

12

Understanding indigenous coping strategies of the Basubiya on the flooded plains of the Zambezi River

Nchindo Richardson Mbukusa

'Umuvuvu kaliwanikilwa feela mumuzuka musenamenzi mwadubwana'

– It isn't easy to find a hippo on dry lands where there is no water for wallowing and swimming –

(Chief Kisco Liswani III of the Basubiya Tribal Authority)

INTRODUCTION

The Basubiya – or Bekuhane as they are also known – are often described as a riverine group of people (BNA, n.d.; Gibbons, 1904; Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1911; Shamukuni, 1972; Mainga, 1973; Mubitana, 1975; Tlou & Campbell, 1984; Likando, 1989; Masule, 1995; Larson, 2001; Gumbo, 2002; Ramsay, 2002; Manning, 2011; Ndana, 2011; Mabuta, Masule, & Tembwe, 2013). It is no wonder that Chief Kisco Liswani III warned that they would rather perish in the water than find themselves wandering in the drier areas away from the rivers and all that they would offer them. The Basubiya of the flooded plains of the Zambezi Region liken themselves to hippos and other amphibious animals. They feel that staying away from river waters 'deculturalizes' them. It is difficult to imagine the Basubiya outside this environment (Shamukuni, 1972; Masule, 1995; Gumbo, 2002; Samunzala, 2003; Ndana, 2011). In the face of possible relocation at times when water volumes increase, they might remark rhetorically, *'ho zwise inswi mu meenzi mpohonachi ihala?'* – 'If you take a fish out of water, can it survive?'

From history immemorial, the Bekuhane (used interchangeably with Basubiya in this chapter) have lived along the Upper Zambezi River and its Chobe–Linyanti tributaries in southern Africa. The waters of these rivers flow and feed into each



FIGURE 12.1:
The Basubiya of the Zambezi floodplains liken themselves to the hippopotamus, which needs the river to survive. (© George Sanzila.)

other depending on where the rain has fallen and which is flowing more strongly. Seasonally, they flood the wedge of low-lying plains between them to variable levels. The Bekuhane's economic activities centre mainly on these surface waters of the Zambezi–Chobe basin. They have been reported to be agriculturalists that cultivate crops along rivers while also keeping livestock (Shamukuni, 1972; Tlou & Campbell, 1984; Masule, 1995; Olson, 1996; Ramsay, 2002; Ndana, 2011; Mabuta et. al., 2013). In the past, they would only be found on drier lands when they were besieged by their enemies, but would return to wetlands when opportunities availed themselves (Olson, 1996). Their environment comprises perennial rivers, lakes, depressions, rapids, marshes, slightly elevated areas, swamps and floodplains, which support a variety of aquatic plants, birdlife, fish and wildlife.

A good number of the Bekuhane still live on land that is always surrounded by water, although a few live permanently on drier land. The group that is on

the drier land also have land on the floodplains as they initially lived there, and return from time to time. All the Basubiya groups prefer deep river channels of the mighty Zambezi River, which support a number of good-eating bream fish (cichlids from the genera *Serranochromis*, *Sargochromis* and *Oreochromis*). There are many types of fruits and plants that the Bekuhane eat, which grow in and around the river. They spend much of their time in and on the water – much like the hippos they identify with.

Although much work has been done by international and local researchers and practitioners on coping strategies in flooded areas (Lupala, 2002; Sakijege, Lupala, & Sheuya, 2012; Wisner, Blaikie, Cannon, & Davis, 2004; Parry, Canziani, Palutikof, van der Linden, & Hanson, 2007), no one has recently explored what it is about the rise and fall of the Zambezi River that gratifies the people of the Zambezi floodplains. In this chapter, the results of qualitative research through in-depth, face-to-face and focused group interviews with the Basubiya, and the insight these provided, are discussed. This chapter contributes to the indigenous knowledge of flood management.

Fifty adult Basubiya (39 males, 11 females) of 70 years and older, living on the floodplains of Zambezi Region in Namibia, voluntarily participated in this study. The majority had no formal education. Through narration, various themes were discussed, such as how they know when the floods will reach them; the joy these bring and the destruction they cause; how the waters are traversed; what foods the floods offer; and how they cope during the floods. The main purpose of this chapter is to help us understand what keeps the Basubiya on the floodplains by examining three pillars of the Basubiya's indigenous knowledge, namely:

1. How the Basubiya know the size of the flood that surrounds them;
2. What makes them enjoy the time of flooding; and
3. How they cope during the floods.

THE ZAMBEZI FLOODPLAINS

Namibia is well known for its vast contrasting landscapes, and the Zambezi Region is no exception. Zambezi Region boasts the Zambezi River in the north and the Kwando–Mashi–Linyanti–Chobe rivers system in the west and south. These rivers meet in the north-east where the region abuts Zimbabwe. At certain times of the year the Zambezi Region is more swampy and riverine in the areas around the villages of Isize, Malindi, Schuckmannsburg, Nantungu, Itomba, Nsundwa, Mpukano, Ikaba, Muzii, Impalila, Kasika, Mbalasinte, Ivilivinzi, Lusese, Kabbe, Masikili, Ioma, Mutikila, Ibbu and Mahundu (see Figure 12.2).

The large body of water that often covers the eastern floodplains around March and April, perhaps more than anything else, sets the Zambezi Region apart from the