



Indigenizing and Decolonizing Ethiopia's Education System: Pathways to Quality and Inclusive Education in the 21st Century

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Abstract

Education is crucial to the development of social values, knowledge formation, and identity construction. However, the major challenge faced by many post-colonial education systems, including Ethiopia, has been the extreme domination of Western models with little recognition of indigenous knowledge systems. The main objective of this study was to analyze the need for, and explore the pathways to, indigenizing and decolonizing the Ethiopian education system to promote quality and inclusive education in the 21st century. This study adopted qualitative research with a case study orientation. Data were gathered through interviews, FGDs, and document analysis, and analyzed thematically. The study reveals that Ethiopia's formal education system has been mostly constructed by externally dominant ideologies, which often ignore indigenous knowledge systems. The main challenge of Ethiopia's education in the 21st century is not only the externally dominant language of instruction, texts, and values, but also the epistemological hierarchy they establish. This epistemic displacement hinders the quality and inclusiveness of education, leading to the estrangement of students from community life, their own heritage, and the diminishing relevance of education to community demands. Even though Ethiopia has rich indigenous knowledge systems, they have not yet been integrated into the country's formal education curriculum, while a Eurocentric curriculum is commonly used. The study indicates that, despite the negative effects of dominant Western education systems on the country's education policy and institutions, there has been very limited experience of indigenous knowledge inclusion in the course curriculum. The country has opted for a dominant Eurocentric system of education rather than indigenous knowledge systems, which hinders inclusive and quality education. The Ministry of Education of Ethiopia should encourage the inclusion of indigenous knowledge in curricula, books, and other materials through systematic collaboration with local communities, organizations, and policymakers to establish quality and inclusive education in the country.

1 Introduction

Education, which is regarded as a vital factor in the progress of any society, has been used as an effective tool for the construction of human identities, transmission of culture, and enhancement of socio-economic advancement (UNESCO, 2006). However, the colonial legacies and the Western-inspired modernization projects that are still prevalent in

many postcolonial contexts continue to sideline the indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) of many African societies. Although the colonial-modernist type of education is associated with some merits, it has also played a vital role in the reconstruction of African societies along Eurocentric perspectives that create space for an emphasis on Western knowledge systems, pedagogical methodologies,

and curricula at the expense of Africa's diverse cultural identities and intellectual traditions (Al-Natour, 2016).

The notion of indigenizing education represents a turning point that departs from externally imposed Western paradigms toward a more participatory, accessible, and culturally authentic education system (Shava and Manyike, 2018). Not only does it do away with exogenous knowledge dissemination, but the paradigm change also incorporates other measures, which include the decolonization of the educational system and challenging paradigm questions such as: what are the underlying assumptions that guide the educational system? What is the distribution of power, and who has the authority to define ways of seeing that which is deemed knowledge? (Ndlovu, 2014). This process aims to identify, document, and integrate indigenous knowledge into all facets of the educational system, from curriculum design and pedagogy to assessment methods and institutional structures (Paraide, 2018).

Indigenization of the curriculum is gaining increasing research attention as higher education institutions seek to decolonize their programs and promote social justice, inclusivity, and representation. Scholars argue that Indigenous Knowledge (IK) can be sustained and revitalized through deliberate curriculum reform, thereby enhancing educational relevance and learner engagement. International experiences illustrate this growing trend. In Australia, the Great Guide to indigenization of the curriculum was developed to support staff at Central Queensland University in embedding Indigenous perspectives into teaching (Al-Natour, 2016). Similarly, tertiary institutions in New Zealand have engaged in indigenization and transformation initiatives since 1999. Attempts to safeguard African Indigenous Knowledge have also been advanced by academic institutions, individuals, and non-governmental organizations worldwide (Maila and Loubser, 2003). These efforts reveal that embedding indigenous perspectives can strengthen educational quality while fostering inclusivity and representation.

The need to decolonize education also extends across Africa. In South Africa, efforts to indigenize the curriculum, following an audit of IK by the

Council for Scientific and Industrial Research in collaboration with selected universities, resulted in the development of an Indigenous Knowledge System policy. Subsequently, the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Northwest University, and Unisa initiated the integration of IK into their academic programs. Moreover, the 2015–2016 student protests concerning curriculum decolonization in South African universities reflected widespread dissatisfaction with colonial curricular legacies (Grange, 2016). Nevertheless, decolonizing the curriculum has proven to be a challenging process. It is a demanding mission requiring institutional commitment and structural transformation. Universities also confront entrenched resistance to change, exemplified by incidents such as the 2021 case at Stellenbosch University. In this context, robust organizational support systems are important for the sustainable integration of IK in higher education and for the promotion of inclusive institutional cultures (Al-Natour, 2016).

Ethiopia, as a country with a long history of independence, presents an interesting case of educational acculturation. While successful in avoiding direct colonization, Ethiopia was, in fact, institutionally influenced by Western values of education, especially during Emperor Haile Selassie I's reign, thus forcing the obliteration of indigenous knowledge and learning practices. The ineffectively managed and categorized education system, presented as a standard one, fails to recognize the diversified culture, language, and ecology of the people of Ethiopia, thereby lessening the social and economic transformative capabilities inherent in every indigenous system. Therefore, the indigenization of the Ethiopian education system is imperative and should inevitably be holistic to address each dimension of the nation—a challenge that needs blending indigenous knowledge and adjustment to the national curriculum (Negash, 2006).

The Ethiopian educational system has been built on and is being shaped by Western paradigms and fails to recognize and celebrate indigenous systems of knowledge. This lack of recognition leads to the breakdown of traditional knowledge, culturally blind students, broadening educational gaps, and a lack of capacity to find locally relevant and ac-

ceptable solutions to local problems (Emeagwali, 2014). A comprehensive, inclusive, and quality education system is constrained by the dominance of Eurocentric perspectives in curriculum development. Accordingly, the misrepresentation of traditional knowledge in the curriculum constrains the relevance of the system and the students' ability to deal with the inherent complexities of the 21st century.

Ethiopia is now undergoing a paradigm shift that advocates education for sustainable development, which calls for a reformation of the existing school curricula. The argument is that constructive solutions to Ethiopia's idiosyncratic problems result from the valorization and appropriation of local resources, notably indigenous knowledge systems (Engdasew, 2022; Demssie *et al.*, 2020). Because the current educational system in Ethiopia is heavily influenced by Western outlooks and practices, it can exacerbate inequalities and hamper the promotion of Ethiopian students as agents of change and as contributors to the nation-building process (Gagura, 2023; Wondimu, 2019). As a result, this study sought to explore the compelling grounds for indigenizing and decolonizing Ethiopian education to incorporate IK into the curriculum, plug knowledge gaps, and foster a more relevant and effective learning environment. Nested in this ground, this study aimed to analyze the need for, and explore the pathways to, indigenizing and decolonizing the Ethiopian education system to promote quality and inclusive education in the 21st century.

2 Research Methodology

This study adopted a case study research design, which provides a profound and detailed understanding of the need for indigenizing the Ethiopian education system. Moreover, using a qualitative approach, this study explored the decolonization of Ethiopian education by integrating IK into the school curricula using an interpretive paradigm. The qualitative approach provides clarity and promotes understanding of the issues of transformation unfolding in the decolonization of Ethiopian education (Amare, 2021).

In this study, both primary and secondary sources of data were employed to fill the gap that was not

covered by one of them and to obtain ample information so as to realize the objectives of this study. Since relying only on primary data cannot fully capture current realities, the use of secondary sources of data was imperative. Therefore, the data that were obtained from primary sources were supported by secondary data collected from published and unpublished sources.

The target population of this study comprises policy-makers in the education sector, curriculum experts, university lecturers, school principals, and indigenous knowledge holders. From this population, participants were selected through a purposive sampling technique based on their expertise, experience, and involvement in educational policy, curriculum development, teaching, research, or indigenous knowledge practices relevant to the study. Thus, they could provide the desired and accurate information that would be relevant to the researcher's focus.

Key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and desk review were used as data collection methods. The primary data were collected through key informant interviews and focus group discussions. Key informant interviews were conducted with curriculum experts, regional education bureaus, university lecturers, school principals, and community elders who have a vast understanding of indigenous education in Ethiopia. This study used a semi-structured interview to investigate issues related to indigenization, decolonization, curriculum relevancy, language of instruction, and inclusive education. In addition, focus group discussions were undertaken with students, parents, and teachers. The composition of the FGD participants was selected considering factors such as gender, age, and educational background. Moreover, desk review was employed as a data collection method. Thus, secondary data were collected through a desk review of education policies, curriculum development documents, governmental documents, journal articles, books, and reports from international organizations. Sources were chosen because of their recency, relevance to decolonization and indigenization, as well as quality and inclusiveness in education.

The collected data were analyzed through the the-

matic analysis method, involving the identification of recurring themes and patterns relevant to the research questions and objectives. Data were coded to reveal underlying themes, which were subsequently discussed and compared to identify areas of convergence and divergence. Furthermore, ethical issues were considered throughout the research process, and all sources used were properly cited.

3 Results and Discussion

3.1 Current Status of Indigenous Knowledge Integration into the Ethiopian Education

Ethiopia enjoys valuable features of Indigenous Knowledge (IK) systems punctiliously hoarded over many generations. This knowledge system holds a range of indigenous practices, principles, inventions, and wisdom associated with natural resource management, agriculture, conflict resolution, governance, medicine, and various other facets of life. Ethiopia has begun a journey to include indigenous knowledge into its curricula and pedagogical approaches, recognizing their transformative benefits. Gumbo (2020) indicated, in his study done in Ethiopia, that there has been indigenization in curriculum development and studies as a plan to naturalize the knowledge base and viewpoints of those who are unnoticed, to make the curricula relevant. According to Makokotlela and Gumbo (2025), traditional knowledge has been downplayed to a greater magnitude due to a lack of revolution in higher education and other settings to decolonize the curriculum. However, the process is driven by a complex mixture of events and problems, leading to a complicated current situation.

Curriculum revision and policy provisions advocate the integration of traditional knowledge into the Ethiopian education system. The government of Ethiopia has identified the significance of IK to increase the relevance of education at local levels. The utility of incorporating indigenous knowledge, indigenous languages, and practices is exemplified by policies such as the Ethiopian Education and Training Policy. Regional Educational Bureaus (REBs) have also begun efforts to incorporate local history, indigenous problem-solving techniques, and traditional ecological knowledge into the curriculum; levels of practice, however, vary consid-

erably depending on available means, institutional motivation, and local participation (KII-01, October 2, 2025).

There is a desire to integrate IK into education at the policy level. The Constitution of Ethiopia recognizes the diversity of cultures and the rights of ethnic communities to sustain and develop their cultures. This has facilitated the formulation of education policies focusing on the need to incorporate local languages, history, and cultural values into the curriculum. Since the Education Sector Development Program lays emphasis on the need to adapt education to local contexts, this indirectly encourages policy for the inclusion of IK and indigenous knowledge into schools. The use of mother tongue language in primary schools is a step toward allowing children to learn about their local cultures and indigenous knowledge (MoE, 2015).

Despite these proclamations, the reality remains patchy, and the integration of IK into the classroom is partial. The greatest challenge faced is related to the practical operationalization of these policies. This requires massive investment in developing curriculum materials, training teachers, providing learning resources that are usable and relevant, and translating generic pronouncements of policy into practical curriculum content, pedagogical methods, and learning tools. Many teachers are unequipped with the knowledge or pedagogical skills to incorporate IK into their classroom lessons. In addition, the curriculum is seldom free from undue emphasis on standardized content, which is nationally set and lacks scope to accommodate local knowledge. IK is more often assimilated through fragmentation than in an integrative manner. This may lead to a situation where IK is seen as trivial or secondary rather than formal science (KII-02, October 5, 2025).

However, there are positive developments to report. Some universities and research institutions are documenting and promoting IK through academic studies, research conferences, and community-based learning programs. Additionally, local knowledge is now integrated into agricultural and environmental education, thus acknowledging the eco-innovations achieved by local communities over centuries. Moreover, endeavors are being made to include mother tongue in the school system and thus

to assist students in studying in their first language (MoE, 2015; Wagaw, 2005).

At present, the education system in Ethiopia has a problem of giving precedence to a one-size-fits-all Western hegemonic version rather than the knowledge and experience of the indigenous Ethiopians themselves. Ethiopian indigenous knowledge is sidelined in the current curriculum, despite the fact that the 1994 education policy recognizes the need for utilizing this valuable resource (Transitional Government of Ethiopia, 1994). The policy promises a combination of indigenous and modern education.

The idea of one of the key informants is quoted below:

The Ethiopian education policy acknowledges the worth of indigenous knowledge systems for development and the preservation of cultural identity. The curriculum mandate that promotes teachers to contextualize learning has been revised. The aim is certainly robust, and IK is theoretically included in subject areas such as civics, environmental science, and agriculture. However, the actual application of this incorporation remains inadequate.

Despite the gap, the incorporation of indigenous knowledge is becoming crucial for creating a resilient national identity, particularly in light of Ethiopia's exceptional history as a state that maintained its independence for a large portion of the colonial era. Therefore, bridging the gap between policy and practice in integrating indigenous knowledge into the curriculum is a vital step toward more relevant and empowering education for Ethiopian students. In general, the findings of this study show that efforts were made, to some extent, to indigenize the Ethiopian curriculum through the inclusion of traditional knowledge, which facilitates the decolonization processes in Ethiopia.

3.2 Benefits of Integrating Indigenous Knowledge Systems into Ethiopia's Curriculum

Ethiopia benefits from the inclusion of IKS into the country's education system. It is not just an add-on; it is a necessary paradigm shift to recognize that

the understanding, significance, and application of locally derived knowledge are crucial, along with indigenous schools of academic thought. Bringing IKS into the curriculum is important to the formation of identity, values, knowledge creation, and sustainable development (KII-03, November 8, 2025).

The most compelling reason for including IKS is to provide a more relevant and engaging learning experience for students. Integrating students' own cultures, histories, and traditions into their education can create an earthly connection between them and the educational course. Thus, education takes a new, nourishing, inward journey to become a meaning-building process. IK presents solid examples and practical applications, which make abstract, intangible concepts more reasonable and feasible for learners. Studying methods of storing grains traditionally or the underpinnings of ecology by using native agricultural practices can seem extremely beneficial for developing learners' cognition and reflection skills. Connecting education with local realities becomes an effort to reduce the disjuncture between school and community and maintains a sense of community and institutional ownership (KII-04, November 15, 2025).

The assimilation of IKS can facilitate learning outcomes in a wide range of courses. Indigenous knowledge systems reflect complex understandings that are frequently highly sophisticated in fields such as medicine and natural resource management, and their inclusion exposes students to new paradigms and creative resolutions to pressing issues. Students can deepen their understanding of health and well-being through the integration of traditional Ethiopian medicinal training with indigenous health systems, and examination of traditional techniques of soil conservation can provide crucial insights into environmentally sustainable and food-secure farming strategies. By drawing on community knowledge, accumulated over many years and built upon by successful experimentation, students are exposed to a broader, and therefore more valuable, spectrum of information in relation to the world (Battiste, 2013; Dei, 2010).

The protection and revival of cultural identity is another advantage of the integration of traditional

knowledge. Since Ethiopia is a multi-ethnic country, it has to preserve its accumulated cultural and historical heritage systems. The proliferation of modern educational systems based on Western models has resulted in the loss of traditional wisdom systems and local dialects. The introduction of traditional knowledge into the curriculum enables learners to become familiar with their culture, wisdom systems, traditional governance systems, traditional folklore, and supreme beings. This reinforces intergenerational learning and continuity by ensuring that indigenous knowledge is transmitted to future generations rather than being lost (KII-05, October 20, 2025).

The application of IKS encourages sustainable development with the aid of the knowledge that indigenous communities possess about the environment. Indigenous people in Ethiopia have managed their resources effectively using traditional tools for generations. A variety of traditional practices, such as herbal medicinal use, water harvesting, and traditional irrigation techniques, are similar to many modern concepts of sustainability and can also address current complex challenges of environmental degradation, desertification, and climate change. By integrating traditional ecological knowledge into biology, environmental science, and agricultural courses, students can be provided with an environmentally sound and culturally meaningful way to connect with their environment. This also promotes the acceptance of sound environmental practices that help to maintain sustainable development and improve their knowledge about local ecosystems (KII-06, October 27, 2025).

The inclusion of indigenous knowledge also benefits students' learning experiences by offering them alternative viewpoints and methods of problem-solving. The knowledge system itself offers different ways of observing the world and enriches scientific information with concrete, lived, and holistic education. The medicinal elements of traditional healing processes can be used together with modern healthcare education. Equally, indigenous methods of conflict resolution, such as traditional laws and consensus decision-making, can be used as resources for legal and social sciences. This inclusion of indigenous knowledge makes education

more lively, interesting, and relevant to students' everyday lives, thus engaging and motivating them as learners (KII-07, October 30, 2025).

The integration of traditional knowledge enhances community participation within the education system. Communities are more willing to participate in the activities of the school and to endorse educational practices if their knowledge and practices are integrated into the formal education system. Elders and custodians of knowledge are valued as resource persons or guest lecturers, and their role in the institutional classroom helps to link formal education with community knowledge and practices. This participatory strategy allows for the restoration of the relationship of equality between the school and the community; it also allows for the creation of opportunities for students to participate in experiential, practical learning outside of the classroom to produce more relevant education (KII-08, November 3, 2025).

The incorporation of IKS plays a vibrant role in the preservation and promotion of Ethiopia's cultural heritage. In today's ever-changing and transient world, the threat of cultural standardization and the erosion of traditional knowledge is prevalent. The inclusion of IKS into the educational curriculum enables the state to defend its cultural identity and ensure the survival of its traditions for the future. This can include recording and documenting indigenous knowledge in order to teach it as part of the curriculum. The use of storytelling, traditional music, art, and craftwork can be incorporated into different courses to encourage cultural pride and appreciation. Such initiatives will encourage students to become custodians of their culture, ensuring that indigenous knowledge remains a living and integral part of Ethiopian society. This maintains not only knowledge but also safeguards the languages, traditions, and social systems that are inseparably intertwined with indigenous knowledge (KII-09, November 10, 2025).

The importance of integrating traditional knowledge systems into Ethiopian education is as diverse as it is wide-ranging. These include a more appropriate, inclusive, and fair education system that incorporates IK along with indigenous subjects and has various benefits such as greater student

engagement, enhanced learning outcomes, cultural preservation and pride, sustainable development, and community strength and well-being. By recognizing the inherent value of locally gathered knowledge and infusing it alongside native academic disciplines, Ethiopia can own its culture while giving its pupils the tools, knowledge, and traits to flourish in an ever-changing world. Ethiopia can build a stronger tomorrow upon a unified educational vision where leading and indigenous knowledge systems empower one another to create a stronger and more sustainable community (KII-10, November 12, 2025).

3.3 Indigenized and Decolonized the Ethiopian Education System

Indigenizing the curriculum is vital to handling the colonial educational system, which disregarded and excluded traditional knowledge systems. Because of this, higher education institutions began to consider decolonizing their curricula (Grange, 2016) and adopting IK as a method to do so (Gumbo, 2020).

Across all key informants and FGD participants, there was a strong consensus that the Ethiopian education system, though there have been some efforts since 2018, is largely alienating and irrelevant to the daily lives and cultural realities of Ethiopian students.

Regarding this, one university professor elaborated:

Our history books often begin with ancient Greece or Rome, not with Aksum or Lalibela. Our science textbooks rarely feature the innovations or environmental knowledge developed by our own people over centuries. Besides, our students learn about Shakespeare but have never heard the proverbs their grandparents use daily.

Self-willed lecturers/teachers did not have to wait for the transformation to be formally started by the leadership of the institution. They were motivated to take the first step to confront the educational atrocities that Western-based education brought, propagating the colonial education system through Western science, which was paraded as more significant than IK. The lecturers/teachers identified

a need to teach students about the importance of local resources, values, indigenous modes of production and management, and their importance for the sustainability of the environment. Concomitant with this move, Maila and Loubser (2003) indicate that lecturers/instructors confronted the notion of teaching only inside the classroom in favor of inclusive approaches that promote diverse and complex environmental problems. The advantage of indigenous people's education is that teaching can take place anywhere at any time, making use of natural resources. Elders take advantage of opportunities whenever they arise to teach about nature and its principles as and when they encounter something worth teaching about.

Live fauna and flora are the breathing teaching aids. The definition of IK discussed in this paper speaks of the local people's knowledge and culture, in line with scholars in the field (Shava and Manyike, 2018). Likewise, Ndlovu *et al.* (2014) indicate that indigenous knowledge is inherently rooted in the sociocultural framework that guided this investigation, which acknowledges that knowledge is socially created. Maila and Loubser (2003) agree that they view IK as traditional and constructed in a local environment to resolve local environmental challenges.

Students need to be taught Ethiopian theories that could be used when studying and applying local people's epistemologies. Ethiopian theories may assist with the understanding of content supplied by the curriculum to ensure the smooth indigenization of the education system. This means IK is relevant to local people as its custodians, even theoretically. Proverbs, for example, can be used as theoretical lenses. This contributes significantly to decolonizing the curriculum and considering the language of indigenous people (KII-11, November 18, 2025).

The Ethiopian education system highly emphasizes memorization for examinations. This is a direct legacy of a colonial-era system designed to produce compliant clerks rather than critical thinkers. This implies that students tend to memorize to pass, then forget the content; they do not learn how to solve problems in their daily activities (KII-12, November 23, 2025).

According to Smith (2021), it takes a complete effort to decolonize Ethiopian education with the inclusion of traditional knowledge into the curriculum through reclaiming, validating, and integrating local wisdom, traditions, and epistemologies into the formal education system. This process starts by recognizing local knowledge as a legitimate and valuable source of learning, combating the dominance of Eurocentric paradigms that have historically left out local methods of knowing. To ensure that students are exposed to indigenous knowledge systems, Ethiopian education needs to incorporate the country's traditional practices in conflict resolution, agriculture, medicine, governance, and environmental conservation that have sustained communities for generations.

Promoting indigenous languages as mediums of instruction is a vital element of decolonizing education, as the semantics of many indigenous concepts are deeply rooted in these local languages. Ethiopia can disseminate knowledge and ensure the preservation of traditional practices more successfully by empowering the use of local languages in schools. Additionally, the education system needs to be designed in such a way that it encourages the involvement of elders, traditional healers, artisans, and local historians. Their knowledge can be utilized to enhance the educational experience and make education more integrative with students' lived reality. Inviting these traditional experts as mentors can help to establish a space where traditional knowledge and practices are appreciated (KII-13, November 26, 2025).

Revising teacher training curricula can enable teachers to incorporate local practices into their lessons and teaching methods (KII-14, November 28, 2025). This result is supported by Yeseraw and Melesse (2023), who noted that teachers need to be empowered through training in culturally responsive pedagogy so that indigenous knowledge will not be perceived as lower or inferior to Western knowledge. Priority should be given to research agencies on Ethiopian indigenous knowledge systems so that they can be studied and integrated into the formal education system. This includes supplementing educational resources such as textbooks, films, and CD-ROMs with local content.

According to Yeseraw and Melesse (2023), evaluation methods would need to be modified to accommodate storytelling, oral traditions, and community activities instead of just Western examinations. Educational institutions should respect the transfer of traditional knowledge through oral traditions and practice and accept more experiential assessment. Consideration should also be given by government policies to promote indigenous knowledge in education reform so as to serve national identity and preservation. Community participation is essential in formulating education policies guided by community culture and knowledge.

From the above findings, one can notice that uncovering and recording indigenous knowledge systems in Ethiopia is important. This entails collecting, managing, and documenting indigenous knowledge through a wide range of sources such as oral traditions, ethnographies, and joint research activities with local people, which can be used to build curriculum materials and resources within the country.

3.4 Effects of Western-Influenced Educational Models on Ethiopia's Educational Landscape and Societal Development

Western-inspired approaches in education have remained, more or less, within the Ethiopian educational setup since the beginning of the twentieth century. The adoption of this imported model was part of the modernization efforts initiated by Emperor Menelik II. This borrowed model privileged Western knowledge over indigenous Ethiopian knowledge systems. School curricula were largely based on Western educational models and pedagogical practices, with limited consideration for Ethiopian cultural knowledge systems and local ways of knowing. During the Haile Selassie era, education continued to rely heavily on Western curricula, textbooks, and teaching personnel, making the incorporation of indigenous knowledge difficult. Likewise, during the Derg period, educational policies were influenced by socialist ideologies and foreign models, limiting the development of curricula grounded in Ethiopia's own cultural realities. Consequently, indigenous Ethiopian knowledge and traditions were marginalized (Kebede, 2006; Mamo and Boro, 2023).

As for Western-dominated policies and paradigms, Western knowledge and values have eroded indigenous knowledge and cultures, resulting in cultural alienation and social division in some communities. The decline of indigenous educational knowledge has led to continuous dependence on international assistance and expertise in the education sector, hindering the development of an indigenous, economically self-sufficient education system (Yishak and Gumbo, 2012).

The standardization of curriculum and pedagogy by Western standards is among the most visible impacts. This compelled Ethiopia to align its curriculum with global standards, trying to import and absorb mainstream knowledge, technology, and science. Furthermore, external influences also led to structured learning environments, systematic evaluation practices, and research-oriented approaches, which in turn professionalized the sector. As a result, many Ethiopian graduates played significant roles in bringing about modernization and development in their fields of engineering, medicine, business, etc. (KII-15, November 30, 2025).

A school principal commented:

The curriculum appears to be not relevant to what we want our children to know about their history, values, and environment. Besides, we are demonstrating concepts and illustrations that do not relate to the day-to-day experiences of an Ethiopian child. For example, an Ethiopian child being taught about snow, although they live in a country that has mostly warm weather, or more about European historical figures than their own.

The above findings indicate that the movement away from traditional indigenous ways of knowing, and the replacement of this method of education with formal schooling in Western ways, has generated a gap in methods of learning as well as a lack of respect for local knowledge systems, languages, and cultural traditions. Many students in Ethiopia will have little or no understanding of their own history, traditional methods of governance, or indigenous methods of problem-solving after they have graduated from school. The end result of the increasing adoption of Western-style education has been a weakening of the cultural identity of

young people, whereby many Ethiopian students believe that Western knowledge is more valid than their own traditional knowledge, which they view as outdated or less important.

An Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) expert said:

Our kids are starting to hate their own culture and believe all things Western are better than what they have been taught in school. Also, the rich oral tradition that we have in our country, the local wisdom that we have in our communities, and our traditional conflict resolution methods among our people are not being recognized through the content of the curriculum, so we are losing part of who we are as a community and as a nation.

The above quotation demonstrates how the individualism associated with Western educational outcomes not only conflicts with Ethiopian cultural traditions, community, and family, but also has the potential to divide families and communities across Ethiopia. Besides, the findings reveal that many traditional knowledge areas, including agriculture, medicine, construction, and ethical frameworks, are disappearing at a rapid pace and are being replaced by developing technologies.

The prioritization of individual accomplishments in education, as opposed to collective accomplishment, is another issue. In traditional Ethiopian education, the value placed on collective responsibility, moral teaching, and learning being incorporated into daily life demonstrates clear differences between indigenous education values and contemporary education values. Western educational practices emphasize the competitive nature of education, the use of standard exams, and measuring success based on how well students perform on standardized assessments, as opposed to how students learn and interact with their communities (KII-16, December 1, 2025).

According to Negash (2006), the standard model for education in Western-style learning institutions has contributed to the division of society into lower and upper classes, resulting in barriers for many Ethiopians to receive quality education based on social class, leading to further inequality between

rural and urban populations and fewer opportunities for many Ethiopians to be involved in the development of their country.

Therefore, from the above assertions, one can deduce that modernization and the global integration of education systems through Western-based models have presented many challenges for Ethiopia. These models, by their nature, have overlooked indigenous knowledge systems and detracted from the practice of indigenous communal learning. The reliance on foreign-based educational models has created a pattern of dependence on foreign expertise and educational systems, thereby limiting Ethiopia's ability to create an independent means of education. Ethiopia can forge a more inclusive, relevant, and sustainable development path while balancing the negative influences of Western models and adopting its own approach.

3.5 Historical and Current Barriers to the Integration of Indigenous Knowledge Systems into the Ethiopian Curriculum

Ethiopia is known for its diverse culture and languages, and for the many Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) developed over thousands of years. Unfortunately, due to both historical and contemporary obstacles, it has not been easy to include IKS in the curricula of Ethiopian schools. Examples of these challenges include traditional Ethiopian education being historically overshadowed by new influences from outside Ethiopia, primarily through religion and Western educational practices. As a result, the traditional structure of education in Ethiopia was replaced by institutional and eventually European-style schools introduced first by missionaries and later by Europeans (Mamo and Boro, 2023).

As Kebede (2006) indicated, the shift toward formalized and European-style schools was initiated mostly during the Imperial period, when there was excessive emphasis on providing an educated and literate elite that could either work for the government or support government needs outside of it. Consequently, indigenous knowledge systems were viewed as inferior to newer forms of knowledge developed in industrialized nations and as less developed than knowledge systems based on science.

Since most IKS were developed within communities and local histories, the limited opportunities for communities to participate in the development of curricula used in formal schools created an additional barrier to their involvement in the formal education system.

Similarly, the Derg dictatorship's socialist ideology had a profound impact on the educational system, focusing primarily on industrial and political development at the expense of indigenous pedagogical practices. Although the Derg regime officially supported the use of Ethiopian languages and endorsed the need to protect Ethiopian culture, there remained a top-down model of curriculum development. Due, in part, to the Derg regime's belief that scientific socialism would lead to political stability, the elimination of IKS was justified; therefore, progress and advancement (which were aligned with social scientific models) would prevail. The political instability and violent conflict that took place during this period compounded the challenge of systematic documentation and the incorporation of IKS into the educational curriculum (Negash, 2006).

The federal government, which started operating after the Derg period, has identified the importance of integrating traditional knowledge owing to increasing recognition of cultural diversity. As a result, the Ministry of Education is developing policies and guidelines on how to incorporate local knowledge systems into subject areas such as history, geography, science, and social studies (KII-17, December 6, 2025).

Teachers in Ethiopia are having difficulty integrating indigenous ecological knowledge elements into their classroom instruction due to a lack of exposure or training in traditional education systems, which did not focus on traditional ecological knowledge. Additionally, there is a lack of instructional resources or textbooks that provide clearly defined and organized Traditional Ecological Knowledge information suitable for use in formal education settings. The integration of traditional knowledge into local schools is sporadic and has not been improved due to inadequate funding or a lack of trained teachers (KII-18, December 10, 2025).

Indigenous knowledge has also become increasingly complicated through political and policy issues. Ethiopian education guidelines recognize the value of traditional knowledge and cultural diversity; however, due to varying national agendas and inefficient bureaucracy, implementation is still lacking. Indigenous knowledge continues to be marginalized through expanding access to education, increasing literacy rates, and consolidating STEM curricula (KII-19, December 15, 2025). Mamo and Boro (2023) support this result, stating that although Ethiopia's decentralized education system allows for regional independence in curriculum development, funding inequalities and political agendas make it more challenging to apply.

The major problem is that there are no proper records or a structured system for traditional knowledge, which is usually passed down orally from generation to generation and can easily be lost or changed over time. It is very important that indigenous knowledge holders actively participate so they have a voice in how their knowledge is used and to protect their intellectual property. However, it is very difficult to find and provide written forms of indigenous knowledge in a way that is accessible to both teachers and students, for example, through electronic media, teaching resources, and textbooks (KII-20, December 17, 2025).

Integrating local patterns of knowledge into the educational system in Ethiopia is very important for preserving culture, promoting sustainable development, and providing quality education. However, many current educational practices rely on rote memorization instead of applying knowledge or developing traditional abilities; therefore, these barriers prevent local knowledge from being used effectively and realistically in education. The limited training teachers receive on local contexts reduces their ability and confidence to successfully use indigenous knowledge in the classroom. Teacher training platforms need to change to include traditional values and to equip teachers to use both local knowledge and culturally sensitive pedagogical methods (KII-21, December 18, 2025).

To support the diversity of Indigenous Knowledge Systems in Ethiopia, culturally grounded instructional materials need to be developed in partnership

with local communities to ensure the information is accurate, authentic, and culturally valid. It is also very important for the education system to continue to use indigenous languages within their respective educational contexts to promote and maintain Indigenous Knowledge Systems (KII-22, December 19, 2025).

As Mamo and Boro (2023) noted, dominant Western views often reject traditional forms of knowledge as unscientific in education. To promote understanding and the use of Indigenous Knowledge (IK) for sustainable development, awareness campaigns and workforce training are needed to highlight the value these forms of knowledge can bring to societal challenges. To acknowledge the value of both traditional and modern forms of knowledge, an integrated and collaborative approach is necessary. There has been little collaboration between indigenous peoples and educational institutions, resulting in a disconnection between schools and local cultural practices. There is significant room for growth through greater collaboration with elders, traditional healers, and craftspeople in the education sector through shared classroom activities, visits to cultural sites, and community-based research projects.

Oral presentations, creativity, skill demonstrations, and culturally appropriate initiatives are examples of alternative, culturally relevant evaluation techniques that are required. To overcome these obstacles and utilize the potential of indigenous knowledge for national development and the empowerment of future generations, a variety of initiatives are needed, such as curriculum development, teacher training, policy reforms, the creation of relevant materials, and strengthened community cooperation (KII-23, December 21, 2025).

3.6 Global Experiences Regarding Indigenizing and Decolonizing Curricula

The global movement to decolonize education arises from the need to rectify historical imbalances that have marginalized Indigenous voices and knowledge systems within traditional curricula, thereby creating more equitable, relevant, and culturally responsive learning environments for all (Battiste, 2013; Stein *et al.*, 2023). These days,

many countries are looking for strategies to incorporate indigenous knowledge into their educational systems, recognizing its potential to promote educational relevance, cultural identity, and societal transformation (UNESCO, 2017; Dei, 2000).

In Australia, curriculum decolonization is a major issue, and the country is working to indigenize its education system. Parkinson and Jones (2018) point to incorporating native knowledge into the curriculum of Australian higher education. At Central Queensland University, the Indigenization of the Curriculum guide was developed to support lecturers' efforts to indigenize the curriculum (Al-Natour, 2016). Al-Natour argues that indigenizing the curriculum in Australia would transform its landscape by acknowledging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge and practices. However, these authors indicate that curriculum transformation has been slow, while students continue efforts to maintain their indigeneity. This idea aligns with Grange's (2016) observation that decolonizing the curriculum is not easy. Uneasy as it may sound, it can be argued that it is still crucial to embark on the decolonization of the curriculum; however, slow progress makes it a difficult task. The slowness in transforming the curriculum is evident in the results of an investigation conducted by Parkinson and Jones (2018) in Australia, which revealed a disjuncture between the curriculum and Aboriginal aspirations for their children's education.

New Zealand is a strong example of biculturalism, being a context where Māori knowledge and culture are incorporated into the educational system. Much of the curriculum is based on the values, history, and customs of the Māori and emphasizes holistic learning and a sense of community, *whānau*, or family, that is so prominent there. Its success is thought to lie in its community-based approach, ensuring that local communities play a central role in the development and implementation of the curriculum, while the integration of *Te Reo Māori* and Māori worldviews across schools helps challenge Eurocentric dominance and strengthen awareness of New Zealand's bicultural heritage. Furthermore, the Library and Information Association of New Zealand Aotearoa has contributed to decolonization efforts by promoting Māori knowledge systems

(*mātauranga Māori*) within library and information management education and professional practice (Lilley and Paringatai, 2014).

African countries are finding it difficult to decolonize their education through the use of indigenous knowledge. In Kenya, traditional aspects of music, dance, and oral literature have been integrated into the curriculum for primary and secondary education. Research by Owuor (2008) indicates that the curriculum is also being extended to include indigenous languages, traditional farming practices, and indigenous knowledge of medicinal plants. Kenya is making progress in its effort to decolonize education and restore Kenyan culture, values, and history away from colonial influence. The hurdles include, among others, resistance to change, lack of funds, and failure to implement policies effectively.

South Africa is in the process of reforming its educational framework to address apartheid narratives by incorporating multiple cultures and histories. Since the protests of 2015–2016, most universities and higher education institutions have made strides in decolonizing curricula and indigenizing academic programs. In a 2015 summit, there was a call urging all institutions of higher learning to decolonize their curricula by breaking down remnants of apartheid and colonialism (Grange, 2016).

However, the validity of claims regarding progress toward the decolonization of education was strongly challenged by student protests. The movements suggested that education had done little to decolonize curricula, institutional cultures, and knowledge systems since the advent of democracy in 1994 (Grange, 2016). The curricula of universities continued to be dismissive of IK, which was considered inferior and did little to improve the human condition. Maila and Loubser (2003) argued that IK could be useful in education and should be recognized. In response to the need for change, the Western Cape Provincial Government formed a Central Curriculum Committee with the responsibility to facilitate decolonization processes. Furthermore, the inclusion of the Ubuntu philosophy in education reinforces positive character and active citizenship.

4 Conclusion

In the course of history, the education system in Ethiopia has largely been dominated by Western models, which have failed to comprehensively appreciate the cultural, social, political, and economic realities of the country. The curriculum, which has largely been adopted, borrowed, or articulated with the involvement of Western expertise, has tended to privilege the Western epistemic perspective and undermine Ethiopia's intellectual tradition, contributing to the process of epistemic injustice. In Ethiopia, there is hardly any regime able to indigenize and Ethiopianize the education system by including indigenous knowledge systems into the school curriculum. In plain words, this study, as one of the attempts to indigenize and Ethiopianize the Ethiopian curriculum, has made a positive contribution.

Indigenizing and decolonizing education in Ethiopia requires a radical reform of curricula, pedagogic approaches, and institutions to focus on Ethiopian indigenous knowledge systems in addition to Western knowledge systems. Although the agenda is directed at literacy and skills-based education, these approaches can disconnect from the realities of the majority (especially rural) students. Reigniting traditional modes of knowledge such as traditional medicine, agriculture, conflict resolution, governance, art, and craft makes education more relatable and relevant, empowers students, and helps preserve indigenous culture while ensuring quality and inclusive education in the 21st century in Ethiopia.

Ethiopian education policy acknowledges the superficial inclusion of IK into the curriculum, although its practical manifestation is hardly identified in policy documents. Irrespective of the challenges, the dominance of Western discourses, lack of pedagogically trained teachers, and negative attitudes toward IK in practice, Ethiopia could minimize the gap between policy and practice through contextualized intervention programs. More crucially, the genuine incorporation of IK into the Ethiopian educational system would unleash its blessings, such as cultural vitality, social cohesion, economic resilience, and problem-solving capacity, thus establishing peace and prosperity. Such a transformation is grounded

in strong academic values and has the potential to significantly improve the lives of Ethiopian students.

5 Recommendations

This research advocates an inclusive paradigm shift within the Ethiopian education system that holds the potential for meaningful inclusion of indigenous knowledge. This process requires designing an integrative framework that incorporates traditional knowledge into the curriculum, from pedagogical techniques and assessment procedures to the structure of educational institutions. Indigenous perspectives should be added to the curriculum through the infusion of proverbs, sayings, and Ethiopian worldviews to construct a locally situated understanding of the curriculum and to supplement traditional practices within its theoretical dimension. Capacity-building schemes should be instituted to enhance teachers' skills to effectively elaborate and communicate various forms of traditional knowledge. Assessment schemes should be critically examined to emphasize indigenous knowledge constructively in both summative and formative assessments. Finally, the research supports curriculum reform in Ethiopia in which indigenous knowledge is integrated through promoting greater cooperation among educational policymakers, teachers, and community participants.

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