic Policy Enactment, Minoritized Communities and Resistance," *Journal of Education Policy* 37, no. 2 (March 4, 2022): 186–204, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2020.1777467>.

society.<sup>38</sup> They challenge traditional Western ways of learning by placing more value on local and lived experiences.<sup>39</sup> By using co-creative approaches such as community-based participatory research (CBPR), different stakeholders contribute to both identifying problems and developing approaches to address them, which guarantees that the research is based on reality.<sup>40</sup> These methodologies are built around the notion of shared control and regularly work together to eliminate traditional hierarchy.<sup>41</sup>

In South Africa, participatory frameworks such as Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (PALAR) have facilitated enduring reciprocal community participation by improving collective learning and capacity building among academics, students, and communities.<sup>42</sup> Participatory action research and community-based research projects demonstrate collaborative efforts of community stakeholders to generate evidence and implement contextually relevant interventions, thereby empowering marginalised individuals and fostering sustainable change.<sup>43</sup> Complementary methods, such as community asset mapping and youth participatory projects, highlight the importance of cultural sensitivity and ongoing support to sustain involvement and efficacy.<sup>44</sup>

The Meraka Cultural Village illustrates transformative engaged scholarship through ubuntu, highlighting relationality, reciprocity, and mutual respect among community members, students, and scholars. Building shelters with sustainable materials from indigenous communities opposes typical research methods and promotes empowerment.<sup>45</sup> Meraka brings its knowledge into real life by supporting unprivileged individuals in using green technologies and permaculture to resolve both economic and environmental problems across the Free State.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### Foucault's Theory of Power

Power is a 'strategic situation that is dispersed in a multiplicity of forced relations'.<sup>46</sup> He describes discursive power as omnipresent and existing throughout society. Foucault talks about power as existing in all aspects of society.<sup>47</sup> Zooming in on the argument that Ghorashi and Sabelis made for the fluidity of power: they argue that power is intertwined with everyday practices, discourse, and experiences.<sup>48</sup> This argument is inspired by Foucault's description of power as omnipresent and without a fixed (palpable) source. Foucault's idea is that power is a complex, dynamic force that shapes our society, and it is not just about one group having power over another but rather a web of interactions where power is

<sup>38</sup> Flora Cornish et al., "Participatory Action Research," *Nature Reviews Methods Primers* 3, no. 1 (April 27, 2023): 34, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s43586-023-00214-1>.

<sup>39</sup> Bill Genat, "Building Emergent Situated Knowledges in Participatory Action Research," *Action Research* 7, no. 1 (March 1, 2009): 101–15, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1476750308099600>; C. Lenette, "Participatory Action Research," in *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Social Science Research Methods* (2455 Teller Road, Thousand Oaks California 91320 United States of America : Sage Publications, Inc., 2022), <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412950589.n693>.

<sup>40</sup> Albine Moser and Irene Korstjens, "Series: Practical Guidance to Qualitative Research. Part 5: Co-Creative Qualitative Approaches for Emerging Themes in Primary Care Research: Experience-Based Co-Design, User-Centred Design and Community-Based Participatory Research," *European Journal of General Practice* 28, no. 1 (December 31, 2022): 1–12, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13814788.2021.2010700>.

<sup>41</sup> Sean A. Kidd and Michael J. Kral, "Practicing Participatory Action Research," *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 52, no. 2 (April 2005): 187–95, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.52.2.187>; Allan Feldman, "Participatory and Critical Action Research," *Educational Action Research* 31, no. 4 (August 8, 2023): 611–19, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2023.2252212>.

<sup>42</sup> Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt, "Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (PALAR) for Community Engagement: A Theoretical Framework," *Educational Research for Social Change*, 2015.

<sup>43</sup> Denny Mabetha et al., "Realising Radical Potential: Building Community Power in Primary Health Care through Participatory Action Research," *International Journal for Equity in Health* 22, no. 1 (May 17, 2023): 94, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12939-023-01894-7>; Maghboeba Mosavel et al., "Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) in South Africa: Engaging Multiple Constituents to Shape the Research Question," *Social Science & Medicine* 61, no. 12 (December 2005): 2577–87, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2005.04.041>.

<sup>44</sup> Naiema Taliep et al., "Community Asset Mapping as an Action Research Strategy for Developing an Interpersonal Violence Prevention Programme in South Africa," *Action Research* 21, no. 2 (June 29, 2023): 175–97, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1476750319898236>; Gillian F. Black and Pam Sykes, "Steps Toward Engagement Integrity: Learning From Participatory Visual Methods in Marginalized South African Communities," *Frontiers in Public Health* 10 (June 27, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2022.794905>.

<sup>45</sup> B. Ntsele, *I Am Because You Are: Engaging For Change*, 2022.

<sup>46</sup> Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power. I: Dreyfus," *Hubert & Rabinow*, 1983.

<sup>47</sup> Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*.

<sup>48</sup> Halleh Ghorashi and Ida Sabelis, "Juggling Difference and Sameness: Rethinking Strategies for Diversity in Organizations," *Scandinavian Journal of Management* 29, no. 1 (2013): 78–86.

exercised and resisted in multiple ways.<sup>49</sup> This notion of power represents a departure from traditional, more simplistic understandings of power as something possessed or wielded by individuals or institutions. Instead, Foucault's definition emphasises the complexity and diffusion of power within society. In his view, discursive power is the way people, events, and other societal actors are understood and described, which is often invisible without analysis.

According to Ghorashi and Sabelis, power is everywhere. In this context, power is invisible and therefore not too important on the agenda because it hides in subtle forms. In paying close attention, there is often an observation of the presence of power everywhere in the reflections, the practices, the voices, the experiences, and the actions of those currently participating and those who have participated in the past.<sup>50</sup> Therefore, its invisibility makes it normal since it is entangled in routines and norms, hence taken for granted. The study leverages lessons from the Meraka Cultural Village by adopting Foucault's concept of power in a more communal and cultural setting where power is exercised through consensus, dialogue, and mutual care, fostering social cohesion and empowerment rather than domination. This challenges dominant narratives of power as control and opens space for inclusive governance and participatory decision-making.

## METHODOLOGY

A qualitative, decolonial study approach was used, based on Indigenous Research Methodologies (IRMs) and informed by Ubuntu and Foucault's methods of analysis. The investigation of the Meraka Cultural Village in the Free State aimed to place Indigenous knowledge first, allow members of the community to reshape traditional forms of knowledge hierarchies and use inclusive community activities to examine epistemic justice.

### Research Paradigm and Positionality

Within the context of a decolonial research framework, the study recognises that knowledge is formed by society, carries power and is tied to the history of colonisation. It contests the influence of Eurocentric thought by choosing to focus on Indigenous minds, customs and traditions. Following the work of Smith and recent scholars who emphasised taking a critical approach and being more understanding, reflexivity was used to examine how the author's position could impact the research.<sup>51</sup> Careful attention to power dynamics allowed all participants to feel they belonged as contributors of knowledge, confirming ethics and humility throughout the study.

### Site and Context

The case of the Meraka Cultural Village was chosen since it reflects Indigenous resurgence, community-based efforts for the environment and active community learning. In rural Free State, Meraka mixes efforts to preserve culture, introduce eco-technology and build strong relationships with universities. It allows for a detailed look at how Indigenous ways of learning deal with important issues in communities and help achieve epistemic justice post-apartheid.

### Participants and Sampling

People involved with Meraka were selected from a set of key stakeholders through purposive and snowball sampling to get a variety of opinions about it. Community elders, youth artisans interested in eco-building, university staff and students, NGO partners and local policymakers were all part of the team. Individuals were interviewed in English and in their local languages, with translation and member-checking used to guarantee the interviews reflected the participants' experiences properly. As guided by Indigenous research principles, participants were included as collaborators and co-creators of the knowledge produced, rather than being solely as informants.

<sup>49</sup> Foucault, "The Subject and Power. I: Dreyfus."

<sup>50</sup> Ghorashi and Sabelis, "Juggling Difference and Sameness: Rethinking Strategies for Diversity in Organizations."

<sup>51</sup> Vivetha Thambinathan and Elizabeth Anne Kinsella, "Decolonizing Methodologies in Qualitative Research: Creating Spaces for Transformative Praxis," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 20 (January 1, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069211014766>.

## Data Collection

The data collection was mainly driven by in-depth, semi-structured interviews that aimed to capture honest accounts about knowledge, belonging, power, resistance and collaboration. Participants were free to express what they experienced in a way that reflected their own perspectives. The importance of reciprocity and the value of self-determination were considered to ensure that participants could influence narratives.<sup>52</sup> The review board gave permission and ethical clearance, and open conversations about the use of data persisted according to the Indigenous protocols.

## Data Analysis

Data analysis included both thematic narrative analysis and Foucauldian discourse analysis to highlight the unique traditions in Indigenous stories and the hidden forms of power in the language and writings of institutions. An inductive approach using NVivo was applied at the beginning to find key themes related to epistemic justice, knowledge co-creation, resistance and relational accountability.<sup>53</sup> The analysis was conducted using various steps to allow everyone to discuss and update the categories and appreciate the communal ownership of knowledge in Indigenous cultures. When Foucauldian discourse analysis was used, it revealed hierarchies, absences and different interpretations flowing from institutional tales related to decolonial community engagement. To validate the findings and ensure they met Indigenous research principles, preliminary results were shared with the participants and those in the community.<sup>54</sup>

## Trustworthiness and Ethical Practice

Trustworthiness and ethical principles were constantly upheld throughout the research. Several approaches were used to improve both the rigour and credibility of the study. The review of members and the discussion of the team allowed the participants to affirm and grow their ideas, while still maintaining their independence. Prolonged engagement with the Meraka community provided depth and contextual understanding beyond surface-level interactions. The detailed description, which included cultural and historical elements about Indigenous communities, allowed the findings to be applicable in different situations. Triangulating data from different sources and a variety of analyses added to the confidence in the findings. The study was guided by protocols from Indigenous groups, which placed value on respect, accountability and reciprocity, improving knowledge and empowerment among community members.

## PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section analyses the key findings of the Meraka Cultural Village project, highlighting how Indigenous methodologies and Ubuntu philosophy challenge traditional power dynamics in community engagement. It examines participants' experiences that exemplify the recovery of Indigenous knowledge, relationality, and co-creation, while simultaneously confronting enduring conflicts with dominant Western epistemologies. The discussion emphasises Meraka as a feasible model for decolonial, participatory research that fosters epistemic justice and social transformation.

## Meraka Cultural Village

The Meraka cultural village is a partnership formed by Mme Sebatso and Anita, a lecturer at the University of the Free State, on a smallholding site designated to organically build a cultural village.

<sup>52</sup> Thambinathan and Kinsella, "Decolonizing Methodologies in Qualitative Research: Creating Spaces for Transformative Praxis."

<sup>53</sup> Michelle E. Kiger and Lara Varpio, "Thematic Analysis of Qualitative Data: AMEE Guide No. 131," *Medical Teacher* 42, no. 8 (August 2, 2020): 846–54, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0142159X.2020.1755030>; Chad Lochmiller, "Conducting Thematic Analysis with Qualitative Data," *The Qualitative Report*, June 20, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2021.5008..>

<sup>54</sup> Arnd-Michael Nohl, "Hidden Contexts, Multilevel Comparisons, and the Postcolonial Location: Reconsidering the Documentary Method Vis-à-Vis Decolonization," *Qualitative Inquiry* 32, no. 3–4 (March 18, 2026): 267–78, <https://doi.org/10.1177/10778004241302298>.

These two friends come together to give indigenous building workshops on this site whilst also fulfilling Mme Sebatso's dream of building a space where different people come together to learn about each other. The Meraka Cultural Village represents a collaboration between the university and community developed through organic, participatory processes.<sup>55</sup> Therefore, the village serves as a creative hub for students, researchers and the local community to teach and learn about indigenous culture, particularly the construction of shelters using traditional materials such as cow dung, straw, horse manure and mud combined with innovative post-natural techniques. This kind of mutual learning fosters intergenerational knowledge transfer, hands-on training and community participation through skills development and service learning and community participation. This site functions as a living laboratory for indigenous architectural practices. The spatial configuration of Meraka is deliberately open and communal, fostering intergenerational knowledge exchange and collective learning. It is designed to accommodate fluid interactions among students, researchers, and local community members, thereby enabling a dynamic interface between academic inquiry and indigenous epistemologies. As Ntsele argues, the village embodies a decolonial praxis that reclaims space as a site of relational knowledge production; partnership is enacted through embodied, place-based learning and mutual recognition.<sup>56</sup>

This partnership exemplifies an engaged scholarship program that is co-created through the interplay of multiple forms of knowledge. Located in Roodewal, not far from the University of the Free State in Bloemfontein, the Meraka Cultural Village illustrates transformative engaged scholarship through the philosophy of ubuntu. This approach emphasizes relationality, reciprocity, and mutual respect among community members, students, and scholars.<sup>57</sup> By building shelters with sustainable materials sourced from indigenous communities, the Meraka initiative challenges traditional research methods and promotes empowerment.<sup>58</sup> Furthermore, Meraka actively translates its knowledge into practice by assisting underprivileged individuals in using green technologies and permaculture to address both economic and environmental challenges throughout the Free State province of South Africa.<sup>59</sup> This also serves as a positive way to strengthen local communities and promote sustainable living practices, thus providing a model for other regions to follow.



*Figure 1: Founders of Meraka cultural village*

<sup>55</sup> Ntsele, *I Am Because You Are: Engaging For Change*.

<sup>56</sup> Ntsele, *I Am Because You Are: Engaging For Change*.

<sup>57</sup> Ntsele, *I Am Because You Are: Engaging For Change*.

<sup>58</sup> Ntsele, *I Am Because You Are: Engaging For Change*.

<sup>59</sup> Common Good First., "Regenerative Meraka Practices: My Identity," n.d.

## Reclaiming Voice: Community Narratives and Indigenous Knowing

The Meraka Cultural Village has become a central space for reclaiming Indigenous knowledge and asserting community epistemic authority. By actively participating in projects, community members challenge dominant, Western-centered knowledge systems and assert their cultural expertise. Indigenous methodologies provide a framework for understanding how local knowledge can coexist with academic research, disrupting traditional hierarchies and validating lived experience.<sup>60</sup>

At Meraka, eco-building activities functioned as both practical tasks and symbolic acts of cultural revival. Participants described how engaging in these practices restored a sense of personal and communal identity. This demonstrates how reconnecting with Indigenous knowledge can have emotional, social, and epistemic significance, aligning with Walker's emphasis on epistemic justice.<sup>61</sup>

Intergenerational knowledge transfer emerged as a strong theme in participants' reflections. Community members shared stories of mentoring younger generations and passing on traditional skills. This approach highlights the dynamic nature of Indigenous knowledge, which evolves to address contemporary challenges while preserving cultural continuity. It embodies relational learning and community self-determination, which are core principles of Indigenous education noted by Dawson et al. It also reinforces Ubuntu values, emphasising interconnectedness and collective responsibility.<sup>62</sup>

Participants observed a shift in how universities engage with communities. Knowledge exchange was increasingly seen as reciprocal rather than hierarchical, moving from expert-led approaches to co-learning. A participant noted entering community spaces as a learner rather than a teacher, reflecting a move toward participatory knowledge production. This shift challenges traditional power imbalances and aligns with Foucault's critique of dominant knowledge structures, supporting the vision of shared epistemic agency.<sup>63</sup>



*Figure 2: Community members and collaborators in Meraka cultural village*

The relevance of Indigenous knowledge to address modern challenges was also emphasised. Participants rejected the idea that traditional practices are obsolete, demonstrating their adaptability and continued importance in sustainability and community development. Engaging in these practices was seen as both therapeutic and a reinforcement of Ubuntu principles, which value mutual care and

<sup>60</sup> Chilisa, "Decolonising Transdisciplinary Research Approaches: An African Perspective for Enhancing Knowledge Integration in Sustainability Science"; Raphael, "Decoloniality in the Psychedelic Research Space."

<sup>61</sup> Walker, "Failures and Possibilities of Epistemic Justice, with Some Implications for Higher Education."

<sup>62</sup> Dawson, Toombs, and Mushquash, "Indigenous Research Methods: A Systematic Review."

<sup>63</sup> Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*.

relational responsibility. This worldview positions people and land as inseparable, offering a strong alternative to Western individualism.<sup>64</sup>

### **Ubuntu in Practice: Relationality, Co-Creation, and Reciprocity**

Ubuntu played a central role in Meraka Cultural Village, functioning not just as a philosophical ideal but as a lived practice that shaped everyday relationality and community participation. Drawing from African philosophy, Ubuntu prioritised interconnectedness, compassion, and collective accountability.<sup>65</sup> The participants defined it as the basis for collaborative dynamics in the project. Group-oriented processes found their representation in the collective design and construction of structures. This collaborative approach showed collective authorship that violated the hierarchy paradigm and embraced the principles of common decision-making. Through these inclusive processes, Ubuntu created shared authority and built self-respect and confidence among participants by making everyone's voice matter.

Every day, community interactions manifested the relational and caring aspects of Ubuntu. Participants discussed how caring for one another was a daily experience and how one could always count on others for help. These instances of relational care reflect relational ethics in which trust, reciprocity, and affectivity are central to cooperative work and to sustaining group morale.<sup>66</sup> Ubuntu, as a lived experience, nullified perceptions of loneliness and worked towards the creation of a socially integrated setting in which people felt visible, cared for, and connected.

Ubuntu also had a profound impact on how knowledge was shared and transmitted in the community. Learning was not viewed as an individual activity but rather as a community responsibility. Those trained were obliged to share that training with others, mirroring the communal, intergenerational model typical of Indigenous research traditions discussed by Thobane and van Rensburg.<sup>67</sup> This practice treated every person as both a learner and an educator, bringing principles of justice and common capacity-building to the forefront.

The rule of reciprocity was applied to the sharing of resources. It was seen that compassion was more important than economic gain, especially when the people were in distress. This morality of caring not only demonstrated how Ubuntu outlines the wellbeing of the whole camp, prioritising it over personal gains, but it also instilled a culture of sympathy and similarity of humanity.

More broadly, Ubuntu influenced not just interpersonal relations but also the synthesis and use of different knowledge systems. It offered a guiding paradigm for mobilising cultural, ecological, ethical, political, and scientific knowledge through active, community-based scholarship. This integrative approach promoted inclusivity and reduced hierarchical power, promoting long-term social equality. Conclusively, Ubuntu was a moral guide and decolonial methodological principle of community engagement, advancing dignity, responsibility towards one another, and shared responsibility at the centre of transformative scholarly work.

### **Power, Silence, and Resistance: Negotiating Discursive Hierarchies**

At Meraka Cultural Village, community engagement is shaped by subtle power dynamics that reflect broader institutional hierarchies. These dynamics demonstrate how power operates through both formal authority and discursive practices, influencing whose knowledge is recognized and valued. Participants frequently noted that formal academic credentials are often privileged over lived experience and Indigenous knowledge, highlighting ongoing epistemic injustice in university-community collaborations. One participant explained that, despite extensive practical expertise, their contributions

<sup>64</sup> Bilotta, "Confronting Social Work Worldviews: Ubuntu and Procedural Research Ethics with Persons Experiencing Refugee Status"; Munung, de Vries, and Pratt, "Genomics Governance: Advancing Justice, Fairness and Equity through the Lens of the African Communitarian Ethic of Ubuntu."

<sup>65</sup> Ewuoso and Hall, "Core Aspects of Ubuntu: A Systematic Review"; Dyer, "Ubuntu and the More-Than-Human: Lessons from African and African Diaspora Feminists."

<sup>66</sup> Bilotta, "Confronting Social Work Worldviews: Ubuntu and Procedural Research Ethics with Persons Experiencing Refugee Status"; Mavhandu-Mudzusi, "Application of Ethics in the South African Rural Context."

<sup>67</sup> Thobane and Jansen van Rensburg, "Transforming Methods for Research With Indigenous Communities."

were sometimes questioned due to a lack of formal qualifications, illustrating how dominant knowledge structures marginalize grassroots expertise as explained by Fourie and Terre Blanche.<sup>68</sup>

The marginalisation of Indigenous knowledge also appeared in the scepticism surrounding environmentally friendly construction methods. Participants reported that alternative building practices were often dismissed as unreliable or primitive, reflecting a wider tendency to uphold Eurocentric technical norms at the expense of locally grounded knowledge.<sup>69</sup> This created tensions for participants, who were navigating the intersection of traditional practices and institutional expectations.

Institutional gatekeeping further constrained grassroots involvement. Participants described bureaucratic processes requiring top-level approvals, such as deans' or finance administrators' sign-offs, which introduced delays and reinforced hierarchical control. These processes often limited community agency and perpetuated unequal power relations. Concerns about the ownership and attribution of Indigenous knowledge were also raised. For instance, participants reflected on the ethical complexities of sharing traditional knowledge learned from others, highlighting questions around recognition, credit, and the commodification of Indigenous wisdom.<sup>70</sup>

Despite these challenges, Meraka created spaces for reflection and transformation. The village encouraged both community members and university affiliates to reconsider their roles in knowledge production, leading to the adoption of Ubuntu-informed ethics that emphasise mutual respect, consent, and shared humanity. A notable example was a university staff member who shifted away from hierarchical knowledge transfer toward a participatory, co-learning approach. This reflects principles of participatory research, where authority and responsibility are shared between all participants.<sup>71</sup>

Resistance at Meraka also emerged in subtle, strategic ways. Some participants, while valuing sustainable practices, opted for conventional or market-driven solutions in constrained circumstances. These decisions demonstrate how power, identity, and pragmatism intersect, revealing nuanced forms of resistance within everyday practices. These strategies underscore the role of the village as a site through which participants negotiate, challenge, and reshape existing hierarchies, highlighting the potential for meaningful transformation in community engagement.

### **Decolonial Possibilities: Pockets of Hope from Meraka**

The Meraka Cultural Village demonstrates how Indigenous knowledge systems can be integrated into community engagement to achieve both epistemic and social justice. By embedding decolonial practices into everyday activities, the project restores dignity and agency to local participants, directly challenging dominant colonial representations of knowledge.

One notable aspect of the initiative is the use of indigenous and natural materials in construction. Participants described working with land-based resources such as cow dung, straw, and horse manure not only as a technical choice but also as a deeply restorative and resistant act. These practices validated the importance of local knowledge in decolonial work, highlighting the symbolic and practical significance of land-based learning mentioned by Raphael.<sup>72</sup> The hands-on construction experience was described as a healing process that strengthened participants' connection to place, aligning with ethical research approaches that prioritize relationality and place-based knowledge.<sup>73</sup>

<sup>68</sup> Eduard Fourie and Martin Terre Blanche, "About Accountants and Translators: Reshaping Community Engagement in South African Psychology," *South African Journal of Psychology* 49, no. 1 (March 31, 2019): 39–51, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0081246318792775>.

<sup>69</sup> Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*; Heleta, "Decolonisation of Higher Education: Dilemmas and Contradictions"; Woolhouse et al., "Collaborative Research as Community Learning in a Higher Education Context, or 'What Would Rod Stewart Do?'"

<sup>70</sup> M.J. Themane, "Drivers and Inhibitors of Diversity and Social Justice in the South African Higher Education Sector: Reflections on a Decolonised Curriculum," *South African Journal of Higher Education*, March 2021, <https://doi.org/10.20853/35-1-4409>.

<sup>71</sup> Cornish et al., "Participatory Action Research"; Kidd and Kral, "Practicing Participatory Action Research."

<sup>72</sup> Raphael, "Decoloniality in the Psychedelic Research Space."

<sup>73</sup> Chilisa, "Decolonising Transdisciplinary Research Approaches: An African Perspective for Enhancing Knowledge Integration in Sustainability Science"; Courtney Ryder et al., "Indigenous Research Methodology – Weaving a Research Interface," *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 23, no. 3 (May 3, 2020): 255–67, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2019.1669923>.



*Figure 3: Earthen wall construction at Meraka cultural village*



*Figure 4: Creative reuse of tires and Indigenous architectural design at Meraka cultural village*

Meraka also challenges traditional university-community hierarchies with the active enactment of Ubuntu as a research ethic. Collective ownership and trust were developed through reciprocal and respectful relationships rather than formal institutional power. Participants emphasised that power at Meraka was derived from relationships rather than positions of authority, allowing authentic learning and collaboration. This redistribution of power reflects decolonial goals to dismantle epistemic inequalities and to uphold co-creation and shared responsibility discussed by Walker # and Zuber-Skerritt.<sup>74</sup> In doing so, Meraka provides a meaningful alternative to superficial forms of community engagement, allowing ethical and substantive collaboration to flourish.

The spatial configuration of Meraka further reinforces decolonial engagement. Moving interactions out of university offices to informal, community-based spaces signaled that knowledge is not confined to institutional settings. This reconfiguration affirms the community as a legitimate site of

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<sup>74</sup> Walker, "Failures and Possibilities of Epistemic Justice, with Some Implications for Higher Education"; Zuber-Skerritt, "Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (PALAR) for Community Engagement: A Theoretical Framework."

knowledge production, in line with calls to apply Indigenous epistemologies in academic contexts.<sup>75</sup> The informal, local space, Meraka, promoted relationality, belonging, and solidarity, bridging social divides and promoting inclusive knowledge sharing.

Finally, Meraka's teaching and learning practices emphasise transparency, openness to failure, and continuous experimentation. Participants highlighted that failure is not treated as a negative outcome but as a critical component of learning and knowledge production. Engagement at Meraka is guided by humility, ethical partnership, and long-term reciprocity. Participants do not view Meraka merely as a research site; instead, it represents a living space for justice-oriented, Indigenous-informed knowledge creation. Such practices align with broader academic calls to decolonise the social contract between universities and communities.<sup>76</sup>

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Following the research findings, it is suggested that when approaching local communities, universities and community partners should employ participatory and relational strategies, founded on Indigenous knowledge systems and the philosophy of Ubuntu. These involve the establishment of spaces in which co-learning and co-creation take center stage and community members are treated as equal partners in the production of knowledge. Practical measures may include transferring engagement activities out of institutional offices to community locations, using practical workshops and participatory projects that enable the intergenerational transfer of knowledge and incorporating Indigenous resources, practices and ethical frameworks into program development. In this way, institutions can develop trust, relational accountability, and culturally sensitive collaboration and break down hierarchical and top-down models of engagement.

Moreover, formal recognition and protection of Indigenous knowledge systems in the academic and development settings should be the priority of policymakers and practitioners. This may involve developing ethical principles on attributing knowledge, endorsing community-driven programs that customise local social and ecological issues, and encouraging long-term collaborations that strengthen reciprocity, transparency, and sustainable capacity building. Moreover, universities and funding agencies must ensure continuity, resilience and scalability of projects such as Meraka Cultural Village by providing resources and structural support. These measures will not only empower local communities but also aid in wider decolonial practices, epistemic justice, and inclusive community participation at both regional and national levels.

## CONCLUSION

This paper aimed to investigate the potential of Indigenous knowledge systems and Ubuntu philosophy to change community engagement through the case study of Meraka Cultural Village. The results indicate that participatory, place-based, and relational practices help communities repossess epistemic power, exchange intergenerational knowledge, and create collaborative learning spaces that can challenge hierarchical and Western-centric knowledge regimes. With the emphasis on how Meraka facilitates co-creation, trust, and mutual respect in practice and symbolically, this paper draws on the possibilities of these frameworks to enhance socially just and decolonial methods of engagement. Finally, Meraka Cultural Village is an example of how valuable community engagement can be achieved when Indigenous epistemologies are at the center of practice. The research confirms that incorporation of Ubuntu concepts in higher education and development projects has the potential to establish "pockets of hope" that challenge the prevailing power structures, empower community-university partnerships, and provide long-term opportunities for social transformation. The results of the study are a valuable addition to the current discourse on decolonisation of academia and offer a viable roadmap to policy-makers aiming to enforce equity, reciprocity, and relational ethics in community engagement.

<sup>75</sup> Shawa, "The Public Mission of Universities in South Africa: Community Engagement and the Teaching and Researching Roles of Faculty Members"; Wright et al., "The Unexpected Benefits of a Decolonized Knowledge Translation Initiative for Indigenous Mother Participants."

<sup>76</sup> Bhandal et al., "Decolonial, Intersectional Pedagogies in Canadian Nursing and Medical Education"; Shain et al., "From Silence to 'Strategic Advancement': Institutional Responses to 'Decolonising' in Higher Education in England."

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