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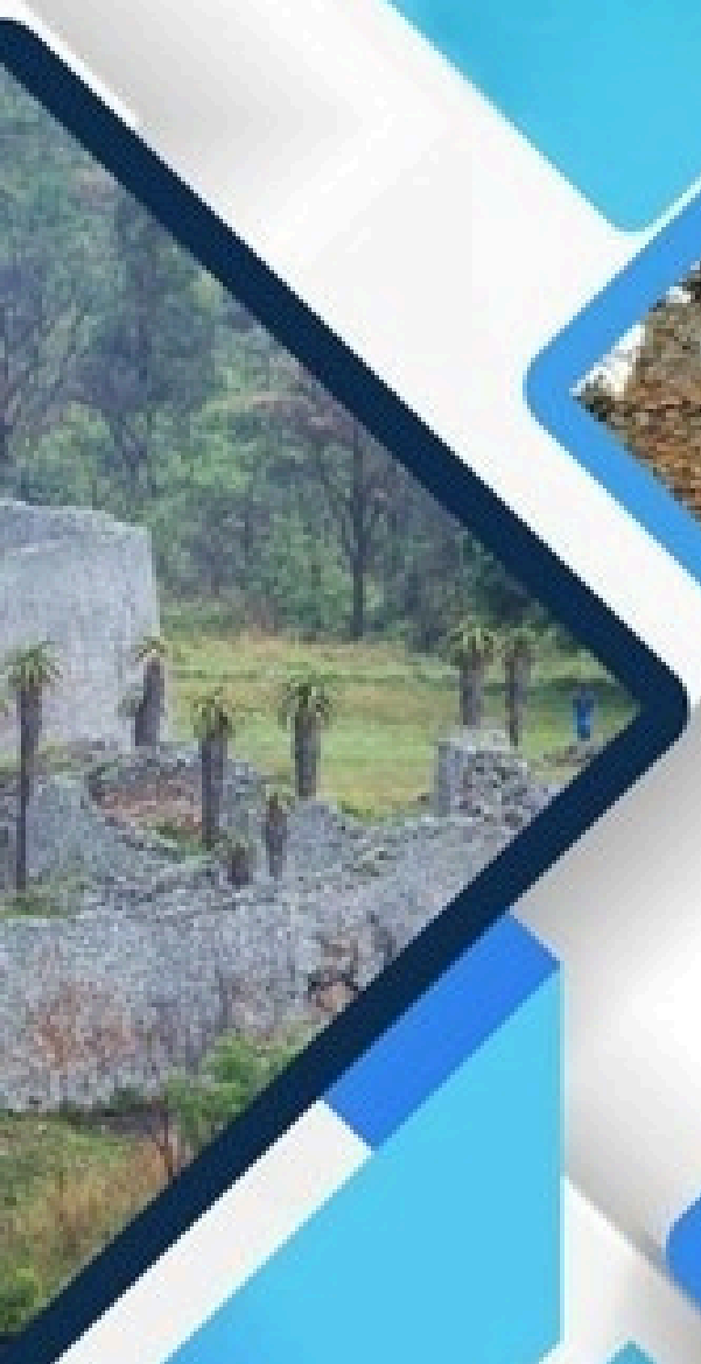

The Journal of Cultural Heritage and Development – Volume 2, Issue 1

The *Journal of Cultural Heritage and Development* focuses on the nexus between culture, heritage and development. Its primary purpose is to publish original articles that relate to the safeguarding, preservation, promotion, and awareness of all forms of cultural heritage within a broad framework. It provides a platform for academics and other professionals interested in the fields of culture, heritage, and development who wish to contribute to this and related disciplines.

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Editorial Note – Volume 2, Issue 1, 2026

It is with great pleasure that we introduce Volume 2, Issue 1 of the *Journal of Cultural Heritage and Development* — a collection of eight rigorously peer-reviewed contributions that explore African heritage, livelihoods, languages, and pedagogies as dynamic, living resources for addressing some of the most pressing challenges of our time: climate change, educational transformation, digital disruption, and the unfinished project of post-colonial nation-building.

The opening study, *Baobab Sisal Crafting as a Climate-Resilient Livelihood for Women Entrepreneurs in Chimanimani District*, demonstrates how creative enterprise rooted in local ecological knowledge can simultaneously bolster household income, enhance food security, and stimulate rural tourism, all while ensuring the sustainable use of protected baobab and sisal species. It offers a compelling model of how heritage-based livelihoods can bridge economic empowerment and environmental stewardship.

In *Reclaiming Africa's Dietary Heritage*, the authors turn attention to Svoboda, a nearly forgotten small grain cultivated in Bikita and Marange. Their work makes a powerful case for the revitalisation of this indigenous crop as a pathway to climate adaptation, nutritional security, food sovereignty, and the restoration of Africa's gastronomic identity, reclaiming not just a seed, but a legacy.

Shifting to the educational sphere, *Museums and Heritage Sites as Pedagogical Spaces under Zimbabwe's Heritage-Based Curriculum Framework* examines the perceptions and practices of teachers in Masvingo urban schools. Despite persistent resource and training constraints, the study reveals a strong consensus among educators that museum-based learning offers a potent complement to formal classroom instruction, enriching the curriculum with lived heritage and experiential depth.

Anchored in Afrocentric epistemology, the article *The Intersectional Role of Music* uncovers shared practices of musical rain-intercession across communities, proposing that these common rituals point to deep cultural continuities that transcend colonial borders, which is a timely reminder of heritage's power to unite rather than divide.

The digital turn takes centre stage in *From Ritual to Revenue*, which interrogates how online platforms are reshaping the mbiya trade within apostolic sects. Through social media, mobile money, and e-commerce, sacred objects are increasingly commodified, a case of democratising access while simultaneously provoking critical questions about authenticity, spiritual authority, and the ethics of commercialising the sacred.

Preservation of the Pupu Battlefield Monument offers a reflective case study in liberation heritage. It illustrates how inclusive and community-engaged preservation can catalyze national identity, social cohesion, local employment, and deeper dialogues on historical justice in post-colonial Zimbabwe, in some way demonstrating that remembering is also a form of repair.

Finally, *Zimbabwean Indigenous Languages as Intangible Cultural Heritage* confronts the enduring hegemony of English, calling for the deliberate development of terminology and the creation of customised digital tools to safeguard and revitalise indigenous languages. In doing so, it affirms that linguistic diversity is not merely a cultural asset but a cornerstone of epistemic justice and inclusive development.

Taken together, these contributions affirm a central thesis: heritage is not a static relic of the past, but a vital, adaptive resource for forging sustainable, just, and culturally grounded futures. We extend our deepest gratitude to our authors for their intellectual rigour, to our reviewers for their discerning engagement, and to our readers for their continued investment in this scholarly endeavour.

As we embark on this second volume, we remain committed to amplifying African voices, decolonising knowledge production, and advancing heritage as a force for transformative change.

Josiline Chigwada and Jacob Mapara

Editors-in-Chief

Baobab-Sisal Crafting as a Livelihood Option for Women Entrepreneurs in Climate-change affected areas

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores the transformative potential of baobab-sisal crafting as a climate-resilient livelihood strategy for rural communities, with a focus on women's agency and empowerment in community-based entrepreneurship. Situated in selected villages in Manicaland Province, Zimbabwe, this research examines the intersections between creative entrepreneurship, household income, food security, and rural tourism development in the context of climate change. Employing a triangulated data collection combining in-depth interviews, participant observation, and focus group discussions (FGDs), this study engaged with nine (9) female crafters selected from the five villages in Chimanimani District, yielding insights into the complex dynamics of baobab-sisal crafting as a livelihood strategy. The findings reveal that baobab-sisal crafting enhances household income and food security, catalyzes rural tourism development, and contributes to poverty reduction and economic empowerment. Innovative value chain development for baobab-sisal products, such as mauyu/baobab mats and 'baobab-sisal blankets,' is identified as a critical lever for accessing local and international markets. This research contributes to the discourse on community-based creative entrepreneurship and sustainability as climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies, highlighting the imperative of contextualizing livelihood resilience within complex environmental, social, and economic factors. It was discovered that every year, women entrepreneurs ensure the progress of baobab-sisal trade through sustainable selective extraction of baobab barks and sisal fibers

Keywords: Baobab-sisal, climate change, community-based entrepreneurship, rural tourism

Introduction and Background

Climate change has had devastating consequences for rural communities globally, with Africa disproportionately affected due to its heavy reliance on rain-fed agriculture. Zimbabwe, a country exemplifying this vulnerability, has witnessed persistent droughts and crop failures, compelling rural communities to explore alternative livelihood strategies (Chagumaira et al., 2016). This study investigates the transformative potential of baobab-sisal crafting as a climate-resilient livelihood strategy for rural communities in the five villages in Chimanimani District situated in Manicaland Province, Zimbabwe.

Manicaland Province, situated in eastern Zimbabwe, shares a border with Mozambique to the east. The province is predominantly inhabited by the Shona

heritage groups that is it is inhabited by, among other ethnicities, the Ndau people and to the north of the Ndau, are the Manyika and Hwesa, with some Karanga in Buhera, as well as Njanja/Zezuru to the west.

The Ndau people, who boast a rich cultural heritage and history (Manyebvu, 2015). Originating from the Gaza Empire in Mozambique, the Ndau people migrated to Zimbabwe in the 19th century, bringing with them their distinct language, customs, and traditions. As skilled agriculturalists, hunters, and gatherers, the Ndau people have developed a profound spiritual connection with their ancestors and the natural environment. Their expertise in craftsmanship is evident in the beautiful baskets, mats, and other handicrafts they produce from baobab-sisal (Manyebvu, 2015).

The province is administratively divided into several chiefdoms, including Mutasa, Musikavanhu, and Chimanimani, each possessing its unique cultural and traditional practices. Manicaland Province serves as a critical trade hub for local artefacts and home-grown innovations, with major road routes such as the Masvingo-Mutare Road and the A10 Highway that comes from Harare through Chivhu, Gutu, Nyika to Chipinge, traversing the province, thus offering opportunities to diversify baobab-sisal product sales. The province's border with Mozambique facilitates trade and commerce between the two countries, with the border area serving as a vital accessible local industry trade area.

However, the extraction of baobab-sisal for crafting purposes has raised concerns regarding environmental conservation. The baobab tree (*Adansonia digitata)* is a protected species in Zimbabwe, with its bark and leaves subject to regulated harvesting. Similarly, the sisal plant (*Agave sisalana*) is protected, with its harvesting governed by specific restrictions. This study seeks to contribute to the discourse on the intersection of sustainable livelihoods and environmental conservation, examining the transformative potential of baobab-sisal crafting as a climate-resilient livelihood strategy while scrutinizing its environmental implications.

Statement of the Problem

Most women entrepreneurs in Zimbabwe’s Manicaland Province continue to endure food insecurity and impoverished livelihoods due to their reliance on rain-fed agriculture, despite climate change-induced drought and receding water tables. This study proposes baobab-sisal crafting as a viable alternative, offering a climate-resilient and sustainable solution.

Objectives

The objectives of the study were:

1. To determine the impact of baobab-sisal income on household income and food security levels of nine (9) women entrepreneurs in selected areas of Chimanimani District over two years;

2. To examine the role of baobab-sisal crafting in catalyzing rural tourism development;
3. To analyze the contributions of baobab-sisal crafting to women entrepreneurs' poverty reduction and economic empowerment; and
4. To identify innovative value chain development strategies for baobab-sisal products

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following questions:

1. What is the impact of baobab-sisal crafting on the household income and food security levels of nine (9) women entrepreneurs in Chimanimani District over two years?
2. How does baobab-sisal crafting influence rural tourism development in selected villages in Chimanimani District?
3. What are the poverty reduction and economic empowerment outcomes of baobab-sisal crafting among women entrepreneurs in rural Zimbabwe?
4. What innovative value chain development strategies can be employed to enhance the competitiveness and sustainability of baobab-sisal products in local and international markets?

Literature Review

A large body of research on baobab-sisal crafting underlines the project's transformative potential as a climate-resilient livelihood mechanism both locally and internationally. Hauze et al (2016) posits that baobab crafting can contribute significantly to sustainable livelihoods and poverty reduction, especially in rural communities where social inequalities are distinctly defined. This assertion is validated by Lisao et al. (2018) who found that baobab-sisal crafting can provide a viable income source for rural women, thereby enhancing their economic empowerment. African scholars have also made notable contributions to the discourse on baobab-sisal crafting. Chingarande (2020) argues that both baobab and sisal crafting can contribute to rural development in Africa by providing an alternative income source for rural communities. Munyebvu (2015) contends that baobab and sisal crafting can enhance biodiversity conservation by reducing the pressure on natural resources. Manyebvu's (2015) contention is supported by the fact that baobab-sisal crafting provides an alternative income source, reducing dependence on natural resources and promoting sustainable use of baobab and sisal resources. This, in turn, contributes to the conservation of natural habitats and the maintenance of ecosystem integrity. The scholars go on to elaborate that the conservation of natural resources is achieved through sustainable harvesting and management practices, such as selective harvesting, reforestation, and habitat restoration, which minimize

environmental impact and promote long-term resource viability. By adopting these practices, baobab-sisal crafting can help maintain ecosystem health and productivity.

Countrywide, “Zimbabwe has an estimated five million baobab trees, with four million of the trees situated on communal lands” (AfroTrade 2014, p. 15). With a lot of people having endured the repercussions of Cyclone Idai in Manicaland, baobab crafting and baobab fruit sales have both rejuvenated the financial standing of many desperate families (UPI, 2019). In his extensive study on African indigenous knowledge systems (AIKS) or ethno-science, Zengeya (2019) highlights the significance of traditional knowledge and practices in promoting sustainable livelihoods and biodiversity conservation in Africa. Zengeya (2019) emphasizes that African indigenous knowledge systems play a crucial role in baobab-sisal extraction, as local communities possess traditional knowledge and practices that ensure the sustainable harvesting and management of these resources. This traditional knowledge, passed down through generations, informs the selective harvesting of baobab fruits and sisal leaves, minimizing harm to the plants and maintaining ecosystem balance (Government of Zimbabwe, 2015).

The extraction of baobab bark has proved to be convenient in circumstances where climate change challenges have led to crop failure and food hunger. In particular, the baobab is a low-altitude growing and drought-resilient succulent tree, which is common in very hot places such as Matabeleland South, Zambezi Valley, Masvingo, Mashonaland West, and Manicaland. It “grows in very dry areas, with rainfall of as little as 500 mm a year. The trees fruit in the middle of the dry season, when there is not much growing and few other income opportunities for local communities” (AfroTrade, 2024, p. 14).

In Zimbabwe, researchers have also explored the potential of baobab-sisal crafting as a climate-resilient livelihood strategy. Chou (2018) found that baobab-sisal crafting can enhance women's economic empowerment and contribute to poverty reduction in rural areas. Chitakira (2020) also argues that baobab-sisal crafting can provide a viable income source for rural communities, while promoting biodiversity conservation. Chagumaira et al (2016) notes that rural communities primarily utilize the income generated from baobab-sisal crafting to meet their basic needs, such as food, education, and healthcare, thereby improving their overall livelihoods.

However, the extraction of baobab sisal for crafting purposes has raised concerns regarding environmental conservation. The Environmental Management Act (2002) designates the baobab tree as a protected species and requires its harvesting to be regulated by law (Government of Zimbabwe, 2015). Similarly, the sisal plant is protected under the same Act. Recent arrests of baobab-sisal crafters by environmental conservation law enforcers have underscored the need for sustainable harvesting practices (USAID, 2022). However, despite intervening challenges, baobab and sisal have multiple uses beyond crafting. In Zimbabwe, for example, the baobab fruit is utilized in the production of fruit juice, with a processing plant already established and commissioned in Mutare City (ZimTrade, 2024). Similarly, in the

Mudzi area, the Harare Institute of Technology, Campaign for Female Education (Camfed) and ZimTrade were planning to sponsor a selected group of ten women picked from the local communities across Zimbabwe to fare their baobab products at international trade fairs (AfroTrade, 2024). So far, “the group has sent sample orders to Egypt and once approved, the market will absorb much of the production coming from Mudzi, which will put the community on the national export map” (ZimTrade, 2024, p. 15).

In African ethno-science, the baobab tree also holds cultural significance, with its bark and leaves used for medicinal purpose. Aluko et al. (2016) Sisal is also employed for soil erosion prevention and as a fencing material (Zengeya, 2019). Lisao et al. (2018) also found that baobab extraction can provide a viable income source for rural communities, while Zengeya (2019) discovered that sisal extraction can contribute to biodiversity conservation by reducing the pressure on natural resources, as alluded to earlier in this section. The importance of sustainable livelihoods and biodiversity conservation is emphasized in various international, regional, and national conventions, with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) stressing the need for sustainable livelihoods and biodiversity conservation (UN, 2015). The African Union's Agenda 2063 also highlights the importance of sustainable livelihoods and biodiversity conservation (AU, 2015).

Zimbabwe's Environmental Management Act (2002) and the National Environmental Policy (2009) established a robust framework for reconciling sustainable livelihoods with biodiversity conservation. The Sustainable Natural Resource Management Framework was established in 2002 (with the Environmental Management Act) and further reinforced in 2009 (with the National Environmental Policy). By regulating the harvesting and use of natural resources, including baobab and sisal, these policies mitigate environmental degradation and promote sustainable resource management (Zengeya, 2019). The policies also foster community-centric conservation approaches, acknowledging the pivotal role that local communities play in environmental stewardship. Additionally, they integrate traditional knowledge and practices into natural resource management, ensuring the long-term sustainability of ecosystems and ecological integrity.

Recent scholarship on natural fiber-based entrepreneurship highlights baobab-sisal crafting as an emerging livelihood strategy among rural women, with production diversifying beyond traditional uses into contemporary utilitarian products such as mats, hats, and ropes (United Nations Industrial Development Organisation, 2024). Agreeably, Oxfam (2025) concludes that studies in Southern Africa indicate that the integration of baobab fibre and sisal leverages locally available, climate-resilient materials to create value-added goods for both domestic and niche export markets. Oxfam (2025) goes on to suggest that the craft is characterised by low entry barriers, minimal capital requirements and intergenerational knowledge transfer, positioning it as a viable micro-enterprise for women in agro-ecologically marginal regions. Empirical work from Zimbabwe and Tanzania demonstrates that participation in sisal

and baobab craft groups is associated with enhanced income stability, asset accumulation, and improved bargaining power within households, although scale-up remains constrained by market access, inconsistent quality standards and limited product design innovation (Lupande, 2026). The dual income-food security pathway operates through direct cash earnings from sales and through in-kind benefits when unsold inventory is retained for household use (Lupande, 2026).

Theoretical Framework

The Climate-Resilient Livelihoods Framework, first propounded by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in 2016 and later prominently advanced by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) in 2020, is a conceptual framework that guides the analysis of livelihoods in the context of climate change (United Nations Industrial Development Organization, 2024). The framework applies to various study fields, including agriculture, forestry, fisheries, rural development, climate change adaptation, sustainable development, and women's empowerment. The researcher chose this framework to analyze the climate-resilience of baobab-sisal extraction and crafting women entrepreneurship and identify strategies to enhance their resilience and sustainability. Originating from the need to address the impacts of climate change on vulnerable communities, the framework builds on the concept of sustainable livelihoods, emphasizing the importance of considering social, economic, and environmental dimensions. Based on tenets such as livelihood diversification, climate risk management, ecosystem-based adaptation, social protection, and institutional strengthening, the framework is particularly relevant to the context of baobab-sisal extraction and crafting women's entrepreneurship, where women face challenges like climate-related shocks, market fluctuations, and limited access to resources. A critical impediment to the economic empowerment and livelihood resilience of women entrepreneurs in rural communities is the limited access to markets and sustainable income streams from baobab-sisal extraction. To mitigate this challenge, the development and implementation of innovative value chain initiatives and market access strategies can provide women entrepreneurs with the necessary support to scale up their baobab-sisal crafting enterprises and successfully penetrate local and international markets. This study employed a qualitative research methodology, utilizing a case study approach to explore the climate-resilient livelihoods of women entrepreneurs in the baobab-sisal sector. Data collection involved in-depth interviews with nine (9) women entrepreneurs, supplemented by participant observation and focus group discussions. The data was also analyzed using thematic analysis of the themes related to climate resilience, livelihood diversification, and women's empowerment.

Justification of the Study

In the face of persistent droughts and climate change, rural women in developing countries are increasingly turning to entrepreneurship as a means of survival. However, these women, particularly those in Manicaland Province in Zimbabwe, face numerous challenges, including limited access to resources, markets and support services (Manyebvu, 2015). This study seeks to empower rural women entrepreneurs in the five villages in Chimanimani District found in Manicaland Province who have taken up baobab-sisal extraction as a livelihood option, through providing them with the necessary tools, training, and support to succeed. The glass ceiling concept is particularly relevant in this context, as women in rural areas face numerous barriers to accessing markets, finance, and other resources necessary for business success (ZimTrade, 2024). This project aims to break down these barriers and provide women with the opportunities and support they need to thrive. By empowering rural women entrepreneurs, we can help to reduce poverty, promote economic growth, and foster sustainable development.

This study is particularly relevant in the context of Zimbabwe, where rural women are disproportionately affected by climate change and poverty. The country's economy has been severely impacted by droughts, which have resulted in food insecurity and limited economic opportunities for rural communities (Chingarande, 2020). However, the baobab tree, with its numerous uses and benefits, offers a promising opportunity for rural women to generate income and improve their livelihoods. The project's focus on sustainable baobab-sisal extraction and entrepreneurship is critical, as it recognizes the importance of environmental conservation while also promoting economic development. By providing women with the necessary training and support, we can ensure that baobab-sisal extraction is done in a sustainable and environmentally friendly manner, while also generating income and improving livelihoods.

This project targets feminist organizations, environmental management agencies, local authorities, and women in general. It is a critical step towards promoting women's economic empowerment, sustainable development, and environmental conservation. By working together, the country can create a more equitable and sustainable future for rural women and their communities. The project's objectives are multifaceted and include providing training and support to rural women entrepreneurs, promoting sustainable baobab-sisal extraction and entrepreneurship, and improving access to markets and finance. The project aims to establish women's committees to manage their entrepreneurial enterprises, provide a platform for sharing knowledge and resources, and promote collaboration and networking among women entrepreneurs.

The impact of this project is far-reaching, with benefits extending beyond the individual women to their families, communities, and the environment. By promoting sustainable livelihoods and entrepreneurship, we can help to reduce poverty, improve food security, and promote economic growth. The project contributes to the achievement of several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), such as the No Poverty SDG 1,

the Gender Equality SDG 5 and the Responsible Consumption and Production SDG 12. It also contributes immensely to Zimbabwe's National Development Strategy 2's 2026-2030's three strategic pillars; Number 2 (Economic Transformation), 5 (Science, Technology and Innovation) and 7 (Job Creation).

Overall, this study is a critical step towards empowering rural women entrepreneurs who have taken up baobab-sisal extraction as a livelihood option. By providing them with the necessary tools, training, and support, I can help to break down the barriers that prevent them from succeeding and promote sustainable development and environmental conservation. I urge feminist organizations, environmental management agencies, local authorities, and women in general to support this project and work towards creating a more equitable and sustainable future for rural women and their communities. The project's potential for impact is significant, and it has the potential to be scaled up and replicated in other contexts. I believe that this project has the potential to make a real difference in the lives of rural women and their communities, and I urge donors and stakeholders to support this critical initiative. By working together, we can create a more sustainable and equitable future for all.

Limitations of the Study

The study's reliance on a small, purposively selected sample of nine female crafters from Manicaland Province limits the transferability of findings to other contexts, as the snowball sampling technique may have introduced homogeneity and selection bias by drawing participants from similar social networks. The exclusive focus on women actively engaged in baobab-sisal crafting precludes comparative insights from male crafters or non-participants, potentially overstating the livelihood impacts within the broader community. While translation of the Ndau language transcripts into English facilitated wider accessibility, nuances of meaning and culturally embedded expressions may have been lost or altered during transcription, affecting interpretive accuracy. Additionally, the absence of prolonged participant observation beyond interview settings and the short data collection window between 2024 and 2025 constrain understanding of seasonal variations and long-term shifts in income, food security and empowerment outcomes.

Methodology

This qualitative study, conducted between 2024 and 2025, employed a triangulated methodology to explore the transformative potential of baobab-sisal crafting as a climate-resilient livelihood strategy for rural communities in the five selected villages in Chimanimani District, located on the eastern border of Zimbabwe with Mozambique and in Manicaland Province. The study's methodology involved a combination of in-depth interviews, participant observation, and focus group discussions to select participants. Snowball sampling was used to identify and select participants, where initial participants referred the researcher to other potential participants who met the

study's inclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria consisted of female crafters who were actively involved in baobab-sisal crafting and residing in the selected villages in Manicaland Province. A total of nine (9) female crafters were engaged in the study, providing rich, contextual data on the complex dynamics of baobab-sisal crafting and its impact on household income, food security, rural tourism development, and women's economic empowerment. The nine (9) female crafters were selected through snowballing, purposively selecting two participants per village, serving one village which contained only one female crafter. To ensure the research was conducted ethically, participants' names were coded to protect their identities and maintain confidentiality. Alphanumeric codes: W1 (woman entrepreneur number 1), W2 (woman entrepreneur number 2 up to W9 (woman entrepreneur number 9) were used to refer to participants in the study, and these alphanumeric codes were accorded to the sampled nine (9) women entrepreneurs depending on which number they appeared when they met with this researcher during snowballing. The five (5) sample villages were also coded as A, B, C, D, and E, and all data was stored securely to prevent unauthorised access. By taking these measures, the study ensured that participants' rights and dignity were respected, and that the research was conducted ethically and responsibly. Text data captured in the Ndau language was transcribed into English for the benefit of readers who could not understand it.

The nine (9) participants were selected based on active participation in the craft for at least two years and consent to share income and food security data. Data saturation was deemed to have been reached when interviews with the ninth participant yielded no new thematic categories regarding livelihood impacts, with recurring patterns of income diversification and seasonal consumption smoothing evident across narratives. To triangulate individual perspectives, two focus group discussions were conducted with all nine participants, the first group having four participants and the second, five participants respectively; structured to explore collective experiences of market access, production constraints, and household decision-making, thereby deepening interpretive consistency across cases. Trustworthiness was strengthened through data triangulation across interviews and FGDs, as well as the use of verbatim quotes to substantiate thematic claims. Verbatim quotes captured in the Ndau language were transcribed into English for easy understanding by the non-Ndau-speaking audience.

Trustworthiness was enhanced through member checking of transcripts, maintenance of an audit trail documenting coding decisions, and prolonged engagement with participants over the six-month study period, which collectively supported credibility, dependability, and confirmability of findings while acknowledging limited transferability due to the small, context-specific sample.

Data Analysis, Discussion, and Findings

This section analyses and discusses the data to come up with findings for the study. Qualitative data from the interviews and FGDs were analyzed using thematic analysis

to identify patterns relating to income and food security. Transcripts were coded inductively, reflecting livelihood impacts. Themes were reviewed for coherence and refined into final themes.

Climate Resilience

The findings indicate that women baobab-sisal crafters in the selected villages have adopted various climate-resilient strategies to cope with the impact of climate change, which has become a major threat to their livelihoods. These strategies include diversifying their livelihoods, using drought-resistant tree species like baobab, and implementing sustainable harvesting practices. For instance, W2, a 41-year-old crafter from Village A, noted:

> *Tiri kuchera tsamba dze*baobab *pamwe chikomo chinozara shasha, tichipfanya tsamba dze*baobab *dzisakonde.*
>
> (We harvest baobab bark during the dry season when the trees are less stressed, ensuring sustainability and reducing the risk of tree damage).

This strategy allows them to manage the baobab trees sustainably, ensuring their continued availability for future generations. Additionally, the women crafters have developed a sophisticated understanding of the baobab tree's growth patterns, allowing them to harvest the bark without causing harm to the tree. They made sure that they did not unbark the baobab tree to cause it to go dry, but they did so minimally to allow it to rejuvenate its cells.

W5, a 28-year-old crafter from Village B, also explained:

> *Tiri kushanda nesisal, shiri inosimba inokwata mvura*
>
> (We also use sisal, which is a hardy plant that can survive with minimal rainfall, reducing our reliance on rain-fed crops).

The use of sisal, a drought-tolerant plant, provides an additional layer of resilience to their livelihoods, as it can thrive in conditions where other crops may fail. Furthermore, the women crafters have developed innovative ways to process and utilize the sisal plant, creating a range of value-added products that command higher prices in the market. Products which they crafted from the sisal plant included mats, cloths, blankets, baskets, ropes, and hats. They bragged that they sold the products to supplement their family incomes and could sell them as far as Mozambique under the auspices of illegal migrant traders.

The adoption of these climate-resilient strategies has enabled the women baobab-sisal crafters to maintain their livelihoods despite the increasing frequency and severity of climate-related shocks. By diversifying their livelihoods, using drought-resistant tree species, and implementing sustainable harvesting practices, the women crafters have demonstrated remarkable resilience and adaptability in the face of climate change. To verify the time dedication the women entrepreneurs applied between crop/animal farming and baobab-sisal crafting, the following data were obtained.

Activity Time Dedication in Months for the Year 2024

Table 1

Respondent	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**8**	**9**	
Farming	1	0	2	1	0	0	3	1	4	Months
Crafting	11	12	10	11	12	12	9	11	8	Months

The above data proves that about 89% of the nine (9) women entrepreneurs devotedly spend most of their time on either baobab or sisal crafting, while the remaining 11% did both. A large percentage of the participants suggested that they were very frustrated by the repercussions of the Cyclone Idai, explaining this for the benefit of international readers and other climate change effects like protracted drought and desperate livelihoods. According to Janzon (2018), many people in drought-prone countries have since left farming enterprises for other business ventures that can help them fend for their families. Janzon (2018) identifies some of these business ventures as encapsulating fish farming, poultry, tailoring, crafting, selling products online and a lot more business ventures in the category of the informal business sector. Therefore, for them, they located a viable livelihood option in baobab and sisal crafting, from which they get a lucrative income after selling the resultant products locally and internationally.

The study revealed that baobab-sisal crafting has enabled women entrepreneurs to diversify their livelihoods, reducing their dependence on a single income source and increasing their economic resilience. Women crafters have expanded their product lines to include a range of value-added products, such as intricately designed bags, hats, baskets and jewellery, which attract higher prices and increase their income. These products are not only aesthetically pleasing but also display the women's creativity and skill, setting them apart from other crafters in the region. Table 2 and Figure 1 below show the commonly crafted baobab and sisal products and the average amount of money in United States dollars that the women said is likely to accumulate for the period of two months per woman entrepreneur.

Estimated Value of Baobab-Sisal Product Sale Between May and June 2024.

The information in Table 2 below shows that the sale of mats and carpets attracts both local and international consumers. During the interviews held and observations made, baobab and sisal crafters did not only traded the products in exchange for money but also for other products such as groceries, kitchen ware and any material that could be traded. Mats and carpets had an estimated value of US$2500 (37%), ropes would attract US$2400 (35%), baskets US1200 (18%) and hats, which were commonly bought locally, had an estimated value of US$700 (10%). The respondents expressed that some of the products, like hats, were seasonally bound and were mostly bought during the cold and hot seasons, especially from the end of May to end of April the

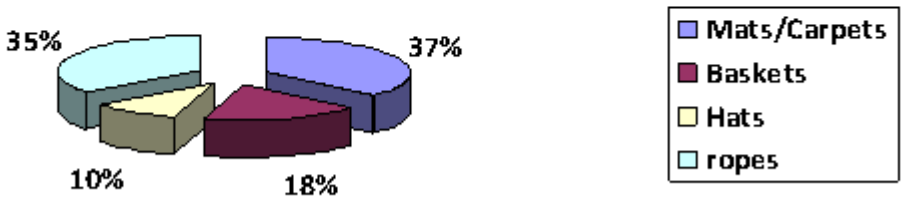
following year. Most women revealed that they normally sustainably extract baobab bark during winter to prevent baobab tree damage due to both diseases and weather, while sisal was extracted when the leaves became mature, that is, in the dry season between the ends of April and October. The respondents elaborated that mostly their local marketing points were by the roadsides and at cultural functions. They also expressed that local and international tourists were regular clients of the baobab and sisal products, with the chief ones being companies and small-scale cooperatives.

Baobab-Sisal Product Estimated Sales between May and June 2024.

Table 2

Product	**Mats/Carpets**	**Hats**	**Baskets**	**Ropes**
Average Value Estimated	$2500	$700	$1200	$2400
Common Market	Local & International	Local	Local & International	Local & International

Fig 1
Estimated value of Baobab-sisal product sale in US$ in two Months



Estimate the percentage value of baobab-sisal product sales in two months

On the concept of diversification, W5 (the Village B woman crafter aforementioned), explained the impact of diversifying her product line:

> *Ndakazvara kufamba tsuma, saka ndakaita pfuma, mapoti nejira*
>
> (I used to only make mats, but now I also make bags and hats, which sell for more money, helping me to support my family).

By expanding her product line, W5 has been able to increase her income and support her family, demonstrating the positive impact of livelihood diversification on women's economic empowerment.

W2, from Village A, noted the unique selling point of their baobab seed jewellery:

Ndakazvara kufamba tsuma, saka ndakaita pfuma, mapoti nejira

(We also make jewellery from baobab seeds, which is a unique product that attracts tourists).

The use of baobab seeds in jewellery making has not only provided an additional income stream for the women crafters but also helped to promote the cultural significance of the baobab tree in the region.

The diversification of livelihoods through baobab-sisal crafting has also enabled women entrepreneurs to tap into new markets and customer segments. For example, the women crafters have started selling their products to tourists visiting the region, providing an additional source of income and exposure to new markets. This has not only increased their income but also enhanced their economic resilience and ability to adapt to changing market conditions.

Access to Markets

The study further aimed to identify the barriers encountered by women entrepreneurs and the promotional tactics they deployed to market their products. The following data were gathered.

Table 3

Entrepreneurs' Common suggested challenges	**Suggested Intervention Measures**	**Marketing strategy**
-Long-distance markets **-competition from other products** **-Price fluctuations** **-environmental laws** **-lack of labour for extracting bark and sisal** **-stereotypes from other provinces**	-Need for skills and digital training -sponsored participation in trade fairs and cultural events -media marketing support -access to loans -support through local authorities -networking expansion	-word of mouth: persuasive advertising -Use of local newspapers to reach potential clients -travel to selling points, local and international -customise the products to suit customer taste -collaborating with local businessmen -attempts to engage NGOs -success story telling in local trade fairs, cultural events, and magazines

-limited networking opportunities **-lack of government support through local authorities to license the activity** **-digital divide**		-social media (especially WhatsApp)

As presented above, the women entrepreneurs indicated that they faced challenges, such as travelling long distances to reach potential clients in both local and international markets, which disadvantaged them financially. They also expressed that they met stiff competition from other products not made of baobab and sisal, such as metal, wood, and plastic products, which were more standardized, legally branded, and licensed. They pleaded that the government needed to support them through local authorities, especially by legalizing baobab bark and sisal extraction. W8 and W5, for example, complained that they were recently arrested and warned not to extract bark from baobabs, which they said were protected tree species. However, despite all the odds, they said they ignored the order to support their families. The women entrepreneurs also said that despite stereotypes from neighbouring provinces chiding them as one of the most backward and savage provinces, they would continue conscientizing people about the value of their culture and the lucrative value of baobab trees and the sisal plant. The respondents also expressed that extracting baobab bark and sisal leaves was a very painful and demanding job, which required the help of their husbands. However, most of them said that they were ‘single mothers’ and that they had to hire labour from men, and that they would devote themselves to weaving and selling to eke a living despite fluctuating market prices.

The respondents indicated that they were in great need of training workshops, especially relating to digital technology, for them to widen the scope of their business and to network with potential clients in both local and international markets.

Women's Empowerment

The findings of this study unequivocally demonstrate that baobab-sisal crafting has been a transformative force in the lives of women entrepreneurs in the selected villages. By empowering women to take control of their economic and social destinies, baobab-sisal crafting has enabled them to transcend traditional gender roles and stereotypes, thereby enhancing their overall well-being.

A critical factor in this empowerment process has been the formation of cooperatives, which provide a platform for women crafters to share knowledge, skills, and resources.

These cooperatives have fostered a sense of solidarity and collective ownership among the women, enabling them to negotiate better prices for their products and access new markets. As W8, a 27-year-old crafter from Village C, noted:

> *Tiri kushanda pachena, tichipfanya masangano anokwata tsamba dzebaobab*
>
> (Through our cooperative, we have been able to access training and markets, increasing our income and improving our livelihoods).

The cooperatives have also facilitated the development of a supportive and inclusive community among the women crafters. W1, a 40-year-old crafter also from Village C, explained.

> *Tiri kushanda tichipfanya kuita kwenyu tsamba dzebaobab.*
>
> (We also provide support to each other, sharing knowledge and skills to improve our products and businesses).

This sense of community and mutual support has been instrumental in building the women's confidence and self-esteem, enabling them to take on leadership roles and assert their rights in their communities. Furthermore, the cooperatives have enabled the women crafters to develop a range of entrepreneurial skills, including marketing, finance, and product development. This has enabled them to increase their income and improve their livelihoods, thereby reducing their vulnerability to poverty and economic shocks. The findings of this study demonstrate that baobab-sisal crafting has been a powerful tool for empowering women entrepreneurs in the selected villages. By providing a platform for women to share knowledge, skills, and resources, the cooperatives have enabled them to take control of their economic and social destinies, thereby enhancing their overall well-being.

Government Policies and Baobab-Sisal Women Entrepreneurs

The Zimbabwean government, through its environmental conservation agencies such as the Environmental Management Agency (EMA), including those that regulate water and climate, has implemented policies aimed at conserving the country's natural resources. However, these policies have had unintended consequences on women entrepreneurs in the rural areas, particularly those involved in baobab-sisal crafting. The Environmental Management Agency (EMA), has been enforcing regulations that restrict the extraction of baobab bark, a key material used by women in Manicaland Province to craft various products such as mats, baskets and blankets. Despite the conservative approach to harvesting, which allows the trees to rejuvenate, the women are facing challenges in accessing the raw material.

A female crafter, during an interview session, shared her experience of being arrested and charged for extracting baobab bark. Accordingly, a lot of female entrepreneurs were arrested in 2022 after being caught harvesting baobab bark in Manicaland (USAID, 2022). She explained that keeping up with family responsibilities has become

increasingly difficult, especially for single mothers like herself who are solely responsible for providing for their children. The crafter lamented that most of the women entrepreneurs in the area are widows with children to look after, and the restriction on baobab bark extraction has severely impacted their livelihoods. Furthermore, the women are also incurring high transportation costs when transporting the bark from the harvesting points to their homes for further processing into baobab fiber and weaves, which adds to their financial burden.

The restrictive policies have not only affected these women's ability to access raw materials but also their ability to market and sell their products. The women in the selected five villages of Chimanimani District have been innovative in finding ways to overcome these challenges. For instance, they have formed collaborative teams for bark extraction, transportation of artefacts to markets and exchange of weaving resources and skills. Some women have also started offering training services to novice women entrepreneurs, which has helped to build their capacity and confidence. The women have also established committees to manage their entrepreneurial enterprises, and more women are joining the business to earn a living.

The women in the baobab-sisal crafting industry have expressed their desire for a machine that can debark and weave the fibres, which would greatly improve their productivity and efficiency. However, this desire is often at odds with the government's environmental policies, which restrict the debarking of certain tree species. The women argue that controlled harvesting of baobab trees can be sustainable and that the trees can rejuvenate if harvested properly. They believe that with the right support and policies, their businesses can thrive and contribute to the local economy. In fact, studies such as the one by Zengeya (2019) have shown that baobab-sisal crafting can enhance household income and food security, catalyze rural tourism development, and contribute to poverty reduction and economic empowerment.

Networking Among Women Entrepreneurs

The women in the baobab-sisal crafting industry have demonstrated the importance of networking in overcoming challenges and achieving success. They have formed collaborative teams and networks that enable them to share resources, skills and knowledge. Digital networking has also played a crucial role in enabling women to access markets and information that can help them improve their businesses. The women have also formed joint ventures and partnerships with other stakeholders, which have helped to increase their access to finance, markets, and technology.

Interview data obtained from the women's networking strategies reveals that they are using a range of approaches to build their businesses. Some of the strategies include forming collaborative teams in bark extraction and transportation of artefacts to markets, exchanging weaving resources and skills, and offering training services to novice women entrepreneurs. The women have also established women's committees to manage their entrepreneurial enterprises, which has helped to improve their decision-making and leadership capacity.

Overall, the Zimbabwean government's policies aimed at conserving the country's natural resources have had unintended consequences on women entrepreneurs in the rural areas. The restriction on baobab bark extraction has severely impacted the livelihoods of women in Manicaland Province, who rely on the craft to support their families. However, the women have demonstrated their resilience and resourcefulness in finding ways to overcome these challenges. Through networking and collaboration, the women have been able to build their capacity and confidence, and their businesses continue to thrive despite the challenges. The study highlights the need for policies that support sustainable livelihoods and entrepreneurship, particularly for women in rural areas.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has demonstrated the transformative potential of baobab-sisal crafting in empowering women entrepreneurs in rural Zimbabwe, thereby enhancing their economic and social status. To harness the full potential of this initiative, women entrepreneurs, policymakers, and stakeholders must collaborate to create an enabling environment that fosters sustainable livelihoods, climate resilience, and women's empowerment (Oxfam, 2025; ZimTrade, 2024).

To this end, the following actionable recommendations are proposed:

- First, the Ministry of Women Affairs, Community and Medium Enterprises should ensure that women entrepreneurs are mobilized to establish and strengthen cooperatives to enhance collective bargaining power, access new markets, and share knowledge and skills;
- Second, the Ministry of Women Affairs, Community and Medium Enterprises should also provide targeted support, including training programs, access to finance, and market linkages, to women-led initiatives.
- Furthermore, the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, Innovation, Science and Technology Development, through vocational training centers and polytechnics, should deliver entrepreneurship and vocational training to women entrepreneurs on the baobab-sisal project under the Heritage-based Curriculum.
- Finally, the Ministry of ICT, Postal and Courier Services, as well as the Postal and Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of Zimbabwe (POTRAZ), should implement the universal service fund to support ICT hubs and digital literacy for women and rural communities. This will open up digital platforms and social media for women entrepreneurs to access new markets, promote their products, and build business networks.

By implementing these recommendations, women entrepreneurs in rural Zimbabwe can unlock new opportunities for economic growth, social empowerment, and

environmental sustainability, ultimately contributing to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

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Reclaiming Africa's Dietary Heritage: Unpacking the Climate Resilience and Nutritional Benefits of *Svoboda* in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

The decline of traditional food systems in Sub-Saharan Africa, including Zimbabwe, has exacerbated farmers' vulnerability to climate change. Despite the abundance of research on known small grains like rapoko (finger millet), sorghum, and millet, the efficacy of svoboda (barnyard millet), a near-extinct small grain crop, has been overlooked. Traditionally cultivated in Manicaland and Masvingo Province for its adaptability and high nutritional benefits (International Plant Genetic Resources Institute, 2019), svoboda (grain size: 1.5-2.5mm) remains a treasured heritage crop among a few elderly farmers. This qualitative study, conducted in Bikita and Marange Districts, picking 8 participants (3 farming households and 1 expert from each district) were snowballed to explore svoboda's climate resilience, nutritional profile, and potential to enhance food security, rural development, and environmental sustainability through in-depth interviews and field observations with adult communal farmers. The districts were chosen because they are among those adversely and constantly affected by climatic changes apart from their historical significance in svoboda growing. The findings advocate for targeted campaigns to revitalize svoboda cultivation, leveraging dry-land agriculture to promote climate resilience and nutritional well-being. As farming communities shift towards modern foods, the nation's food security, sovereignty, and cultural heritage are compromised. Revitalizing svoboda offers a unique opportunity to reclaim Africa's dietary heritage and promote sustainable development.

Keywords: aridity, climate change, dietary heritage, gastronomy, permaculture, *svoboda*

Introduction

The sharp decline of traditional food systems in Sub-Saharan Africa, exemplified by Zimbabwe, has rendered farmers increasingly vulnerable to the vagaries of climate change. This paradigmatic shift has compromised the nation’s food security, sovereignty and cultural heritage, underscoring the need for a nuanced reevaluation of indigenous crop varieties. This qualitative study seeks to raise awareness on the need to revitalise the near-extinct, forgotten or lost crop variety known locally as *svoboda*, and widely known as barnyard millet (*Echinochloa esculenta*), a small grain millet often ground into flour and consumed as rice. It can be dehulled, parboiled, and eaten the way people do to rice. It is endowed with remarkable nutritional, climate resilience, and socioeconomic benefits.

Background

In Zimbabwe, the Bikita and Marange Districts are paradigmatic examples of regions beset by erratic rainfall patterns and climatic changes, which have deleterious effects on agricultural productivity. The districts' predominantly sandy and poor soils, which are prevalent in most parts of the region, are ill-suited for modern grains, which are increasingly vulnerable to climate-related stresses. The two districts' agro-ecological conditions, characterised by sandy soils and a semi-arid climate, are well-suited for the rain-fed growing *svoboda*. *Svoboda* boasts a grain size of 1.5-2.5mm, which is smaller than that of *rapoko,* which ranges from 2.5-3.5mm. This traditional crop is highly adaptable to the local conditions, making it an ideal choice for smallholder farmers in the area. Historically, both Marange and Bikita Districts have been one of the strongholds of *svoboda* production in Zimbabwe, with local farmers cultivating the crop for centuries.

Svoboda is typically grown in areas with low rainfall, where other crops may struggle to thrive (Akplo et al, 2023). As Alkire and Foster (2011) note, the crop is planted in well-prepared fields, often in rotation with others, and requires minimal external inputs. Farmers tend to the crop regularly, ensuring that it receives adequate moisture and sunlight. The plant itself has narrow, pointed leaves with a bluish-green color and a slender, straight stem that grows to a height of 1-2 meters. Harvesting is typically done by hand using traditional methods, where mature panicles are cut, dried, and then threshed to extract the grains, which are then winnowed to remove chaff and debris. The grains are stored in traditional granaries or bags, where they can be kept for extended periods without spoilage. When preparing *svoboda* for consumption, the grains are typically dehulled, parboiled, and then ground into flour, which can be used to make a variety of traditional dishes, including porridge, bread, and beer. The straw from the crop is also used for animal feed and thatching.

In addition to its uses as a food crop, *svoboda* has also been used in traditional medicine for its numerous health benefits. The crop is rich in nutrients, including fibre, protein, and minerals, making it an excellent food source for people with dietary restrictions. The traditional knowledge and practices associated with *svoboda* cultivation have been passed down through generations, with farmers playing a crucial role in preserving the crop's genetic diversity and cultural significance. Despite its numerous benefits, *svoboda* cultivation has declined precipitously with the advent of colonialism and the introduction of so-called modern crops, like maize, relegating this erstwhile staple crop to the periphery of agricultural practice. Today, *svoboda* persists in the hands of a dwindling coterie of conservative farmers who have preserved the traditional knowledge and practices associated with its cultivation, providing a vital link to the past. This study sought to build on this traditional knowledge, exploring the

potential of *svoboda* to promote climate resilience, nutritional well-being, and sustainable development in Bikita and Marange Districts.

Statement of the Problem

The vulnerability of most sub-Saharan African farming populations to the vagaries of climate change-related stresses is attributable to a heavy reliance on modern cross-bread hybrid cereals persistently grown on climate-induced dryland farming zones. In Zimbabwe, the net effect for this is food hunger, limited livelihood options and poverty and hence as a remedy, this study gives advocacy to *svoboda* with climate-change-related positives for seed revival, sustainable food security in rural communities.

Research Objectives

The objectives of the study were to:

1. Investigate and document the nutrient properties of *svoboda.*
2. Explore the traditional preservation methods and cultural significance of *svoboda* in rural communities.
3. Examine the potential of *svoboda* in promoting sustainable agriculture, enhancing food security and improving livelihoods in rural communities.

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following questions:

1. What are the nutritional characteristics and benefits of *svoboda*?
2. How have rural communities in Zimbabwe preserved and maintained *svoboda* over time?
3. What are the potential contributions of *svoboda* to sustainable agriculture, food security and rural livelihoods?

Literature Review

The decline of traditional food systems in Sub-Saharan Africa, including Zimbabwe, has exacerbated the vulnerability of farmers to climate change (Muchuru and Nhamo (2019). Despite concerted efforts to promote modern crop varieties, small traditional grains such as *rapoko*, sorghum, pearl millet and sundry have been largely overlooked, yet they offer a promising solution to climate change resilience (Tesfaye et al., 2020). Such grains are currently, though minimally grown in parts of Manicaland and Masvingo Provinces for their adaptability and high nutritional benefits (International Plant Genetic Resources Institute, 2019). Despite these merits, a burgeoning body of research suggests that small grains are more resilient to climate

change, require less water, and are rich in nutrients (Ferguson and Lovell, 2014).

This study attempts to promote *svoboda* farming in Zimbabwe's climate change- prone areas such as Bikita and Marange, and so forth to increase food security and livelihood options. Svoboda is a near-extinct type of millet that is climate change, weevil, pest and disease resilient. A critical examination of *svoboda's* etymology, derived from the Shona language, reveals that it means "freedom" or "liberation," which aptly describes its potential to liberate farmers from the constraints of modern crop varieties (ZIMVAC, 2023) and a dependency on government and donor agencies for food security. The crop's small size (grain size: 1.5-2.5mm) and hardiness make it an ideal crop for dry-land agriculture, which is critical for promoting climate resilience and nutritional well-being in Zimbabwe (Chitiyo & Duram, 2017). Furthermore, *svoboda's* nutritional profile, which includes high levels of fibre, protein and minerals, makes it an excellent crop for promoting nutritional well-being (Pingali et al., 2021).

Empirical studies have demonstrated the efficacy of permaculture-based farming methods, which promote the use of small grains like *svoboda,* in improving crop yields and enhancing food security (Akhtar, 2016; Vitari & David, 2017). Conservation farming, which involves the use of small grains has been successfully implemented in areas like Mukore Village in Bikita, Zimbabwe (Chitongo, 2013). These approaches offer a sustainable alternative to modern crop varieties which are often susceptible to climate change factors (Janzon, 2018). By promoting agro-ecological practices, small grains like *svoboda* can play a critical role in enhancing food security, rural development and environmental sustainability.

In Zimbabwe, small grains have been found to be more nutritious than modern cross-bred cereals, which cannot withstand drought and changing weather conditions (ZIMVAV, 2023). Research has shown that small grains like *svoboda* are rich in antioxidants, phytochemicals and other nutrients that are essential for human health (Ferguson & Lovell, 2014). Furthermore, small grains like svoboda require less water and pesticides, making them a more sustainable option for farmers (Althouse, 2016). By promoting the use of small grains like *svoboda,* Zimbabwe can reduce its reliance on imported crops and promote food sovereignty.

Revitalising *svoboda* offers a unique opportunity to reclaim Africa's dietary heritage and promote sustainable development (Althouse, 2016). By leveraging dry-land agriculture and promoting climate resilience and nutritional well-being, *svoboda* can play a critical role in enhancing food security, rural development and environmental sustainability in Zimbabwe (Ferguson & Lovell, 2014). As scholars like Janzon (2018) argue, it is time to scale up small grain varieties like *svoboda* and downplay modern crop varieties that are vulnerable to climate change. By doing so, Zimbabwe can

promote a more sustainable and resilient food system that benefits both farmers and consumers.

Methods

This qualitative study employed snowball sampling to select 8 information-rich participants, consisting of 3 farming households and 1 expert from each of the Bikita and Marange Districts in Manicaland and Masvingo Provinces, Zimbabwe. The districts were conveniently chosen due to their historical significance in *svoboda* cultivation and vulnerability to climate change. The study utilized a case study design, with a focus on smallholder farmers who grow Svoboda millet in Bikita and Marange Districts of Zimbabwe. Data were collected in the pre, during and post 2024 farming season through in-depth interviews and field observations, focusing on adult communal farmers who traditionally cultivated Svoboda. The data collection process aimed to gather information on the socio-economic characteristics of the farmers, their production practices, and the challenges they face in growing *svoboda.* The data analysis was conducted using a thematic approach, where the data were analyzed to identify key themes and patterns. The analysis revealed that *svoboda* millet has several advantages over other traditional crops, including its ability to thrive in poor soils and its resistance to pests and diseases. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, villages and respondents were coded. The study adhered to ethical standards, obtaining clearance and informed consent. Trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation of data collection methods and analysis, as well as member checking.

The study's findings were further validated through a comparative analysis of *svoboda* and other traditional seed varieties. The analysis revealed that *svoboda* has several advantages that make it an ideal crop for farmers in drought-prone areas, including its drought resilience, nutritional value, and resistance to pests and diseases. *Svoboda's* deep roots allow it to access water deep in the soil, making it more resistant to drought. Additionally, *svoboda* is also less susceptible to pests and diseases, making it a low-maintenance crop that requires fewer external inputs. By promoting the production and consumption of *svoboda,* it is possible to preserve cultural heritage and promote community cohesion (Marongwe, 2013). The study's findings suggest that reviving *svoboda* may have numerous benefits for food security, sustainable agriculture, and cultural preservation through using it, for example in cultural observances and rituals such as beer brewing in rain-making ceremonies. It is essential to provide support to farmers who still grow this crop and promote its production and consumption to ensure its survival for future generations.

Permaculture Theory as a Paradigm for Sustainable Ecology

The Permaculture theory, conceived by Australian scientists Bill Mollison and David Holmgren, emerged as a response to the detrimental effects of industrialisation on the Australian environment. Mollison & Holmgren (1978) introduced the concept of permaculture, emphasizing sustainable ecology and industrial production. Initially designed to mimic natural ecosystems, permaculture aimed to promote sustainable benefits while minimizing harm to nature. Over time, the scope of permaculture expanded to encompass social systems, sustainable agro-biodiversity, and practical solutions to agricultural challenges. The theory is guided by three ethical principles: earth care, people care, and fair share (Holmgren, 2002). Earth care involves preserving diverse life forms, while people care emphasizes the interconnectedness between humanity and nature. Fair share ensures equitable resource distribution, reducing poverty and promoting harmonious coexistence. Permaculture has been defined as the creation of ecological human settlements, particularly through the development of sustainable agricultural systems that mimic natural ecosystems (Althouse, 2016). Mollison founded the first Permaculture Institute in Northern Australia in 1979, offering design courses based on his publication*, Permaculture a Designer's Manual* (Macnamara, 2001). The concept has since spread globally, with permaculture associations established worldwide. The permaculture framework advocates for a transition from traditional farming methods, which often result in soil degradation, to conservation agriculture that promotes sustainable development (Janzon, 2018). This approach encourages minimal soil disturbance, boosts soil-microbial symbiosis, and facilitates crop rotation and mixed cropping for optimal yields (Chitongo, 2013).

Results and discussion

Revitalizing traditional food systems

The sharp decline of traditional food systems in Sub-Saharan Africa, exemplified by Zimbabwe, has rendered farmers increasingly vulnerable to the vagaries of climate change (Macnamara, 2001). This study's findings suggest that revitalizing traditional crops like *svoboda* can promote climate resilience, nutritional well-being, and sustainable development. As Ferguson & Lovell (2014) noted, small grains like *svoboda* are more resilient to climate change and require less water. Communal farmers in Bikita and Marange Districts who grow *svoboda* reported higher yields and better adaptation to local conditions compared to those growing modern cross-bred grains like maize.

Svoboda has inherent resilience to climate change, making it ideal for regions experiencing unpredictable weather patterns. According to ZimTrade. (2024),

Zimbabwe's worst drought in 40 years during the 2023/2024 growing season drastically impacted crop yields, particularly for maize, which is the country's principal grain. These crops also provide critical nutrients essential for growth and development, offering protection against infections and diseases. Traditional foods have superior nutritional composition, but they are largely absent from the Zimbabwean diet (Chitiyo & Duram, 2017). Revitalizing traditional crops can contribute to sustainable development by promoting local food systems, improving food security, and enhancing community resilience. In Zimbabwe, more than 70% of the population relies on rain-fed agriculture, making them vulnerable to climate-related shocks. Very few farmers who are growing drought-resistant small grain crop varieties were noted to be relying on near-extinct small grain varieties like *svoboda* as some farmers testified.

Farmer 1 from Bikita District noted,

> *Svoboda inhaka yedu uye kubva kare yaitipa goho kunyange munguva yekusanaya kwevhura.*
>
> (Svoboda is our heritage crop, and it has always given us good yields even in times of drought).

Farmer 2 from Marange District echoed this sentiment, stating:

> *Taingorima svoboda kubva kare uye yaitibetsera kuraramisa mhuri dzedu.*
>
> (We've been growing svoboda for generations and it's always provided for our families).

The colonial legacy in Zimbabwe continues to stop farmers to return and adapt to traditional cereal crops often stereotyped as backward. Adopting traditional cereal grains as staples depends on the behaviour of consumers and markets; it is more about demand than supply. Zimbabwean consumers mainly prefer maize as a staple, but there is a growing demand for traditional products, mainly for health reasons.

Favourable price control measures through the Zimbabwe Grain Marketing Board (GMB) have also helped to incentivise farmers to grow these crops. Interventions to promote the consumption of traditional foods must take into account generational factors, family contribution, and food safety at every stage of the socio-ecological model. Agricultural extension services should be tailored to provide training and resources for farmers on best practices for growing traditional crops. Efforts should be made to develop markets for traditional crops, improving their economic viability and

appeal to a wider audience. By doing so, Zimbabwe can build a more resilient and sustainable food system, better equipped to withstand the challenges of climate change.

Reasons behind the near-extinction of *svoboda* seed variety and the need for its revival

Local farmers attribute the decline in *svoboda* growing to several factors, primarily the lack of support and recognition from government institutions and the agricultural sector at large. Many farmers have shifted to growing crops varieties that are more demanded at the market and with better price support. This shift has led to a decline in the cultivation of traditional crops like Svoboda, which, despite its numerous benefits, is often overlooked in favor of more modern and lucrative options.

The neglect of traditional crops like *svoboda* is not just an oversight but also a result of changing consumer preferences and lack of awareness about the nutritional and environmental benefits of these crops. Chitiyo & Duram (2017) note that alternative agriculture, which includes traditional crops like Svoboda, is often marginalised by consumer food perceptions and international agencies. This marginalisation has limited the growth and development of local markets for traditional crops, making it harder for farmers to sustain their production. To promote the revival of Svoboda, Chitiyo & Duram recommend that local farmers should be supported in growing traditional small grains through initiatives that raise awareness about the benefits of these crops and develop local markets. In addition to awareness and market development, Janzon (2018) suggests that promoting the growing of traditional small grains like Svoboda requires a focus on sustainable agricultural practices that enhance soil health and biodiversity. By adopting practices that work in harmony with the environment, farmers can improve the productivity of their land while reducing their reliance on external inputs. This approach not only benefits the environment but also makes farming more sustainable and resilient in the face of climate change. Janzon's recommendations highlight the importance of integrating traditional knowledge with modern sustainable practices to promote the growth of crops like *svoboda.*

Marongwe (2013) emphasises the need for policy support and institutional frameworks that recognize the value of traditional crops like *svoboda.* By developing policies that support the production, processing, and marketing of traditional crops, like the 2023/2024 National Traditional Grains Policy of Zimbabwe, governments can create an enabling environment for farmers to grow these crops sustainably (ZimTrade, 2024). This could include providing training and resources to farmers, supporting the development of local markets, and promoting the nutritional benefits of traditional crops. With the right support and policies in place, traditional crops like svoboda can

play a critical role in enhancing food security, promoting sustainable agriculture, and preserving cultural heritage. This is due to a number of reasons such as drought resistance, weevil resistance, long shelf span, low maintenance costs and ability to grow well on different soil types.

Fig. 1: Svoboda (*Echinochloa esculenta*)

It can be seen in Figure 1 that *svoboda* grain size can closely match 1.5 to 2.5mm with a hardiness that makes it an ideal crop for dry-land agriculture. According to Chitiyo and Duram (2017), it is highly medicinal and nutritional having high fibre, protein and

mineral content.

One farmer in Bikita District boasted of having harvested 4 sacks of *svoboda,* which he grew on a very small piece of land and he expressed confidence that he could produce a significant yield if he were to grow it on a larger scale. The table below shows data that were obtained from the observations and interviews held in both Bikita and Marange Districts.

Quantity of *svoboda* grown by Bikita and Marange District Communal Farmers in the 2024 Period

Table 1

	Bikita District				**Marange District**		
	Village A Farmer 1	**Village B Farmer 2**	**Village C Farmer 3**		**Village A Farmer 4**	**Village B Farmer 5**	**Village C Farmer 6**
Svoboda Quantity in bags	4	3	1		1	0.5	3
Main purpose	Beer brewing, food	Beer Brewing, food	Medicinal purposes		Preserving heritage, medicinal purposes	Preserving heritage, food	Food for medicinal purposes

In spite of the fact that most farmers in Bikita District favoured growing modern cereals such as maize, they had very little harvest compared to the few farmers who grew favoured growing *svoboda*. None of the *svoboda* crop grown failed according to the information obtained in both districts. Had the Svoboda crop been recommended, the farmers could have been growing it on large pieces of land to obtain big yields. Farmers 3, 4 and 5 suggested that they grew *svoboda* mainly to prevent the crop from extinction and for its drought and weevil resilience. However, all the farmers grew *svoboda* as a preserve and food while Farmers 3, 4 and 6 grew it particularly for medicinal purposes such as its potential to treat type 2 diabetes, gluten-related disorders and iron deficiency anaemia Chitiyo & Duram, 2017). The *svoboda* crop did not fail them because it proved to be drought, weevil, pest and disease resistant as compared to other modern cross-bred cereals like maize.

This resilience of the *svoboda* crop is a testament to the potential benefits of traditional farming practices, which have often been overlooked in favour of modern agricultural methods. The fact that these crops have been preserved for generations speaks to

their inherent value and the knowledge that has been passed down through the years. By embracing these traditional practices, farmers in Bikita District and beyond may be able to build a more sustainable and resilient agricultural system, one that is better equipped to withstand the challenges of climate change and other environmental stressors.

Furthermore, the medicinal properties of the *svoboda* crop highlight the importance of preserving biodiversity and the knowledge associated with traditional crops. As the world grapples with the challenges of climate change, food insecurity, and public health, the potential benefits of traditional crops like *svoboda* cannot be overstated. By supporting and promoting these crops, policymakers and agricultural experts can help to ensure that communities like those in Bikita District have access to nutritious food, sustainable livelihoods, and the knowledge and resources they need to thrive.

Svododa's Climate Resilience and Adaptation

Climate resilience and adaptation are critical concerns for agricultural communities worldwide, particularly in regions vulnerable to climate-related stresses. Traditional small grains like Svoboda millet have demonstrated remarkable resilience to these stresses, attributable to their adaptability to poor soils, drought, and high temperatures (Janzon, 2018). As Akhtar et al. (2016) noted, permaculture-based farming methods, which promote the use of small grains, in this case, svoboda millet, can improve crop yields and enhance food security.

Farmer 1 from Marange District explained:

> *Svoboda yaingorimiwa munharaunda muno kwemakore, uye inonyatsoda nzvimbo seino. Haipfukutiwe uye inorarama muivhu chero risina chikafu*.
>
> (Svoboda millet has been traditionally grown in this area for centuries and it's well-suited to our local conditions. It's resistant to weevils and it can thrive in poor soils).

This expertise was corroborated by direct observations which revealed that Svoboda millet fields in both districts showed better crop yields and showed fewer signs of stress compared to modern ones.

The benefits of growing *svoboda* millet are further underscored by the data collected from the two districts. In Bikita District, the average yield of *svoboda* was approximately 3 to 4 sacks per acre with each sack weighing about 50 kilograms, a

remarkable achievement considering the crop's rarity and the challenging environmental conditions. In Marange District, two farmers stored *svoboda*, with Farmer 4 having a single sack while Farmer 5 and Farmer 6 have a half bucket and three buckets respectively. These findings suggest that promoting the production and consumption of *svoboda* can have significant benefits for local communities. Additionally, the crop's adaptability to poor soils and drought makes it an ideal choice for farmers in areas with challenging environmental conditions.

Moreover, the preservation of traditional crops like *svoboda* millet is crucial for maintaining biodiversity and ensuring food security in the face of climate change compared to other drought prone crops. As the global climate continues to change, crops like *svoboda* will become increasingly important for communities that rely on agriculture for their livelihoods. By supporting and promoting these crops, policymakers and agricultural experts can help to ensure that these communities have access to nutritious food and sustainable livelihoods.

Furthermore, the potential for *svoboda* to contribute to sustainable agriculture and food security in Zimbabwe is significant. With the right support and promotion, this crop could become a major player in the country's agricultural sector, providing a reliable source of food and income for thousands of smallholder farmers. As such, policymakers and agricultural stakeholders must take a proactive approach to supporting the production and consumption of *svoboda,* and to promoting its benefits to local communities.

Nutritional and Medicinal Benefits of Svoboda

Traditional small grains like *svoboda* are increasingly recognised for their medicinal properties and high nutritional value. Farmer 3 from Bikita District reported,

> *Tinoshandisa svoboda kubika sadza, chikafu chemuno muZimbabwe. Inoshandisiwa zve pachivanhu chedu sekubika doro uye inozivikanwa nekurapa zvirwere.*
>
> (We use svoboda to make sadza, which is a staple food in our community. It's also used in traditional beer brewing, and it's known to have health benefits).

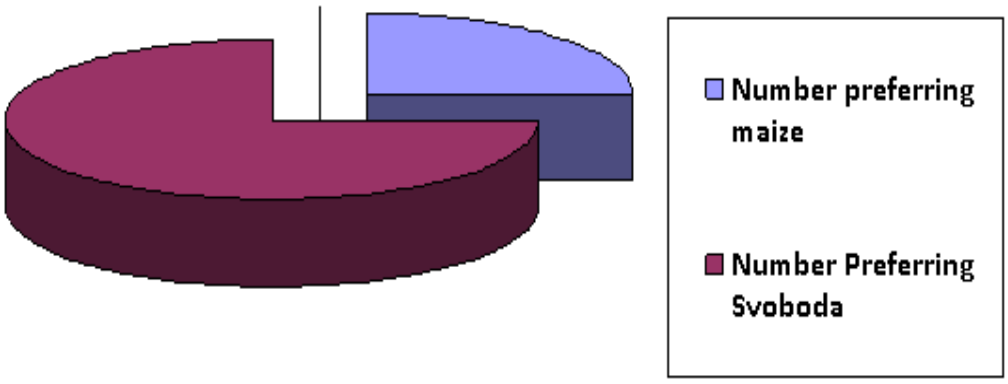
For instance, *svoboda* is rich in fibre, protein, and minerals, making it an excellent crop for promoting nutritional well-being. Additionally, the crop has been found to have antioxidant properties, which can help to prevent chronic diseases. These findings suggest that promoting the production and consumption of *svoboda* can have

significant health benefits for local communities. Furthermore, the crop's nutritional benefits can help to address malnutrition and related health problems in rural areas.

Notably, most farmers in Bikita District who grew *svoboda* reported that they used it to make traditional foods such as *sadza* and traditional beer. Similarly, in Marange District, farmers who grew *svoboda* reported that they used it to make traditional foods, consume it as a medical recommendation, and to promote nutritional well-being. The versatility of *svoboda* in traditional food preparation and its perceived health benefits highlight its potential to contribute to the nutritional security of rural communities. The potential health benefits of *svoboda* are particularly significant in the context of rural Zimbabwe, where access to healthcare and nutritious food can be limited. By promoting the production and consumption of this crop, policymakers and healthcare professionals can help to address some of the pressing health challenges faced by rural communities. Moreover, the antioxidant and nutritional properties of *svoboda* make it an attractive crop for communities looking to adopt healthier dietary options.

In addition to its health benefits, the cultural significance of *svoboda* in traditional food preparation and ceremonies should not be overlooked. The crop's role in traditional beer brewing and *sadza* preparation highlights its importance in social and cultural practices. By supporting the production and consumption of Svoboda millet, policymakers can also help to preserve cultural heritage and promote community cohesion.

Fig 2: Comparative Assessment of Crop Preference in Face of Climate Change



Farmers preferring svoboda= 6 (75%); Farmers Preferring Maize= 2 (25%)

Socio-economic Benefits and Cultural Significance

Revitalizing *svoboda* can promote socio-economic benefits and cultural significance in local communities such as communal practices like beer brewing and sale, barter trade and sundry. As Chitiyo and Duram (2017) noted, alternative agriculture

characteristics, such as those found in millets production, can enhance rural development and environmental sustainability. Farmer 6 from Marange District noted,

> *''Svoboda is a part of our cultural heritage, and it's a symbol of our community's resilience and adaptability.''*

The crop is also an important source of income for local farmers, who can sell it at premium prices due to its high nutritional value. For example, in Bikita District, Farmers 1 and 2 who grew *svoboda* reported higher incomes compared to those growing modern cereals. Notably, Farmers 4 and 6 in Marange District who grew *svoboda* reported that they sold it to augment family income.

The economic benefits of growing *svoboda* are likely to be particularly significant for smallholder farmers, who often struggle to access markets and secure a reliable income. By promoting the production and sale of this crop, policymakers can help to create new economic opportunities for rural communities and support sustainable livelihoods. This, in turn, can contribute to poverty reduction and improved food security, as farmers are better able to afford the food and other necessities they need.

Table 2: A Comparative Analysis of *Svoboda* and Maize

	Advantages	**Disadvantages**
	-drought resistant/withstands climate-related shocks -weevil resistant Disease and pest resistant -easy to store -an icon for heritage preservation -nutritional benefits -medicinal value -favors virtually all soil types -used to pay fines and beer brewing -potential to enhance food security, rural development and environmental sustainability	- currently limited market access -currently limited on *svoboda* in general -limited availability of processing machinery -not a preference by modern consumers as food

Maize and other cereals	-high market demand (widely traded commodity -higher yields per hectare if rains are stable -is a staple food in many cultures -shorter growth cycle	-require adequate rains -often succumb to drought Prone to pests and diseases e.g., fall armyworm and BMB, eldana -purchasing pests and chemicals costly -high labour cost -storage costs -falling market prices -require fertile soils -labor intensive e.t.c.

It can be noted that, despite some advantages maize has over *svoboda*, climate change factors stand as the major drawback and, therefore, the need to recommend Svoboda for its adaptability to climatic vicissitudes and the need to preserve the country's heritage. Maize and other cereals are often vulnerable to climate change as well as pests and diseases among other disadvantages mentioned in the above table. During the interviews and field observations held, it was evident that most communal farmers prefer very much to grow Svoboda but they lacked support from local authorities and the government.

A Comparative Analysis of *Svoboda* and other small grain seed varieties

A comparative analysis of *svoboda* and other traditional seed varieties reveals that Svoboda has several advantages that make it an ideal crop for farmers in drought-prone areas. According to one farmer from Bikita District,

> *Svoboda millet is more resilient to drought than other traditional crops like rapoko, sorghum, and finger millet. It can survive with minimal rainfall and still produce a good yield.*

The farmer noted that Svoboda millet's deep roots allow it to access water deep in the soil, making it more resistant to drought. The farmer also highlighted the merits of *svoboda* in terms of its nutritional value observing that Svoboda millet is rich in fibre, protein and minerals, making it an excellent crop for promoting nutritional well-being. In comparison, other small grain crops like *rapoko* and sorghum may not have the same level of nutritional value. In addition to its drought resilience and nutritional value, *svoboda* is also less susceptible to pests and diseases. The farmer noted that *svoboda* is resistant to weevils and other pests, which makes it a low-maintenance crop that requires fewer external inputs. This makes *svoboda* an attractive option for farmers who want to reduce their reliance on chemical pesticides and maintain a more sustainable farming system. The farmer also highlighted the importance of preserving

svoboda as it is part of African cultural heritage and it is essential that farmers preserve them for future generations. By promoting the production and consumption of *svoboda,* it is possible to preserve cultural heritage and promote community cohesion.

Therefore, the above observation reveals that *svoboda* has several advantages that make it an ideal crop for farmers in drought-prone areas. Its drought resilience, nutritional value, and high resistance to pests and diseases make it a low-maintenance crop that can provide a reliable source of food and income for farmers.

Harnessing the Power of Small Grains for a Food-secure Future

The data analysis reveals that reviving *svoboda* can play a critical role in securing a food-secure future. According to Farmer 1,

> *Svoboda yavashoma chaizvo zvokuti yavakuda kukurudzira varimi vanayo vasara kuti vairime. Izvi zvikasaitiwa, ndiwo mapararire embeu ye svoboda.*
>
> (Svoboda is a lost seed that needs to be revived through incentivizing the fewest farmers with remnant svoboda seed reserves. If not done, svoboda may become totally extinct).

This sentiment is echoed by many other farmers who participated in the study. The analysis highlights the importance of providing support to farmers who still grow *svoboda*, as they are the custodians of this valuable genetic resource. By incentivizing these farmers, it is possible to increase production and promote the crop's resilience to climate change.

The study also reveals that *svoboda* has several advantages over other traditional crops, including its ability to thrive in poor soils and its resistance to pests and diseases. Farmer 1 also noted that *svoboda* is a hardy crop that can survive with minimal rainfall, making it an ideal crop for our region. The analysis suggests that promoting the production and consumption of *svoboda* can help to improve food security, particularly in areas where other crops may struggle to grow.

The data analysis also highlights the potential of *svoboda* to contribute to sustainable agriculture and food security. By promoting the use of this crop, it is possible to reduce reliance on external inputs, such as fertilisers and pesticides, and promote more sustainable farming practices. This can have numerous benefits for the environment, including improved soil health through aeration, improving soil crump structure, and biodiversity. Furthermore, the study reveals that *svoboda* has significant cultural

importance, particularly in traditional food preparation and ceremonies. The analysis suggests that promoting the production and consumption of *svoboda* can help to preserve cultural heritage and promote community cohesion.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The revitalization of *svoboda,* a small grain crop on the brink of extinction, necessitates a multi-faceted approach that engages local authorities, cultural centres, and relevant ministries and departments in Zimbabwe's agricultural sector. To revive *svoboda*, a strategic intervention is required, involving the procurement of existing stocks at premium prices to incentivise farmers to replenish supply reserves. Subsequently, the certified *svoboda* seed should be promoted as a recommended crop, with yields commanding high prices at grain collection depots, such as the Grain Marketing Board of Zimbabwe. This approach will not only ensure the preservation of *svoboda* for future generations but also contribute to a more sustainable and healthier food system. Furthermore, cultural centres and local authorities should collaborate to promote the cultural significance of *svoboda,* while responsible ministries such as the Ministry of Lands, Agriculture, Water, Climate and Rural Resettlement should provide technical support and resources to facilitate the crop's sustainability. By adopting a coordinated and inclusive approach, Zimbabwe can successfully sustain *svoboda,* enhancing food security, promoting cultural heritage and contributing to a more resilient agricultural sector.

Recommendations

Based on the conclusion, the following three recommendations can be made:

1. The Ministry of Agriculture and other relevant departments, should procure existing stocks of *svoboda* at premium prices to *incentivize* farmers to replenish supply reserves and encourage more farmers to grow the crop.

2. The government should promote certified *svoboda* seed as a recommended crop, ensuring that farmers have access to high-quality seeds and technical support. This can be achieved through collaboration with agricultural extension services, research institutions, and other stakeholders.

3. Cultural centres and local authorities should collaborate to promote the cultural significance of svoboda, raising awareness about its importance in traditional practices and its potential to contribute to a more sustainable and resilient food system. This can include cultural events, educational programs, and community outreach initiatives.

4. For its drought and weevil resilience, it is also recommended to communal farmers that *svoboda* be tried in other drought prone areas of Zimbabwe such as Mberengwa, Gokwe, Chiredzi and Zaka

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African Indigenous Knowledge Systems and the Decolonial Project: Towards a Genuine Heritage-Based Education 5.0 Curriculum in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

There seems to be a paucity of literature, particularly on the confluence of African Indigenous Knowledge Systems (AIKSs) and the decolonial project within Zimbabwe's higher and tertiary education curriculum (herein equated to the Heritage-Based Education 5.0 curriculum). Hence, the current reflection explores the philosophical interface between AIKSs and the decolonial agenda towards a genuinely Heritage-Based Education 5.0 curriculum in Zimbabwe. This reflection is secondary research considered handy where field inquiry is seen to yield little value. Secondary research was preferred because this reflection is predominantly data selection, not data collection. Secondary research was also chosen ahead of field inquiry because documentary evidence is readily available, cost-effective, and the process of data selection is unobtrusive (non-interfering/non-disruptive) and non-reactive (unaffected by the research process). The current reflection is informed by Afrocentrism (sometimes called the Afrocentric Theory) - a principle consistent with the African renaissance, Africanisation agenda, heritage-based philosophy, and decolonisation of education. To foster a shared understanding with the readership, the paper reconceptualises AIKSs and the decolonial project upon which it unravels the two often conflated notions of decoloniality and decolonisation. It is at this juncture that the paper estimates the decolonial potential of AIKSs, concluding that AIKSs are, on the whole, replete with decolonial proclivities. Expediting the integration of AIKSs into Zimbabwe's Heritage-Based Education 5.0 curriculum, therefore, serves to urgently decolonise higher learning towards indigenous-oriented innovation and industrialisation. The paper, therefore, recommends the formulation of a clear and comprehensive policy framework tailored to guide and expedite the integration of AIKSs into Zimbabwe's Heritage-Based Education 5.0 curriculum with a view to advancing the decolonial agenda consistent with indigenous-oriented innovation and industrialisation.

Keywords: African Indigenous Knowledge Systems, Decolonial Agenda, Heritage-Based Education 5.0 Curriculum, Afrocentrism.

Introduction

African Indigenous Knowledge Systems (AIKSs) represent African epistemology, which can be equated to African knowledge production, African meaning-making, or simply the African ways of knowing. The decolonial project, as underpinned by the Decolonial

Theory, speaks to unlearning Western ideologies. Zimbabwe's higher and tertiary education curricula have since been reconfigured into a decolonial praxis called the Heritage-Based Education 5.0 (HBE 5.0), as operationalised since 2019. To Garwe (2025), therefore:

> The HBE 5.0 is more than just a curriculum overhaul; it is a cultural revolution. It rewinds the colonial tape, re-centering Zimbabwean heritage and ancestral wisdom as legitimate epistemological resources. This transformative model transcends the limitations of Education 3.0, a framework criticised for its Eurocentric bias and neglect of local knowledge systems. Instead, HBE 5.0 embraces 'pluri-versality', celebrating the symphony of diverse knowledges and fostering collaboration between universities and communities (p. 2).

This drift towards a heritage-based higher and tertiary education curriculum (HBE 5.0), thus, harmonises with the Afrocentric Theory (Afrocentrism), 'Narratives of Return' Theory, and *Sankofa* Principle – cognate ideals that urge African societies to return to something African, something rooted in precolonial times (*id est*, the AIKSs) for solutions to problems associated with the postcolonial dispensation. The current paper, therefore, seeks to explore the philosophical interface between AIKSs and the decolonial project against a backdrop of the vestiges of colonialism that continue to bedevil and haunt Zimbabwe's HBE 5.0 curriculum.

Background

This reflection comes against a backdrop of the vestiges of colonialism that continue to bedevil and haunt Zimbabwe's higher and tertiary education curriculum (the HBE 5.0 curriculum). These vestiges or residues of colonialism are configured into a matrix, which Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015) refers to as the 'colonial logic' expressed in the form of a triad comprising the coloniality of power, coloniality of knowledge, and coloniality of being.

Coloniality of power subsumes the racial hierarchisation of humanity with Africans regarded as lesser beings placed at the bottom of the hierarchy, it also includes the bifurcation of the world into the 'zone of being' (the Global North – the core zone) and 'zone of non-being' (the Global South – the peripheral zone) with the culture of the former exerting heavy influence on that of the latter. Coloniality of knowledge constitutes the denigration of AIKSs, exaltation and legitimation of Western Knowledge Systems (WKSs), colonisation of African knowledge spaces by WKSs, and portrayal of the Euro-North Americans (Global North) as the custodians of real knowledge, which is worth being sought (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015). Coloniality of being gestures into "how African humanity was questioned as well as into the processes that contributed towards the 'objectification'/ 'thingification'/ 'commodification' of Africans" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015, p. 490). Coloniality of being, therefore, speaks to the Euro-American inclination of viewing Africans as sub-humans. This unfortunate idea of questioning African humanity and commodifying

Africans finds expression in the ideas of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804 A.D.) who, according to Kaputa (2011), once said 'Africans need to be driven by thrashing' and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831 A.D.) who, according to Funteh (2015), once remarked 'there is nothing harmonious with humanity in Africa'. The preceding finds confirmation in Albert Schweitzer's paternalistic but contradictory statement: 'The African is my brother, but he is my younger brother by several centuries' (as cited in Smiley, 2023), which views Africans as 'sub-humans', childlike 'children of nature'.

The colonial logic seems to continue manifesting in Zimbabwe's higher and tertiary education curriculum (the HBE 5.0 curriculum), whose architects consciously or subconsciously continue to emphasize Western epistemologies (WKSs) thereby marginalising AIKSs. For instance, most lectures continue to be delivered in English, which follows that knowledge-production continues to be done in English – the erstwhile coloniser's language. The position that knowledge-production continues in English, therefore, sounds admissible because the language-in-education (the official medium of instruction) is what determines and shapes knowledge-production in any institution of learning. Western research methodologies (research paradigms, approaches, designs, and instruments), which are not readily accommodative of the Afro-Zimbabwean culture and heritage as grounded in AIKSs, continue to pervade knowledge generation in Zimbabwe's higher and tertiary education curriculum. Despite the HBE 5.0 philosophy, which is currently the catch-phrase, the Occidental pedagogies (e.g. methodologies of equilibrium), Western capitalist values in general, and neoliberal economic values of competitive individualism, consumerism, efficiency and productivity, in particular, continue to suffuse Zimbabwe's higher and tertiary education curriculum.

Regrettably, the Government of Zimbabwe (2018) (a principal document guiding the implementation of HBE 5.0) says nothing about integrating the communocentric AIKSs into the modernisation and industrialisation of Zimbabwe through education, science, and technology. Even the University of Zimbabwe Vice-Chancellor's (2022) *Teacher Education Transformation Programme*, another principal document on HBE 5.0, is also silent on the communocentric AIKSs. Consequently, the Occidental pedagogies and Western capitalist values continue to propagate what could be termed the cut-throat competition within Zimbabwe's higher and tertiary education, which is at tangent with the communocentric and cooperative African worldview grounded in AIKSs and *Unhu/Ubuntu*. This continued reliance on WKSs is evident despite the purportedly indigenous-oriented HBE 5.0 blueprint operationalised since 2019 ostensibly to decolonise and transform Zimbabwe's higher and tertiary education curricula and training programmes. AIKSs and the languages that carry them on the whole continue to be peripherised, which constitutes the continuity of coloniality.

The continuity of coloniality of knowledge is confirmed by Tarugarira (2024), who reiterates that contemporary institutions of higher learning in Zimbabwe are still operating

largely within Western paradigms of knowledge production. While HBE 5.0 aims to dismantle colonial legacies and embed the indigenous cultural heritage, AIKSs remain marginalised (Tarugarira, 2024). It is concluded in Tarugarira's (2024) study that indigenous values and religious cultures are insufficiently harnessed, limiting the alignment of national education, innovation, science, and technology development with the broader heritage-based developmental goals. This paper, therefore, interrelates AIKSs and decoloniality towards a genuinely Heritage-Based Education 5.0 (HBE 5.0) curriculum in Zimbabwe. Such an undertaking is also targeted at re-awakening the local philosophers of education so that they save themselves from becoming intellectual imposters basically good at mimicking dominant theories and knowledges within the Western academy.

Problem postulation

The current reflection is motivated by the continuity of coloniality – the colonial logic which continues to manifest in postcolonial Zimbabwe's higher and tertiary education curriculum as emblematised by the emphasis that it continues to place on the WKSs. Consequently, African Indigenous Knowledge is still an under-utilised resource in local development activities (Zengeya-Makuku *et al*., 2013). Hence, Afro-Zimbabweans could be losing what could be of value to them. In spite of the HBE 5.0 philosophy, which is currently the catch-phrase, Western epistemologies continue to suffuse Zimbabwe's higher and tertiary education curriculum. It is, therefore, incumbent upon this reflection to estimate the decolonial potential of AIKSs, developing a case for Zimbabwe's HBE 5.0 curriculum.

Theoretical framework

This inquiry is informed by the Afrocentric Theory. Whilst Eurocentrism is a Western cultural bomb designed to annihilate the African worldview, epistemology (knowledge), and heritage, the Afrocentric Theory (whose synonyms are 'the Afrocentric cosmic view' or 'the Afro-centred paradigm' or 'Afrocentrism') is an antidote to Eurocentrism. Afrocentrism is not isolationism but thinking and acting African, *id est*, African centeredness. For Higgs and Van Niekerk (2003), "Afrocentrism is a response by African scholars to re-write the skewed history codified by colonisers so that Africans can systematically construct an understanding of an African reality by themselves for themselves" (p. 41). This liberatory inclination is endorsed by Okoye (2023), according to whom Afrocentrism seeks to reposition the African continent positively to enable Africans to achieve their development by themselves and for themselves. Africans, thus, needed to view reality from an Afrocentric worldview rather than treat everything Eurocentric as the truth. In the same vein, Dei (2012) argues that the Afro-centred paradigm is an important theoretical and pragmatic space for African peoples to interpret and critically reflect upon their experiences on their own terms and through the lenses of their

worldviews and understandings, rather than being forced to understand the world through Eurocentric lenses.

Proponents of Afrocentrism, therefore, have embarked on a journey to replace Eurocentrism with the Afrocentric Theory by presenting Africa-Egypt (*Alkebulan-Kemet*) as the originator of world civilisation and knowledge (Okoye, 2023). They presented and continue to present Ancient Egypt (*Kemet*) as the cradle of epistemology, science, and mathematics (Okoye, 2023). Attempts by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831 A.D.) and like-minded rationalists to dissociate Egypt from what they deride as 'Africa proper' are noted. However, Egypt remains in Africa by Geography. The portrayal of Africans as the originators of world civilisation and knowledge (the pith of Afrocentrism), thus, finds explanation and substantiation in the 'African-Egyptian origins of Greek Philosophy' (James, 2009; Wuta, 2023), grounded in the 'Afrocentric Greek Dependency Theory' (Okoye, 2023).

The Afrocentric Greek Dependency Theory maintains that the Greeks, who are erroneously regarded by omission or commission as the originators of Western civilisation and knowledge, were in actual fact taught and mentored by the Ancient Egyptians (Okoye, 2023). Likewise, James (2009) declares categorically that 'Egyptians educated the Greeks'. According to Wuta (2023), the prominent Greek characters like Thales (Circa 640-600 B.C.), Pythagoras (Circa 582-500 B.C.), Socrates (469-399 B.C.), Plato (427-347 B.C.), Aristotle (384-322 B.C.), and Alexander of Macedon (356-323 B.C.) sailed to Egypt and listened to the Egyptian Mystery priests who preached the knowledge and wisdom contained in the Ancient Egyptian Mystery religious system.

In more specific terms, annals of history have it on good record that Aristotle and his students shuttled from Athens to Egypt, where they converted the Royal Egyptian Library into a Research Centre (Onyewuenyi, 2005; James, 2009). With the passage of time, Aristotle's students transformed the Research Centre into a University. Eventually, the students of Aristotle compiled a vast body of scientific knowledge which they had gained from inquiry in Egypt and also from the oral instructions which they had received from the Egyptian Mystery Priests. It is these African-Egyptian teachings, knowledge, and wisdom that Aristotle and neophytes then called the history of Greek philosophy. Therefore, the loudly-touted Aristotelian philosophy is not pristine Greek philosophy but an extension of African-Egyptian philosophy. A related account deliberately mentions Aristotle's student Alexander III of Macedon (affectionately dubbed Alexander the Great), "who, by an act of aggression, invaded Egypt in 333 B.C., and ransacked and looted the Royal Library at Alexandria and together with his companions carried off a booty of scientific, philosophic and religious books" (James, 2009, p. 109). This was a plunder of intellectual property amidst military conquest. Thus, "Greeks stole the legacy of the African continent and called it their own" (James, 2009, p. 2009). This explains the view that Greek (Western) philosophy is '*Stolen Legacy*'.

Africans are purported to have abandoned their own indigenous civilization, a bequest whose historical foundations are deeply entrenched in ancient Egypt and Nubia. This profound heritage is accentuated by the actuality that Egypt served as the crib of science, philosophy, and mathematics (Okoye, 2023), while ancient Nubia, which is located in modern Sudan, in fact contains the world's highest number of pyramids, surpassing even Egypt (Brier, 2002). It is this Ancient Egyptian civilisation that the Greeks (Westerners) are reported to have stolen, tailored to suit their needs, and claimed to be theirs (Wuta, 2023). In the process, Westerners claimed ownership and authorship of the African heritage (Ancient Egyptian epistemology and science) so successfully that attempts to set the record straight have become and continue to be an uphill struggle. This is the genesis of Eurocentrism, which, as a cultural bomb premised on stolen African-Egyptian legacy, makes Africans see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement, and it compels them to want to identify with that which is furthest removed from themselves (Okoye, 2023), for instance, with the Occidental epistemologies (WKSs) rather than knowledge systems of their own (AIKSs). Yet AIKSs remain the epitome of African epistemology and bedrock of holistic African existentiality. Afrocentrism, therefore, challenges the Western-orchestrated coloniality of knowledge. The decolonial potential of AIKSs, therefore, is best understood and appreciated from this perspective of Afrocentrism.

Interrogation of available literature: Identifying knowledge gaps

In her book *Decolonising Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, Smith (1999) critiques Western research as a tool of imperialism that has historically marginalised indigenous knowledge. Smith urges the reclamation of indigenous knowledge and decolonisation, which involves reversing the marginalisation of indigenous knowledge systems and ensuring that they are central to research. Smith also advances indigenous agency, whose central goal is having indigenous peoples become the researchers, rather than merely the researched, which transforms research into a tool for self-determination. Although Smith's submissions are among some of the works that may have influenced policymakers in Zimbabwe, they manifest a geographical gap in knowledge since they are in the global context. The current inquiry, therefore, seeks to reflect on issues of a similar nature within the local Afro-Zimbabwean context, hoping to gather new, nuanced, and interesting insights.

At a regional level, philosophers of education seem to address the matters of AIKSs, decolonial agenda, and heritage-based education as isolated themes and disjointed issues. Authorities like Dei (2012), for instance, portray African Indigenous Knowledge as 'heritage knowledge', which suggests that AIKSs enhance the African culture-embeddedness of knowledge and hence they have a decolonial inclination. Dei (2012), thus, interfaces AIKSs and decoloniality but falls short in linking the two with heritage-based education. Moreover, the fact that Dei's (2012) discussion is in the diasporic

context exhibits a geographical gap in the literature, which the current paper seeks to address by reflecting on issues of a similar nature in Zimbabwe. The fact that Dei (2012) wrote almost a decade before the promulgation of Zimbabwe's HBE 5.0 presents the current reflection with a temporal knowledge gap, which needs to be addressed through interrelating AIKSs with decoloniality in the purview of the topical HBE 5.0 curriculum.

In the context of neighbouring South Africa, Martinez-Vargas (2020) recognises the exigency of AIKSs in decolonising higher education research, transforming a traditional uni-versity into a pluri-versity. According to Martinez-Vargas (2020), the chances of success in transforming a uni-versity into a pluri-versity could be brightened through adopting practices that are "diverse in form and content, including knowledge systems historically excluded, but equally preserve those that, although imposed, should still be present for an ecology of knowledges" (p. 112). This evokes the thesis of hybridity, which urges the integration of AIKSs and WKSs, with the former occupying a larger portion in the curriculum. Martinez-Vargas (2020) further argues, "diversifying our practices as researchers and combining them with traditional research practices is the only way to promote a pluri-verse which is nurtured by diverse knowledge systems on our way towards decolonisation" (p. 112). Decolonisation, therefore, does not seek to expunge Western epistemologies, nor does it rest upon AIKSs only, but it harmonises with the thesis of hybridity. Being based in South Africa, Martinez-Vargas's (2020) discussion exhibits a geographical gap, which the current reflection seeks to bridge by estimating the decolonial acumen of AIKSs in the context of Zimbabwe's HBE 5.0 curriculum.

In his local study targeted at re-evaluating Zimbabwe's HBE 5.0, Tarugarira (2024) proclaims that the said blueprint is a decolonial initiative aimed at reconfiguring the national education framework to foster indigenous-oriented creativity, critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaboration within universities and colleges. As Tarugarira (2024) urges a return to tradition, he, therefore, implicitly envisions and recognises the decolonial potential of AIKSs within Zimbabwe's HBE 5.0 blueprint. His inquiry, however, is not substantially focused on the decolonial praxis of AIKSs, and hence it may not be exhaustive in this regard.

Drawing on preliminary data from a pilot study she conducted at five Zimbabwean universities, Garwe (2025) demonstrates how the HBE 5.0 model aligns with decolonial philosophies by contesting dominant Western epistemologies and promoting inclusive and culturally responsive teaching policies. Contesting dominant Western epistemologies hints at challenging the preponderance of WKSs. Promoting culturally responsive education policies implicates the agenda for fostering AIKSs. Consequently, Garwe (2025) highlights the numerous benefits resulting from the implementation of the HBE 5.0 model, especially through honouring local wisdom and place-based knowing. However, Garwe's (2025) study was not exhaustive in estimating the decolonial acumen of AIKSs,

a gap which the current reflection seeks to address by delving deeper into the confluence of AIKSs and decoloniality within the purview of Zimbabwe's HBE 5.0 curriculum.

Research methodology

This article is predominantly a textual or documentary analysis as a form of secondary research. Documentary analysis is an interpretivist research design in which the researcher systematically examines existing documents or literature to extract meaningful data relevant to the driving concerns of the inquiry. According to Bowen (2009), documentary analysis is an efficient method that is less time-consuming and cost-effective as it requires data selection instead of data collection. Documentary evidence is available (since many documents are in the public domain), documentary analysis is unobtrusive (does not draw undue attention), and non-reactive (unaffected by the research process). It is for these reasons that documentary analysis was preferred ahead of other research designs. This paper, therefore, is a reflection on other people's literary works that include primary and secondary sources (journal articles, book chapters, and handbooks) which address the issue under scrutiny, *id est*, the decolonial potential of AIKSs within Zimbabwe's HBE 5.0 curriculum.

Indigenous Knowledge (IK) and African Indigenous Knowledge Systems (AIKSs) untangled

The word 'Indigenous' is derived from the Latin word '*indigena*', whose English equivalent is 'indigene', which is usually taken to mean 'native'. Indigenous, thus, refers to "the root of things; as something that is natural and in-born to a specific context or culture" (Msila, 2009, p. 311), something peculiar to a certain culture and inimitable to any other cultural milieu.

IK, therefore, depicts the kind of meaning-making or knowledge production or epistemology that is peculiar to any given locale. It is "knowledge that people in a given community developed, and continue to develop over time, and is based on experience often tested over centuries of use, adapted to the local culture and environment, which is ever-changing and dynamic" (Zengeya-Makuku, Kushure, Zengeya & Bhukuvhani, 2013, p. 447). IK, therefore, is home-grown but amenable to change. Mawere (2015) also views IK as a set of ideas, beliefs, and practices of a specific locale that has been used by its people to interact with their environment and other people over a long period of time. Hence, IK is perennialistic.

Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKSs) in general have also been defined as "the sum total of the knowledge and skills which people in a particular geographical area possess" (Shizha, 2010, p. 32). The abbreviation 'IKSs' is more of an umbrella term because there are IKSs unique to the USA, there are IKSs peculiar to the Scandinavian cultural landscape, there are IKSs inimitable to Australia, etcetera. In the Sub-Saharan context,

therefore, there is a need to add 'African' as a prefix to 'Indigenous Knowledge Systems' so that it reads 'African Indigenous Knowledge Systems' abbreviated as AIKSs. AIKSs, therefore, incorporate combinations of epistemologies encompassing the technological, philosophical, social, economic, educational, legal, and governance systems of Africans (Msila, 2009). These systems are embedded in the history and culture of Africans, including their civilisation. AIKSs, thus, form the backbone of the social, economic, scientific, and technological identity of Africans (Msila, 2009).

Decoloniality: An antidote to coloniality

Decoloniality (Decolonial Theory) underpins struggles against colonial legacies wreaking havoc in the lives of ex-colonised peoples in general and their education in particular. Decolonial theorists argue that colonial education systems not only marginalised Indigenous Knowledge Systems but also imposed epistemic violence, privileging Western ways of knowing and suppressing diverse knowledges (Garwe, 2025). Decolonial Theory emphasises the pursuit of epistemic justice, challenging entrenched power structures and promoting the validity and legitimacy of multiple knowledge systems (Garwe, 2025). Protagonists of the Decolonial Theory include Walter Mignolo, Frantz Fanon, William Dubois, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Kwame Nkrumah, and Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, among others. The decolonial agenda targets the 'triad of coloniality', which subsumes the coloniality of 'power', 'knowledge', and 'being' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015). Decoloniality, therefore, is the 'how' part of decolonisation as well as a process of liberation to unmask and reveal coloniality (residues of colonialism), and challenge its endurance across the three dimensions of power, knowledge, and being (Ranawana, 2023). It involves the whole process of unlearning the Western colonial ideologies. Decoloniality announces a broad 'decolonial turn' that involves the task of the very decolonisation of power, knowledge, and being.

Unlike the simple decolonisation movements of the 20th Century, "decoloniality was and is aimed at setting afoot a new humanity free from racial hierarchisation and asymmetrical power relations in place since conquest" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015, p. 489). Decoloniality is more epistemological in outlook, whereas decolonisation is more political in flavour. Decoloniality, thus, challenges the colonial logic (the dark side of the Euro-North American-centric modernity) in general and coloniality of power in particular. This is substantiated by Maldonado-Torres (as cited in Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015), who writes, "by decoloniality it is meant here the dismantling of relations of power and conceptions of knowledge that foment the reproduction of racial, gender, and geopolitical hierarchies that came into being or found new and more powerful forms of expression in the modern/colonial world" (p. 488). This insinuates that the decolonial agenda is wary of the racially or colonially induced injustice, inequality, inequity, and iniquity. The said agenda seeks to counteract the socio-politico-cultural subjugation of one race by the other. Decoloniality, therefore, is consistent with the Critical Race Theory, which views racism

as a systemic phenomenon that needs to be challenged and counteracted. Decoloniality is replete with emancipatory predilections that make it relevant to the protracted African quest for self-determination.

Universities in Africa, for instance, continue to produce alienated Africans who are socialised into hating the Africa that produced them and liking Europe and America that hate them (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015). These universities, therefore, manifest the coloniality of knowledge as they valorise Western epistemology. Decolonial theorists view Western epistemologies as deliberately designed to intellectually subjugate the ex-colonised peoples, annihilate their Indigenous Knowledge Systems, and thwart their heritage-based worldviews. It is this coloniality of knowledge that the decolonial agenda also seeks to challenge.

Decoloniality is a call for the democratisation, de-homogenisation, de-Westernisation, and de-Europeanisation of knowledge (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015). Democratisation of knowledge means availing equal knowledge-production opportunities for all peoples across the globe. De-homogenisation of knowledge is the drift from the universalisation of dominant epistemologies. De-Westernisation and de-Europeanisation of knowledge is a shift from the belief that Westerners and Europeans are the custodians of worthwhile knowledge worth being sought. Decolonial thinking, thus, conceives knowledge as an entitlement to all peoples; it is against the Western universalisation of knowledge, and it challenges the highly-sloganeered Western-European custodianship of knowledge. To Ranawana (2023), decoloniality rejects the possibility of the so-called Western universal truth, and hence it counteracts the coloniality of knowledge.

Decoloniality could also be understood as an opportunity for the formerly subjugated to relearn their knowledge that could have been pushed aside, forgotten, buried, or discredited by the forces of modernity, settler-colonialism, and racial capitalism. However, decoloniality is not a means to reject the scientific, medical, social, and ethical 'advances' of the modern era *tout court*. It is, rather, a cautious and sober way to explore colonisation, settler-colonialism, racial capitalism, modernity, and, most recently, neoliberalism and neo-capitalism, and how they have displaced an array of modes of living, thinking, and being in the subjugated peoples' natural world. Decoloniality, therefore, aspires to restore, elevate, renew, rediscover, acknowledge, and validate the multiplicity of life experiences, culture, and knowledge of the indigenous and ex-colonised peoples to de-centre racial privilege. Above all, decoloniality attempts to reassert and validate the ex-colonised people's humanity, thereby challenging the coloniality of being.

AIKSs and the decolonial agenda: Towards a genuinely Heritage-Based Education 5.0 curriculum

AIKSs can serve as a basis on which another world outside the present Western-centric one can be imagined, and hence there are ways in which AIKSs can transform and/or

lead to the decolonisation of knowledge within higher education in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) (Ndlovu, 2014). Zimbabwe's HBE 5.0 curriculum, therefore, is not an exception because its emancipatory vision is further capacitated by AIKS. Among the many methods by which AIKSs can be deployed to transform and decolonise curriculum and research is the deliberate attempt to privilege the African archive over the Western one when conducting research and developing content materials for teaching purposes (Ndlovu, 2014). This suggests the need to privilege those sources of knowledge that carry subalternised views of the indigenous people of SSA in general and Zimbabwe in particular. Such will also require a practical step towards dealing with the politics of citation, where students and researchers can be encouraged to recognise those scholars who have privileged AIKSs above those who privilege WKSs (Ndlovu, 2014).

The decolonial agenda harmonises with critical pedagogy. "Critical pedagogy advocates for a shift from the 'banking model' of education, where teachers deposit knowledge into passive student minds, towards a dialogical approach" (Garwe, 2025, p. 3). Critical pedagogy, therefore, detests the traditional, monotonous, and disempowering lecture-assign-test-recite method dubbed the expert-disciple model of teaching. Critical pedagogy sets a premium on the dialogical approach as exemplified by Freire (2005), according to whom, a good education is 'neither what A does to B nor what A does for B but what A does with B'. With their culture-embeddedness and decolonial inclination, AIKSs have the potential to foster this dialogical approach because they motivate student participation, emblematic of the highly cherished transactional learning. This finds explanation in the fact that recognition is readily given to what learners think, say, and do at home and in the community. With emphasis on ancestral wisdom and community engagement, students become active in class as they find their identities affirmed and cultural roots strengthened (Garwe, 2025). AIKSs, thus, serve to contextualise learning, thereby generating interest among students, which is consistent with the decolonial imperative of Zimbabwe's HBE 5.0.

The focus of Zimbabwe's HBE 5.0 on integrating ancestral wisdom and local knowledge aligns with what Garwe (2025) refers to as the Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKSs) Theories – decolonial principles targeted at honouring local wisdom and place-based knowing. Based on these IKSs Theories, therefore, it becomes arguable that AIKSs create opportunities for students to voice their lived experiences, challenge dominant narratives, and co-create knowledge that addresses community needs and aspirations. With a strong anchor in AIKSs, Zimbabwe's HBE 5.0 curriculum is strategically positioned to facilitate the recovery and redemption of the hitherto suppressed indigenous epistemologies, decolonising higher learning, and empowering students to reclaim their cultural heritage and utilise it for indigenous-oriented problem-solving and development (Garwe, 2025).

Garwe (2025) advances the 'Endogenous Development Theory', which underscores the importance of centering knowledge construction processes within the lived realities and priorities of local populations. The said theory posits that development initiatives should be driven by local values, aspirations, and knowledge systems, rather than externally imposed models. In resonance with this theory, which assumes a decolonial outlook, the HBE 5.0 framework emphasises endogenous development goals such as community engagement and fostering solutions relevant to Zimbabwean contexts (Wuta, 2022). AIKSs, therefore, needed to be brought to the epicentre of these purportedly endogenous development goals so that these goals become truly indigenous-oriented, culture-embedded, and decolonial in outlook. Incorporating AIKSs into Zimbabwe's HBE 5.0 curriculum enjoins students to value multiple epistemologies beyond the dominant Western canon, towards *pluri-versality*, creating space for stakeholders to engage with their lived knowledge systems and contribute to solutions informed by their lived experiences (Garwe, 2025).

Findings in Garwe's (2025) study show initial promise in Zimbabwe's HBE 5.0 curriculum, serving to validate identities and knowledge pluralism through culturally responsive practices. In other words, the HBE 5.0 is capable of giving AIKSs the recognition that they are due, so that these culture-embedded epistemologies, in return, sharpen the decolonial vision of the said curriculum framework. The decolonial potential of AIKSs is seen in their ability to dismantle colonial-era structures by restoring the African identity, re-centering African worldviews, and fostering epistemic freedom. By reclaiming AIKSs, Zimbabwe's HBE 5.0 can challenge Eurocentric paradigms in society, governance, health, and technology, promoting a more holistic and culturally relevant approach to development and well-being.

Strengthening cultural identity and fostering a sense of belonging on the part of the HBE 5.0 curriculum readily aligns with decolonial aspirations, which can be amplified and magnified through the incorporation of AIKSs into the said curriculum framework. "This alignment is not just local; it resonates with global movements challenging colonial legacies and privileging indigenous knowledge systems" (Garwe, 2025, p. 13). The HBE 5.0's focus on culturally responsive andragogies and pedagogies, thus, resonates with a global chorus of educational innovations (inclusive of the incorporation of AIKSs) that challenge the dominant Western epistemologies. Moreover, realising HBE 5.0's emancipatory vision demands not just institutional commitment within Zimbabwe, but a global alliance united in their pursuit of decolonial and culturally responsive learning (Garwe, 2025), which evokes the bringing of AIKSs to the epicentre of higher learning and training in accordance with the dictates of decoloniality.

To dismantle the colonial hangover in higher and tertiary education in Zimbabwe, the integration of AIKSs into HBE 5.0 could be expedited to replace vestiges of the Eurocentric Education 3.0 curriculum with a system that values indigenous languages

and pedagogies, making education more relevant to learners' cultural backgrounds. To restore the Afro-Zimbabwean identity and sovereignty, the recovery and promotion of AIKSs in education are considered crucial, as these serve to reclaim and restore the indigenous identities, languages, and experiences lost or suppressed during colonialism. To challenge the Western knowledge hegemony in the HBE 5.0 curriculum, AIKSs could be deployed to offer alternative ways of knowing that can be used to critique and move beyond the assumptions embedded in WKSs. By tapping more into AIKSs, Zimbabwe's HBE 5.0 curriculum can reduce dependence on external knowledge systems and develop solutions to local problems that are more sustainable and culturally appropriate. This is basically the promotion of self-determination.

Garwe (2025) views Zimbabwe's journey of HBE 5.0 as a testament to the transformative power of education, and a reminder that the symphony of decolonisation is still being composed. Hence, she urges:

> Let its (HBE 5.0 curriculum) melodies weave into the broader symphony of learning, offering hope for a future where classrooms become sanctuaries for diverse voices, knowledge ecosystems flourish in their multiplicity, and education plays its role in dismantling colonial legacies and fostering a world where cultures thrive in harmonious exchange" (Garwe, 2025, p. 13).

This urges the expeditious incorporation of AIKSs into Zimbabwe's HBE 5.0 curriculum as an exigency for the decolonisation of higher learning and attainment of the highly cherished ideal of *pluri-versality*. HBE 5.0's evolving composition, while still unfinished, has the potential to become a powerful anthem in the ongoing rendition of decolonial and culturally responsive education (Garwe, 2025). However, a cautious decolonial approach to Zimbabwe's HBE 5.0 curriculum can create a dynamic "third space" that synthesises relevant elements of both AIKSs and WKSs, rather than simply rejecting one for the other. This encourages the hybridisation of ancient and modern knowledges in accordance with the ideal of *pluri-versality*.

Conclusion

The process of decolonisation, as underpinned by the Decolonial Theory, requires a fundamental shift in mind-set both for individuals and institutions of higher learning in Zimbabwe, *id est*, a shift away from internalised colonial values towards the re-learning and re-valuing of indigenous knowledge. AIKSs, thus, needed to be brought to the epicentre of endogenous development goals so that these goals become truly home-grown, culture-embedded, and decolonial in outlook. Integrating AIKSs into Zimbabwe's HBE 5.0 curriculum, therefore, serves to indigenise, contextualise, and decolonise education and training towards heritage-based creativity, innovation and industrialisation.

In fact, AIKSs strengthen and sharpen the decolonial potential and edge of Zimbabwe's HBE 5.0 curriculum.

Recommendations

1. This paper recommends that the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, Innovation, Science and Technology Development (MoHTEISTD) formulate a clear and comprehensive policy framework tailored to guide and expedite the integration of AIKSs into Zimbabwe's HBE 5.0 curriculum with a view to advancing the decolonial agenda consistent with heritage-based innovation and indigenous-oriented industrialisation.
2. The paper urges universities and colleges to deliberately transform and decolonise research in an attempt to privilege the African archive over the Western one when developing content materials for teaching purposes.
3. The paper also encourages the Zimbabwe Government to escalate investment in research, documentation, and training (capacity building) to empower universities and colleges to embrace and promote AIKSs more effectively in pursuit of the decolonial project.

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Museums as Pedagogical Spaces in the Implementation of Zimbabwe's Heritage-Based Curriculum: Teachers' Perspectives

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Abstract

Through the Secretary's Circular Number 4 of 2024, the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education in Zimbabwe announced the adoption of the Heritage-Based Curriculum Framework for 2024-2030. This program stands aligned with Vision 2030 and is aligned with the National Development Strategy One (1) and Two (2). Its fundamental principle is to create an education system that leverages on heritage-based education to produce goods as well as services in the economy's value chain. This adopted new approach in Zimbabwe's education system presents an opportunity for museums as well as heritage sites to serve as complementary learning spaces that improve the effective application of heritage-based learning. Museums offer students an opportunity to handle as well as study real objects and artifacts, which fosters problem-solving as well as interaction with others, thus making them valuable supplementary learning spaces. If properly utilised, museums have the capacity to enrich education by providing the much-needed access to history, culture, and heritage-based technology and innovation. Engagement with museum artifacts enhances students' interest as well as improving learning outcomes across varied subject areas. This study thus explores how heritage sites, museums as well as monuments can enhance heritage-based learning, mostly in secondary schools, given the challenge that most teachers as resource persons in these schools are mainly trained not in history or heritage disciplines. This research therefore investigates the perceptions of secondary school teachers in Masvingo urban government schools in regards to the use of museums and heritage sites as complementary learning spaces. Through the use of qualitative research methods, this study reveals that regardless of existing challenges, teachers have a positive perception of museum-based learning, recognising its role in fostering fact-based education and providing a dynamic, hands-on teaching and learning environment. This then highlights the potential need for museums and heritage sites to effectively support the demands of Zimbabwe's heritage-based curriculum (2024-2030).

Keywords: museum learning; teacher perceptions; heritage-based curriculum framework; heritage-based education; complementary learning spaces

Introduction

The philosophy of Zimbabwe's recently launched heritage-based curriculum (HBC) framework 2024- 2030 is to produce an end product of young people who can think beyond the confines of the given curriculum, who are innovative, critical, and creative learners that can help proffer solutions to contemporary challenges in society (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, 2024).

For this reason, the view that education and training should only be executed in the school environment has lost its validity. The concept of education is not limited to the classroom setup, but is rather considered a lifelong, ongoing activity that goes beyond the formal school classroom. Teachers in secondary schools are struggling to effectively teach heritage-based subjects due to limited knowledge resources, inadequate training, and a lack of engaging teaching materials (Chiripanhura, 2022). This has led to a teaching and learning gap in the students' competencies and appreciation of cultural heritage studies. Heritage sites as well as museums, which house the invaluable historical and cultural artifacts, possess the potential to bridge this gap by providing spaces for hands-on learning experiences that complement traditional classroom teaching. The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education in Zimbabwe Secretary's circular no. P.54 released on the 30th of June 2023 stressed the deliberate need to strike a balance between theory and practice, with special emphasis on educational tours to provide an in-depth learning experience for learners. The same circular encourages schools to augment their classroom teaching with outdoor learning, which involves educational tours to museums as well as heritage sites. This study, therefore, examines how museums can be strategically incorporated into the curriculum in order to support teachers while enriching students' understanding of heritage-based learning, hopefully through real-time remote access. Furthermore, it also explores the potential of heritage sites as well as museums in enhancing heritage education in schools. Given the challenges that teachers face in delivering heritage-related content, this study explores how these resources can serve as effective supplementary educational learning tools. Through integrating museums as well as heritage sites into the mainstream curriculum, this research aims to provide practical solutions for making heritage education more appealing, informative as well as being readily accessible. It also advocates for their inclusion as alternate learning platforms in the implementation of the Heritage-Based Curriculum Framework 2024-2030.

Wan Salaiman, Mahbob, and Azlan (2017) defined out-of-classroom learning as the learning that transpires outside the walls of a schoolroom, frequently employing real-world environments, community centres, or other locations to provide real learning experiences that are more interactive as well as engaging than the usual classroom teaching and learning. Simplified, it is learning that transpires virtually and physically, supplementing what is learnt inside the four walls of a traditional classroom. This method of learning is characterized by three main domains, namely knowledge, attitude, and skill. Out-of-classroom education in museum institutions fulfils the three learning domains: knowledge, attitude, and skills, making it a satisfying educational method in implementing Zimbabwe's heritage-based learning. In the knowledge domain, students gain that deeper understanding through engaging with authentic artefacts and curated narratives that connect the theory to the lived experience, guaranteeing better comprehension as well as knowledge retention. The attitude domain is satisfied as students develop appreciation,

pride and respect for cultural diversity, nurturing identity formation as well as positive values towards heritage.

Meanwhile, the skills domain is addressed through participatory activities, which include observation, interpretation, communication, and the utilisation of digital tools, which boost practical competencies applicable in academic and community contexts. When combined, these domains create what is called a holistic reward where students not only acquire knowledge but also internalise values while developing transferable skills, thereby transforming heritage education from rote learning to a meaningful, lifelong experience.

The Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills (Welsh, 2006) encourages out-of-classroom learning. The argument being that such learning helps develop lively learners. Students begin to see that community problems are multifaceted and that solutions are often diverse. Outside learning, hence, equips learners with hands-on knowledge grounded in real experiences. Such students are better prepared to address the actual challenges and more often develop a stronger sense of community belonging as well as responsibility. In addition, out-of-classroom learning shapes soft skills that extend beyond the subject content. This amalgamation nurtures both academic competencies and social accountability. In addition, out-of-classroom learning builds on soft skills that extend beyond the subject content. Wan Sulaiman et al. (2017) state that outdoor participation cultivates critical thinking, motivation, time management, communication, teamwork, as well as professional judgment. These are all competencies that formal classrooms alone cannot instill fully. Furthermore, out-of-classroom learning provides platforms for socialization and personal development. Learners gain well-being, trust, respect for the setting, and skills for social integration (Wan Sulaiman et al., 2017). The classroom without walls, consequently, becomes a fertile ground for all-inclusive learner growth. The out-of-classroom learning experience can happen within diverse locations. Among them are field trips to museums, historical sites, nature reserves, local businesses, as well as virtual experiences online. Zimbabwe is home to varied heritage which encompasses cultural, historical, natural, tangible, and intangible artifacts. These heritage sites and museums play a very crucial role in heritage-based learning, offering valuable opportunities for education, cultural preservation, as well as community engagement. Additionally, museums serve as important informal learning institutions. They bridge the school curriculum and complement formal education by providing additional training opportunities. As clearly spelled out in the Zimbabwe Heritage Studies Syllabus (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, Volume 1, 2015), museums and heritage sites are recognised as key learning spaces that connect classroom knowledge to lived cultural experiences. Lessons that are verbally delivered in schools can the be reinforced in museums through the utilisation of tangible object materials. This teaching approach thus, strengthens understanding thereby ensuring that abstract concepts are decoded into concrete learning experiences.

This gives learning a whole new approach and meaning, which is object-based. In this way, students participating in education in museums do not only get the knowledge of a particular course, but they also enrich their lives by utilising a variety of cognitive skills in combination with real-life experiences (Falk & Dierking, 2000).

Museums are places suitable for cognitive, emotional, and kinesthetic orientations for children (Hein, 1995). Cognitive capacity building in museums includes strengthening the child's or student's intellectual abilities through experiential and practical education that stimulates observation, analysis, and critical thinking. Through engaging with real objects and interactive displays, scholars connect abstract ideas to the tangible experiences, thereby enhancing memory retention and problem-solving skills. This procedure not only supports what they learn in school but also nurtures curiosity, creativity, as well as the ability to apply knowledge in meaningfully diverse contexts (Hein, 1995). Though the role of museums as learning spaces is irrefutable, their effectiveness in aiding the implementation of Zimbabwe's heritage-based curriculum is hinged heavily on teachers' innovations to engage meaningfully with these resources. Zimbabwean schools have a tradition of facilitating visits to museums and heritage sites, often in line with the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education's policy as outlined in the National Heritage Studies curriculum document, excursions to such spaces is recommended. Nevertheless, these visits often lack structure as well as alignment with curricular goals as stipulated by the ministry. Without clearly set objectives or integration into the school lesson plans, scholars often experience these trips as casual tourism rather than purposeful learning opportunities. This gap between policy intent and classroom practice underscores the need for structured frameworks to help educators connect museum resources directly to curriculum outcomes. This study, therefore, argues for the need to integrate museums as complementary learning platforms in the implementation of the Heritage-based Curriculum Framework 2024-2030. At face value, Zimbabwe's heritage sites and museums are well-positioned to complement the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education's heritage-based curriculum framework. However, in reality, it might not be the case. It is against this background that this research sought to gather the views of teachers about the contribution of these heritage spaces in reinforcing student understanding of concepts taught in class; providing learning experiences in real-life situations; making learning more meaningful and enjoyable, and enabling students to think and master knowledge through contextualised experiential learning, among other things.

Background to the study

Reforms in the education systems are globally a common routine. These reforms are important as they aim to address the shifting needs of society and prepare students to face the challenges of the future, as well as create a more dynamic, inclusive, and forward-looking education system that will prepare learners for a rapidly evolving world. Vasquez-Martinez (2013) defines educational reforms as changes and transformations in the

scholastic system in relation to such factors as educational philosophy, student policy, curriculum, pedagogy, didactics, organisation, management, financing, and links with national development in this century.

Upon attaining independence in 1980, Zimbabwe reformed its educational systems to align them with new post-colonial national goals. Before independence, Zimbabwe's (then Rhodesia later briefly Zimbabwe-Rhodesia) education system was predominantly Eurocentric. It operated a two-tier system, similar to that of South Africa, with one system designed for Africans and another for Europeans (Whites). Importantly, the Rhodesian settlers did not identify themselves as Africans but rather as Europeans. The aim was to perpetuate the subordination and silencing of the African child's psyche. The education system during the colonial era was designed to serve the interests of the White minority while segregating the Black majority (Atkinson, 1972; Zvobgo, 1994). The education available for the Blacks was underfunded and mainly focused on providing basic literacy, numeracy, and minimal vocational training to match labour requirements for the colonial economy (Zvobgo, 1994). Hoagland (2020) and Naude (2019) are of the view that the colonial education system was meant to ensure that the colonised became appendages of the coloniser. Dei (2012) accentuates that the British colonial masters used the Western education system to enculturate Eurocentric ideologies with a strong negation of the Zimbabwean and other indigenous knowledge systems. Indigenous Zimbabwean beliefs, values, nuances, and mores were relegated to paganism.

After independence, motivated by the need to decolonise the education system and redress colonial injustices, the Zimbabwean government introduced several educational reforms. These reforms positioned education as a key instrument for national development, social equity, and empowerment. During the first decade of independence, educational reforms implemented were oriented towards socialism Dorsey, 1989; Mudavanhu *et al*., 2025). Another set of educational reforms in Zimbabwe came in 2017 through the competency-based curriculum, which had been adopted in 2015. The reforms informed by the 1999 Nziramasanga Commission of Enquiry Report were necessitated by Zimbabwe's desire to align its education to the 21st century skills and national development goals (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, 2015). Amongst other tenets, the competency-based curriculum stressed more on STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics), heritage and cultural studies, as well as the production of goods and services. The emphasis is on skills development for production which marked a major shift from the preceding curriculum, which emphasised more on knowledge acquisition over practical application. The framework stressed the need for learners to demonstrate competencies through practical tasks that integrate knowledge, skills, and values. It was through this curriculum that the Zimbabwe School Examinations Council (ZIMSEC) introduced the component of continuous assessment in the form of continuous assessment learning activities (CALAs), which contributed 30% to the final exam marks for Grade 7, O-Level and A-Level learners (MoPSE, 2015). Mwembe and Moyo (2024) are of the view that CALAs operationalised the competency-based approach by aligning assessment with real-world problem solving.

The end of the competence-based curriculum in 2023 ushered in the heritage-based curriculum (HBC) framework, which will guide Zimbabwe's primary and secondary education from 2024 to 2030. Among other issues, the HBC makes Heritage Studies one of the five (5) core subjects at O-Level, implying that all secondary learners from form one (1) to form four (4) are expected to study the subject. Previously, Heritage Studies had been an elective for the same learners, and a sizeable number of schools were not offering it, citing lack of teachers, compounded by the inavailability of textbooks. Some schools offering the subject relied on a history teacher whose teaching was driven by their 'love for heritage' (Chiripanhura, 2022). Announcing the adoption of the HBC framework, the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education stressed that it builds on the strength of the competency-based curriculum (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, 2024). This curriculum is implementing reforms in primary and secondary education whose overall goal is to produce highly competent pupils with a Zimbabwean outlook to work in an innovative and knowledge-driven economy. In line with Zimbabwe's National Development Strategy One (1) and Two (2) of becoming an empowered and prosperous upper middle-income society by 2030, these reforms have led to an innovative, heritage-based curriculum which is in line with the Education 5.0 model. Education 5.0, introduced in 2018 by the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, Innovation, Science and Technology Development, is the philosophy guiding Zimbabwe's higher and tertiary education.

As stipulated in the MoPSE Secretary's Circular, Number 4 of 2024, the aim for the new heritage-based curriculum is to promote and cherish the Zimbabwean identity; to prepare pupils for life and work in an innovation and knowledge driven economy that fosters life-long learning; prepare pupils for participatory citizenship, instill peace and sustainable development; prepare and orient pupils for participatory leadership and voluntary service and to strengthen measures to mold the pupils to cherish and practice the Zimbabwean philosophical orientation of Unhu /Ubuntu (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, 2024, p. 3). As derived from its aims, this Heritage-based curriculum seeks to foster lifelong learning and prepare pupils for participatory leadership while at the same time facilitating the sustainable development of the Zimbabwean economy. It also seeks to foster the Zimbabwean and Bantu philosophy of Ubuntu, a philosophy that is bound to encourage peace and participatory citizenship. This curriculum is influenced by the understanding that every successful civilisation value and emulates its culture and identity; hence, culture and heritage are integrated in the teaching and learning process within the heritage-based curriculum. The ambition for Zimbabwe's new curriculum that will be of the "self-aware learning child," through an indigenous paradigm becomes less feasible with the continued marginalisation of the teaching and learning of African languages and literatures. Languages are repositories of culture, identity, histories and African indigenous knowledge systems, but their marginalisation and dependence on the dominant language of English tends to estrange our children from African worldviews and cultural values that are found in local African languages, such as Shona, Ndebele, Tonga, and Kalanga. According to Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, "education in colonial languages alienates Africa to Africa and is an impediment to the decolonisation process" (1986, 139).

It is in this light that the curriculum's goal of "heritage education" seems an impediment with the use of English to teach most subjects in our schools and neglect of the vernacular African languages. This in turn may contribute to hindering the restoration of African institutions and knowledge systems, as is the vision of the curriculum reforms with the limited teaching of African literatures, whose histories, oral traditions, philosophies and experiences inform African identities and realities. The prevailing societal value attached to English has further aggravated the challenge of teaching of African languages in our schools since it signifies prestige and economic opportunities. The effective implementation of this curriculum to fulfil its decolonising objective necessitates enhanced support to the teaching of African languages and literatures, through various initiatives that include policy implementation, teacher training, adequate resources and the integration of indigenous knowledge systems at all educational levels.

The 2024 curriculum innovation in Zimbabwe is part of an ongoing process of educational reforms that have evolved since the country's independence in 1980. In earlier years, the government of Zimbabwe put priority on expanding access to education, mainly for the marginalised and vulnerable communities, and introduced free primary education. Over the subsequent decades, curriculum reforms increasingly were focused on integrating African heritage and local knowledge while adapting to global trends in education. The 1990s and 2000s witnessed a shift towards skills-based education, as well as a bias towards technical and vocational training to fulfill the demands of a growing economy and society. These changes were aimed at creating a more inclusive and responsive education approach that left no one behind, setting the stage for inclusive reforms.

Theoretical framework

Jean Piaget's constructivist theory propounded in 1952 is foundational in giving insights into how learners develop knowledge through active processing with the environment. Piaget avows that learning does not exist in the form of passively receiving information from the environment, but it is rather an active process whereby the learner interprets and reorganizes experiences to create meaning for themselves (Waite-Stupiansky, 2022). This means that knowledge is therefore constructed and not transmitted. Therefore, effective learning environments need to encourage inquiry, interaction, and reflection to stimulate learning (Waite-Stupiansky, 2022). Constructivism, therefore, places great emphasis on learner-centered pedagogies that aim to foster exploration, problem-solving, and negotiation of understanding continuously.

The principles of constructivism take particular importance in a heritage-based curriculum. Non-formal educational spaces, such as museums and heritage sites, offer immense experiential opportunities wherein learners engage in cultural narratives, material artifacts, and historical interpretation in an interactive format. The principles of constructivism take particular importance in a heritage-based curriculum.

Non-formal educational spaces, such as museums and heritage sites, offer immense experiential opportunities wherein learners engage in cultural narratives, material artifacts, and historical interpretation in an interactive format. It is not a case of receiving historical facts but one in which students actively build meaning over cultural heritage through observation, dialogue, and hands-on activities. These experiences thus foster sophisticated order thinking skills, for instance, critical analysis, creativity, as well as contextual reasoning, with an added capacity for entrepreneurship and innovation because of real-world engagement. For instance, museum tours that are guided or rather participatory heritage-based workshops inspire students to interpret cultural objects in a collaborative approach: exchanging perspectives as well as negotiating meaning amongst peer and educator participants (Canocchi, 2025). This is in line with the views of Piaget, who viewed social contact with others as essential to cognitive development, whereby students test and further hone their ideas through dialogue. Therefore, a heritage-based curriculum becomes a dynamic platform where students connect individual experiences to shared cultural memory and improve their understanding of identity, history, and community.

Nevertheless, while Piaget's constructivism provides a sound pedagogical basis, it is necessary to include various theories representative of African epistemologies as well as learning values. The philosophy of Ubuntu serves as a culturally situated complement. Ubuntu reflects on relationality, a communality of interdependence, and the fact that individual identity is constituted in a shared social existence, in other words, "I am because we are" (Ewuoso & Hall, 2019). In education, Ubuntu shows the significance of community, teamwork, empathy, and the production of knowledge together, reinforcing that learning cannot be solely individual but always social as well as collective. Situated within a heritage-based curriculum, the incorporation of Ubuntu reinforces cultural relevance and pedagogical resonance. It provides educators with the opportunity to position African worldviews, affirming indigenous knowledge systems, and engaging learners with heritage not simply as historical content but rather as lived cultural inheritance. This approach engenders a sense of belonging, identity affirmation, as well as cultural pride whereas fostering socially responsible students who comprehend their position in relationship to a broader community.The fusion of constructivist theory and Afrocentric perspectives with particular reference to Ubuntu, offers a holistic framework to the heritage-based curriculum. It leverages the experiential fruitfulness of museums and heritage places while rooting education in communal and culturally responsive values. Such teachers are in a position to create learning experiences that are considered deep, meaningful, identity-conscious, and social. This combined approach fosters not only deeper knowledge building but also equips learners for lively contributions to cultural conservation along with sustainable community development.

Role of museums and heritage places in education

Museums serve as key information centres; museum education must enable effective student education. Museums deliver accessible, inclusive, and high-quality learning while contributing towards research, innovation, and economic restoration through various exhibitions and outreach programmes (Chitima, 2021).

Following the educational reforms initiated by the Zimbabwean government in 1980, there was an 80% increase in the number of Black children visiting museums for educational purposes (Pwiti, 1994). As a result, students have become the primary audience for museums and heritage sites in Zimbabwe (Chitima, 2021). It is against this background that this research explores the criteria and extent to which museums and heritage sites can be effectively utilised to complement learning environments in support of Zimbabwe's heritage-based curriculum.

The concept of education is not just a notion to be limited to schools, but is considered an ongoing activity in all areas of life. Although schools have an important responsibility to provide students with gains towards the goals in the curriculum and syllabus, Ramey-Gassert et al. (1994) argue that formal school learning environments are often disconnected from real-world events and objects. The classroom setup, although invaluable and irreplaceable, might not be adequate in moulding a creative and innovative student who is ready for participatory leadership. It is, therefore, useful to have different learning environments to support the life-long dimension of this new curriculum framework. To effectively impart real-world knowledge to students, experts advocate for learning to take place outside of the school setting in a meaningful environment that reflects the way knowledge will ultimately be used (Herrington & Oliver, 2000). Although there are different non-formal education contexts, the role of the museum is evident in terms of tangible and direct clarification of the correct positioning and correlation of concepts. Museums can be used to introduce students to many aspects of the real world through the use of tangible evidence. Gardner (1991) argues that museums constitute out-of-school learning environments that engage students, stimulate their understanding, and encourage independent learning. Falk and Dierking (2000) describe museums as "formally informal" educational spaces, meaning they provide structured learning experiences while allowing students to explore at their own pace. In Zimbabwe’s secondary school curriculum, heritage education is a core subject aimed at preserving cultural identity and promoting national consciousness.

While making an analysis of museum missions, Zeller (1989) brought out three major philosophies that served as foundations of much of museum practices, namely the educational museum, the aesthetic museum, and the social museum. While museums certainly serve aesthetic and social purposes, the educational philosophy is the most comprehensive tenet of modern museums, as even the aesthetic and social benefits are of a long-term nature.

Most individuals' first learning experiences are in informal spaces, such as museums, making their contribution to a student's sense of identity and their educational trajectory indispensable (Crowley & Jacobs, 2002; Crowley et al., 2014). In the Zimbabwean education system, museums and heritage sites align quite well with the heritage-based curriculum of the nation, whose intention is to raise cultural fluency and national identity. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) contends that Africa's post-colonial education systems need to give precedence to indigenous knowledge systems while delinking from Eurocentric perspectives. Recent studies, particularly by Marovah and Ncube (2024), highlight the critical role of museum education in the implementation of the heritage-based curriculum by instilling a sense of ownership and belonging through visiting learners.

The study emphasizes how museums, beyond serving as spaces for preserving heritage, can be dynamic educational platforms that complement the classroom learning. Museums avail opportunities for students to connect the theoretical with the practical aspect, and they help convey intangible heritage, for example, oral histories as well as traditional art forms, that are not easily captured through the conventional traditional teaching methods. Through the integration of such content into our curriculum, museums make intangible heritage available and relevant, preserving it for future generations. Overally, incorporating alternate learning environments such as museums and cultural centres into the heritage-based curriculum frameworks is essential for creating an enriched, contextualised, and interactive educational experience. This method not only deepens scholars' understanding of their heritage but also guarantees that education remains very vibrant, engaging, and connected to local communities, thus complementing learning spaces in implementing Zimbabwe's heritage-based education.

The use of museums and heritage places as educational resources provides for interdisciplinary education. Eshach (2007) states that non-formal learning places, such as museums, facilitate cross-disciplinary learning through the effective inclusion of history, geography, art, and social studies. In the Zimbabwean context, heritage places like Great Zimbabwe, Khami Monuments, and the country's national museums provide inclusive histories that can be utilised as teaching materials across varying disciplines. This integrated method to learning guarantees that scholars cultivate a higher sensitivity to the interrelatedness of the varying fields of study, thus enhancing their analytical capabilities and problem-solving skills. This notable inclusion of museum tours and heritage site visits within the learning curriculum allows for the learners to acquire direct knowledge of Zimbabwe's rich historical and cultural heritage, thus facilitating a proper interaction with indigenous knowledge systems. This methodology is in line with the general visions of heritage-based curriculum, which includes incorporating innovation as well as experiential learning for a more effective learning experience (Chitamba and Chitamba 2025). Currently, teachers are faced with an array of challenges in delivering the heritage-based curriculum effectively, ranging from the lack of suitable training, insufficient resources, and limited availability of relevant teaching resources.

According to (Chitamba and Chitamba 2025), a high percentage of teachers are challenged in relating heritage material to students due to a lack of educational resources and weak teacher training in heritage education. Museums and heritage sites serve an imperative purpose of reducing the aforementioned challenges through providing structured and guided learning opportunities for enriching classroom learning. Hooper-Greenhill (2007) emphasises the role of museums in facilitating inquiry-based learning and critical thinking in students because they stimulate analysis, interpretation, and identification of connections between historical events and modern issues.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design to foreground the voices of Heritage Studies and History secondary school teachers practising in government schools in Masvingo urban. The rationale behind adopting the qualitative paradigm was that teachers' perceptions and attitudes towards the usefulness of museum spaces and heritage sites as complementary learning environments are shaped by multiple factors that require in-depth exploration and interpretation. In addition, the study sought to explain current museum educational programs and capture teachers' critiques on whether such programs enhance learners' comprehension of theoretical concepts taught in the classroom.

The research targeted six purposively selected government secondary schools in Masvingo urban. The choice of these schools was influenced by their proximity to the researcher, which reduced travel costs, as well as their established history of organising educational tours. At these schools, 30 participants were selected which included teachers responsible for teaching History and Heritage Studies, as well as those who had at some point accompanied learners on excursions. They were selected basing on their knowledge on the subject area equally among the selected schools. Headmasters, museum and monuments staff, and selected learners who had participated in excursions were also included to broaden the spectrum of perspectives and ensure that missing voices were captured. These were selected randomly across the various school selected. Data was obtained through a mixed method approach. The researchers distributed the questionnaire through Google forms; printed questionnaire copies were distributed by hand to the teachers based on availability and interest of teachers. Semi-structured interviews were performed between teachers, headmasters in both face-to-face interview and online interviews based on the availability and willingnes of the participants. Ethical consideration was adhered to as the researchers obtained informed consent from all participants who volunteered to take part in the research.

They also assured the participants of their privacy and confidentiality and anonymity of the research work, and that they could withdraw from the research any time, they choose to. Those participants who agreed to participate the researcher asked them to sign consent form if not they can share information without recorder in that situation; detailed field notes were taken, so as to allow participants to express themselves fully without any form of anxiety. The questionnaire was formulated by the researcher and covered two sections. The first section sought to deduce teachers' understanding of the Heritage-Based Curriculum Framework (2024-2030), while the second gathered teachers' opinions about museums and heritage spaces as complementary learning environments.

Questions were both open- and closed-ended to allow for descriptive statistics while still providing space for qualitative elaboration. This triangulated approach ensured that the study not only documented teachers' perceptions but also contextualised them against institutional practices, museum programming, and learners' experiences.

	Respondents		H	
School	**Teachers from the organizing committee /accompanied learners on tours**	**Other teachers who teach Heritage/History**		**Total**
Victoria High	3	2		**5**
Rujeko Secondary	3	2		**5**
Masvingo Christian	3	2		**5**
Mucheke 1 High	3	1		**4**
Mucheke 2 High	3	2		**5**
Masvingo Day School	3	1		**4**
Total	**18**	**10**		**28**

In the case of schools, a maximum number of five (5) teachers were selected as target respondents. This choice was necessitated by the researchers' intention to explore the factors considered by school trip organizing committees when deciding upon the destinations for educational tours. A purposed sampling technique was used to select those teachers who had accompanied learners on educational tours so as to get them to share their knowledge and experience in organizing and supervising trips to museums and heritage sites. In all, a total number of eighteen (18) teachers attended the survey and shared their knowledge of the educational benefit of the tours and perceptions of heritage-based learning. History and heritage studies teachers were targeted for this study given their presumed expertise of museum and heritage-related curriculum. In addition to the teachers, the heads of the selected schools, who had a supervisory role to sanction such tours, numbering ten (10) and five learners each from every targeted school to a total of 15 were purposively selected to offer a firsthand insight into the role of museum education. Fifteen (15) personnel of each institution, who were involved in organization of educational visits, were also selected for the study. A combination of the data from each data collection method was thematically analyzed after being processed by coding for any similarities or differences, which might have appeared in the course of the research.

School	Teachers from Organising Committee / Accompanied Learners on Tours	Heritage/History Teachers	School Heads	Learners	Museum Staff	Total Respondents per Category
Victoria High	3	2	2	3	–	10
Rujeko Secondary	3	2	2	2	–	9
Masvingo Christian	3	2	2	2	–	9
Mucheke 1 High	3	1	1	3	–	8
Mucheke 2 High	3	2	2	3	–	10
Masvingo Day School	3	1	1	2	–	7

Museum Staff	–	–	–	–	15	15
Total	18	10	10	15	15	68

Research Findings

Teachers' Comprehension of the Heritage-based Curriculum

Responses from teachers showed different levels of understanding of the heritage-based curriculum introduced for 2024-2030. Teachers from the various school organizing committees presented a broad consciousness of their requirements, particularly their emphasis on experiential learning through museum and heritage place visits. They however, highlighted gaps in the implementation, specifically the lack of funding to go towards the trips, as well as clear guidelines. A respondent noted, *"We entirely understand the requirements of the curriculum, which is to engage directly with heritage sites, but with a lack of proper funding and guidelines, excursions remain difficult to organise"* (Respondent 1, School Organizing Committee, 2024).

Teachers who have once accompanied students on museum visits provided a more practical perspective. They confirmed that visits improved engagement but complained about the absence of structured lesson plans. *"The new curriculum promotes and provides for hands-on learning, which is good, but when we take our students to museums, there is no structured framework to guide our lessons"* (Respondent 2, Accompanying Teacher, 2024). This observation echoes the Curriculum Framework, which emphasizes the need for curriculum-aligned activities to support experiential learning.

Across the various groups, teachers emphasised the need for professional training. While the majority grasped the philosophy of the HBC, they lacked clarity on classroom implementation. One teacher explained, *"… affirmative, I know what the circular states. The issue for me, however, is how to decode that in the classroom"* (Respondent 4, School Organising Committee, 2024). Educators related these challenges to marginal orientation efforts, despite MoPSE delivering official circulars such as Secretary's Circulars Nos. 4, 9, 10, and 15 of 2024. Though a training workshop was held in Masvingo Province at Victoria High School in 2024, it was compact and only reached a few teachers. Therefore, most educators depend on documents without a guided interpretation.

Efforts by MoPSE to Orient Teachers

Teachers consistently uttered that MoPSE's efforts to orient them were insufficient. They admitted receiving circulars and the *Learning and Assessment Teacher's Guide*; nevertheless, they emphasised a lack of professional development programs for capacitation. Teachers maintained that such documentation provided philosophy but not the practical tools needed. One respondent stated, *"We need capacity-building workshops that clearly speak to the expectations; or else, each school will interpret this circular differently"* (Respondent 1, School Organising Committee, 2024).

Teachers who had partaken in these museum visits stressed that while this curriculum prioritises experiential learning, the MoPSE had not introduced structured courses to support educators. This echoes what Chitamba and Chitamba (2025) defines as the "implementation gap" in Zimbabwe's Heritage-Based curriculum reforms, where teachers are left to interpret policy independently.

Teachers' and Headmasters Perceptions of Museums and Heritage Sites

Teachers generally observed that museums and heritage places are crucial spaces for heritage education. School organising teams emphasised their role in offering tangible, real-world encounters within a historical context. As stated, *"Heritage like Great Zimbabwe provides for students to interrelate with history in a way textbooks cannot"* (Respondent 1, 2024).

Tutors who had escorted learners echoed this sentiment, emphasizing that museums make learning memorable as well as interactive.

> *"Scholars become more engaged when they see and touch historical artefacts. This makes learning more practical and memorable"* (Respondent 2, Teacher, 2024). They also viewed museums as spaces that encourage critical thinking through practical learning experiences. Though, they complained that exhibits were seldom tailored to the curriculum content. One respondent remarked, *"Museums are treasured, but they do need to tailor make their exhibitions to suit curriculum content so that visits are not just regular sightseeing trips"* (Respondent 3, 2024).

Preparation for Visits: Expectations vs. Reality

The organising committees stated that planning museum as well as heritage sites visits requires complex logistical issues which including transport, permissions, and coordination with museum personnel. They often negotiated reduced fares for entrance or sought external support due to limited school funds. Tutors also stated preparing students in advance, but noted the absence of structured preparatory materials.

Teachers usually expected interactive, curriculum-linked experiences from the museum institutions. Instead, they often found exhibits fixed and guides rushed. *"We expected museums institutions to provide structured programs linked to the heritage-based curriculum, but mostly students just walk around looking at displays that have no relation to the classroom content"* (Respondent 4, 2024). Approximately 25% of teachers, however, voiced satisfaction, praising museum personnel who provided comprehensive explanations. These varied responses highlight the need for closer cooperation between schools and museum institutions.

Improvements Needed for Museums as Learning Spaces

Teachers pointed out several areas that need improvement. They called for the need for curriculum-aligned exhibits, age-specific programs, as well as interactive learning tools. They recommended affordable entry fares, transport subsidies, and inclusive admission for students with disabilities. Tutors also emphasised the serious need for well-trained museum personnel and interactive technologies namely augmented reality and virtual tours. *"Scholars often find the traditional museum displays boring; incorporating technology would make the experience more engaging"* (Respondent 5, Headmasters, 2024).

They in addition proposed structured communication amongst museums institutions and schools, including pre-visit guides and post-visit assignments. Such partnership would make heritage-based learning continuous rather than episodic.

Integrating Museums into the Curriculum

Teachers recommended that museums and heritage sites be formally integrated into the national curriculum. They suggested that the MoPSE work together with museum institutions to develop subject-specific learning modules, planned pre-visit assignments, and post-visit activities. *"If the museum visits carried on were part of the curriculum with the standard learning objectives, schools would prioritise them rather than treating them as optional trips"* (Respondent 6, Teacher, 2024).

Tutors supported the use of digital technologies to broaden access. The suggestion was online videos, virtual tours, and live video conferencing with curators. These solutions reduce costs relating to transport, food, and accommodation while addressing crowding issues. *"Most rural schools cannot pay for trips to museums, but online access to exhibitions would bridge that gap"* (Respondent 7, Headmaster, 2024).

Computer-mediated communication tools such as the email, SMS, WhatsApp, chat boards, LinkedIn, as well as voice calls were identified as effective in networking with teachers, learners, and also museum staff. The omnipresence of smartphones provides for opportunities for both synchronous and asynchronous learning. Incorporating these tools enhances communication and democratize access to heritage education.

Summary of Findings

The findings above clearly indicate that while teachers in Masvingo Urban School recognise the potential for museums institutions and heritage sites in supporting the HBC, several restrictions hinder full integration. The teachers have an overall awareness of the curriculum's philosophy however lack training and support for implementation. The MoPSE has disseminated various policy documents but has delivered limited orientation. Museums are valued as complementary spaces for students, but their efficiency is being reduced by logistical challenges, which include the lack of structured programs, and weak alignment with the Heritage Based curriculum content. Teachers recommended curriculum integration, digital access, and stronger collaboration amongst stakeholders to maximise educational benefits. The research findings also revealed that Zimbabwe's secondary school teachers view significant potential in integrating museums institutions and heritage sites into the national curriculum. They, though, emphasised the need for a structured curriculum alignment, advocating for partnership amongst the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education and museums to develop subject-specific learning modules. They also suggested the provision of standardised educational materials, for instance worksheets as well as study guides, in an attempt to ensure that museum visits are academically enriching, engaging and recreational.

Educators who accompanied students for museum visits emphasized the need for structured pre-and post-visit activities to enhance the learning outcomes. They also recommended research assignments or tasks before and after visits as well as guided discussions, reports, or projects afterwards to reinforce concepts. Moreover, they stressed the significance of interactive, engaging museum tours led by knowledgeable personnel.

Teachers in in their focus group discussions emphasised the need for digital learning tools, including virtual tours and online educational resources, to provide for the access to students who cannot visit museums physically because of varied reasons. They also suggested project-based learning approaches, where students actively engage with museum specialists and conduct field research to deepen their comprehension of heritage studies.

The indicates that while museums and heritage places have great educational potential, their impact is limited due to lack of structured integration into the heritage based school curriculum. Teachers intensely believe that museum visits should be formalised with clear cut learning objectives and well-defined activities that link directly to subjects being offered in schools like history, geography, and science. Furthermore, better coordination between schools and museums, institutions along with improved accessibility through virtual resources, will ensure that students from all diverse backgrounds benefit from these learning spaces.

In order to maximise their role as complementary learning spaces, museum institutions need to adopt innovative teaching methods, which include interactive exhibits, digital archives, and project-based learning. Addressing these logistical barriers, such as transport costs and scheduling challenges, will further encourage schools to utilise museums for their educational excursions. Ultimately, a more strategic and structured approach will position museums and heritage sites as crucial components of Zimbabwe's secondary school education system.

Discussion of Findings

The outcomes of this research highlight the significant role being played by museums and heritage places in complementing Zimbabwe's heritage-based curriculum. The study established that tutors recognise the value of these spaces in providing experiential learning, that fosters critical thinking, and enhancing students' understanding of national identity. This is in line with Chitima (2025), who contends that school visits to museums deepen students' appreciation of their heritage by providing hands-on engagement with artifacts. However, this research also revealed a gap in implementation strategies, with many teachers citing lack of structured learning frameworks that guide these visits. Hooper-Greenhill (2007) emphasises that for museums to serve as efficient educational tools, their exhibitions must be tailor made to curriculum objectives, a need that remains largely unsatisfied in Zimbabwe.

A major obstacle identified in this study is the insufficient orientation of tutors to the HBC. Despite the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education delivering a handful of curriculum materials, teachers hinted that there had been no formal workshops or training sessions in helping them translate the curriculum's philosophical grounding into practical teaching methods. This also reflects on similar findings by Falk and Dierking (2013), who stresses that the successful curriculum implementation requires both clear policy direction as well as capacity-building initiatives for teachers.

Without organized professional staff development, teachers remain uncertain about how to integrate museum visits effectively in their teaching and learning, resulting in inconsistencies in how these schools implement the curriculum.

Furthermore, outcomes of this research showed that tutors who had accompanied students on museum visits generally perceived the experience as beneficial but lacked structured educational engagement. While scholars gained exposure to historical artifacts, the absence of a guided learning framework diminished the academic value of these museum visits. This is consistent with Chitima (2021), who claims that decolonising museum education involves aligning their exhibitions with school curricula and incorporating interactive learning techniques.

Teachers in this study stated that museum visits often turned into passive sightseeing experiences rather than well-structured learning opportunities that are aimed at enhancing students' analytical and critical thinking skills.

Another significant issue raised by respondents was the issue of logistical and financial constraints that hinder frequent museum and heritage visits. School committees reported challenges in securing transportation and funding, which limited student access to heritage sites despite their recognised educational value. Achille and Fiorillo (2022) notes that effective heritage education requires a collaborative approach between schools, museums, and policymakers to ensure that resources are allocated for meaningful student engagement. Tutors in this study suggested that the MoPSE should introduce subsidised programs or partnerships with these museums to in order to facilitate more frequent visits and provide educational materials that align with the HBC.

This study confirms that while teachers really appreciate the role of museums and heritage sites in enhancing heritage education, several barriers hinder their full integration into Zimbabwe's heritage-based curriculum. The lack of teacher capacitation, financial constraints, and unstructured museum learning experiences contribute to the underutilization of these spaces. Drawing on the literature consulted for this study, it is evident that for museums to function as effective complementary learning spaces, there is a need for curriculum-aligned exhibitions, teacher capacity-building programmes, as well as increased governmental support. Addressing these challenges would definitely enhance the educational value of museum institutions, ensuring that the HBC achieves its goal of fostering national identity, critical thinking, as well as innovative learning approaches and provision of goods and services.

Conclusions

This study has established that museums and heritage places significantly contribute to the Zimbabwean secondary school curriculum through providing an experiential learning experience that improves students' comprehension of cultural heritage. Teachers appreciate the potential of these sites; nonetheless, they are confronted by various limitations in their utilisation stemming from the lack of training, funding, as well as the absence of an organised educational program from the museums.

This research highlights that while the MoPSE has adopted the heritage-based curriculum, the teachers are still not well-equipped for its implementation due to a lack of capacity-building initiatives emanating from the education sector. The lack of workshops and professional development initiatives has resulted in none uniformity in the ways that schools integrate museum visits into their new curriculum.

In the absence of well-structured support, the potential of museums as complementary learning spaces remains largely untapped. Additionally, the study stresses the need for greater cooperation amongst museums and schools to create interactive, curriculum-driven programmes that foster critical thinking and profound reflection on heritage artifacts. Financial and logistical constraints are also significant deterrents to regular museum visits, thus requiring government and corporate sponsorship to subsidise these heritage education-related efforts.

Therefore, for the heritage-based curriculum in the Zimbabwe context to be effectively rolled out, MoPSE, museums and tutors must join forces towards creating a conducive environment for heritage-based education. Surmounting these challenges presented in this study through capacity building, increased financial support, as well as innovative learning approaches may guarantee that Zimbabwean learners study their history and live it meaningfully. Through greater incorporation of museums and heritage sites into the school system, Zimbabwe can potentially raise a generation of students with a strong attachment to their cultural heritage, along with the critical thinking that is needed for national development.

Recommendations

From the results of this research, a list of recommendations is given to improve the incorporation of museums and heritage sites in the implementation of Zimbabwe's heritage-based curriculum.

The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPSE) ought to establish organised training programs for educators in order to capacitate them with comprehensive knowledge regarding the aims as well as implementation procedures regarding the HBC. Falk and Dierking (2013) posit that the success of a curriculum relies on the readiness of its educators. The staff development, workshops, and seminars should be organised to prepare instructors with the required competencies essential to enhance the learning benefits derived from museum excursions.

Secondly, cooperation between museums and educational organisations is necessary to create systematic and curriculum-based educational programs. Chitima (2021) thinks that the decolonisation of museum education involves creating exhibitions that are aligned with school curricula, alongside the adoption of interactive learning methodologies. Museums ought to collaborate with educators in designing led learning experiences that surpass observation, such that the learners get to engage actively with historical objects and participate in critical thinking exercises.

Thirdly, funds should be secured from Government to schools to enable constant visits to the museum by the students. MoPSE needs to implement subsidy schemes or consider collaborations with cultural institutions and business sponsors to grant schools affordable entry to museums. According to Achille and Fiorillo (2022), sustainable cultural heritage education needs resource mobilisation and collaboration among stakeholders. Additionally, schools should consider fundraising activities to fund cultural heritage learning endeavours.

In addition, museum visits need to be better planned by the school administration. Committees that organise schools need to be provided with administrative support to enable them to plan school visits with ease through engaging ancillary staff. This includes arranging transport, negotiating for reductions in admission charges, and developing pre-visit and post-visit learning resources to enable such visits to be more effective. As Hooper-Greenhill (2007) emphasises, experiential learning works best if there are formal frameworks to guide students through the learning experience.

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The Intercessional Role of Music Among the Kalanga and Nyai- Shona People

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Abstract

This paper explores the intercessional role of music among the Kalanga and Nyai-Shona people found in Botswana and Zimbabwe, respectively. The main aim of the research was to examine how the Kalanga of Botswana and the Nyai-Shona people of Zimbabwe intercede for rain. The paper analyses the lyrics of "Mvura Ngainaye" by Thomas Mapfumo, a Zimbabwean Shona musician, and "Phondanyama" by Ndingo Johwa, a Motswana Kalanga musician based in Botswana. We argue that the Kalanga and Nyai-Shona are the same people, even though they reside in different countries and speak related language varieties. The two selected songs are the connecting thread for our argument. Anchored on the Afrocentricity theory, the study employed an emic-ethnographic approach and a qualitative research design. The two musicians and the two songs analysed in the study were purposively sampled. Data were mainly collected through the analysis of the lyrics of the two pieces. Additional information was sourced through interviews with Ndingo Johwa, since he sings in Kalanga, a language which is not spoken by the current researchers. The lyrics of the two songs were subjected to critical discourse analysis. Leitmotifs were identified and data categorised according to the identified leitmotifs. Findings reveal that musical practices serve as a medium for communication with the divine and offer a means of expressing individual and collective identity among the Kalanga and the Nyai-Shona people. There are several similarities in the way the Kalanga and the Nyai-Shona intercede for rain. For instance, they both make direct appeals to Mwari/Mngwali and intercede for rain through spirit mediums and ancestral spirits. These similarities, among others, seem to point to a common cultural origin. This study contributes to the literature on the role of music in society as well as the fields of musicology, anthropology and decolonial studies, among other benefits.

Keywords: intercessional role, music, music practices, Kalanga, Nyai- Shona, communication, collective identity

Introduction

Music permeates various aspects of the lives of Africans. For instance, recreational periods, suffering moments, happy ones like the birth of a child, initiation ceremonies, hunting, war, and prayer, are punctuated with music (Finnegan, 2012; Mbaegbu, 2015). According to Mbaegbu (2015, p. 177), "African music is one of the cultural characteristics that make the African who he is as a distinct cultural being in the world, for it binds Africans together and gives them common characteristics".

This research paper examines the intercessional role of music among the Kalanga and Nyai- Shona people found in Botswana and Zimbabwe, respectively. It examines how musical practices serve as a medium for communication with the divine and offer a means of expressing individual and collective identity. The focus is on the lyrical content of two songs, namely, “Mvura Ngainaye” by Thomas Mapfumo, and “Phondanyama” by Ndingo Johwa. Thomas Mapfumo is a Zimbabwean Shona musician, while Ndingo Johwa is a Motswana Kalanga musician based in Botswana. We compare and contrast the two songs in order to establish whether there is a common cultural thread. We argue that the Kalanga in Botswana and the Nyai-Shona in Zimbabwe are the same people, even though they reside in different countries. This separation is a result of the creation of arbitrary boundaries by the colonialists. The two selected songs, which were sung by two different musicians from two different countries, are the connecting thread for our argument as both musicians are interceding for rain. Our argument is further strengthened by Ndingo Johwa’s other song, “Makamu”. In that song, Ndingo Johwa explicitely states “*Bamwe bedu vagele kuZimbabwe*” (Our compatriots reside in Zimbabwe). The similarity between the Kalanga in Botswana and the Nyai-Shona in Zimbabwe is also reflected in common place names. For example, there is Domboshaba Culture Centre in Botswana and a place called Domboshava, north of the capital Harare, in Zimbabwe.

Research gap

The surveyed literature shows that there is hardly any comparative literature that focuses specifically on the role of music in interceding for rain in times of drought in the two countries. There is therefore, a need for a study such as the current one which focuses on the intercessional role of music among the Kalanga of Botswana and the Nyai-Shona of Zimbabwe. This study is unique in that it compares two musicians from two different countries who sing in different but related indigenous languages.

Justification of the study

This study on the intercessional role of music among the Kalanga and Nyai-Shona people holds significant potential for enhancing cultural understanding and fostering social cohesion. In addition, music is a vital element of African cultural identity. It serves as a medium of storytelling, preservation of history and cultural expression. Therefore, this study makes an important contribution in terms of documenting and safeguarding intangible cultural heritage. Furthermore, the study makes a modest contribution to the ongoing conversations among scholars on the role of music in society as well as the fields of musicology, anthropology and decolonial studies. Finally, global audiences can gain a deeper appreciation of African music, thus fostering greater cultural awareness and connection.

Background

The Role of Music in African Societies

Music is an African socio-political and economic tool to support or resist the status quo. The importance of music in the black African's life is emphasized by Finnegan (2012) who stresses that the Igbo sing in different contexts that include fighting, work, love, harvest and hunting expeditions, among other things. Music is therefore an Indigenous Way of Doing (IWD) things when Africans relate to both pleasant and unpleasant contexts in their everyday economic, social and political life.

Idolor (2002) cited in Mazrui (2018), postulates that 'No phenomenon of utility survives in a society; an indication that the presence of music in almost every African society has a formidable role to play.' This demonstrates that human beings, from time immemorial, used music to satisfy societal needs in different circumstances.

It is against this background that this paper examines Ndingo Johwa's "Phondanyama" and Thomas Mapfumo's 'Mvura Ngainaye' in their independent responses to adverse climatic conditions. Both artists rewrite history, by retelling audiences the musical sacred narratives to Thobela/Tovera through renowned spirit mediums, who are strongly revered to this day. This paper contends that, although music is the composer's story about his feelings and emotions, it does not express his or her worldview alone (Goldman, 2013). Through music, the inquisitive minds can discern a people's culture, views, values, beliefs and the society at large. Music therefore, helps to read beyond the surface of what is obtaining in a society. Like human stories, music and the related arts are found implicated in these stories. The two artists' songs are a rediscovery and reminder of the journey of the traditional coded lessons of communicative acts with the living Mwari/Mngwali in order to sustain livelihoods. The terms Mwari and Mngwali are used interchangeably throughout the paper as the equivalent of God.

Brief Historical Background of the Nyai-Shona and Kalanga people

It is pertinent to give a brief historical background of the Nyai-Shona and Kalanga people since they are the main subjects of this study. This backdrop is critical for understanding how the Kalanga and Nyai-Shona people request for rain through song.

The Shona people are the largest ethnolingustic group in Zimbabwe (Owomoyela, 2002). They are comprised of various subgroups which include the Karanga, Zezuru, Manyika and Korekore. The Nyai-Shona people are predominantly found in Zimbabwe and in parts of Mozambique. According to Owomoyela (2002, p. 10), the Shona "believe in one creator, Mwari, and hold the propitiation of ancestors crucial since their involvement in human affairs is intimate and such things as rainfall and the health and prosperity of the living depend on their good humor".

The term "Nyai", which refers to the Shona, was deliberately chosen because it is the original name of the Shona people. The term was used by Solomon Mutswairo to

refer to the Shona people in his novel *Feso*, which was first published in 1956 (Mutswairo, 1980). *Feso* is an allegorical critique of colonialism and was the first novel to be written in Shona (Mandova & Wasosa, 2012). In a poem titled "Nehanda Nyakasikana" in the novel *Feso*, Mutswairo writes:

> *Nehanda Nyakasikana! Kunozove rinhiko*
> *Isu VaNyai tichitambudzika?*
> *Mweya unoera kunozove rinhiko*
> *Isu VaNyai tichidzvinyirirwa?*
> (Mutswairo, 1980, p.43).
>
> ([Nehanda Nyakasikana how long will it take
> While we the VaNyai are suffering?
> Sacred spirit how long will it take
> While we the VaNyai are under oppression?)

In the poem Mutswairo appeals to Nehanda, to deliver them from colonial oppression. Nehanda was a legendary woman whose spirit inspired Africans to fight against the white settlers during the First Chimurenga of 1896/97 in the present-day Zimbabwe (Mandova & Wasosa, 2012). Mutswairo acknowledges the role of traditional religion in the political struggle of the Nyai-Shona people.

The term "Shona" was coined by colonialists and entrenched by Clement Doke, a Bantu languages expert at the University of the Witwatersrand who was tasked to unify the Nyai dialects.

According to Dube (2020) and Matiza and Dube (2020), the Kalanga are an ethnic group mainly located in south western Zimbabwe, mostly in Bulilima and Mangwe districts of Matabeleland. The Kalanga are also found in modern Botswana. The main focus of this paper is on the Kalanga residing in Botswana.

Dube (2020) posits that the origins of the Kalanga can be traced back to the Kingdom of Mapungubwe and the Leopard's Kopje culture, which significantly influenced their identity. The Kingdom of Mapungubwe (1075-1220CE) is considered to be a precursor to the Kalanga identity. The Kalanga occupied parts of modern-day Zimbabwe and Botswana around 1000CE (Dube, 2020).

According to Dube (2020) and Matiza and Dube (2020) Chief Chibundule, also known as Hamuyenanzwa, is recognized as the first notable Kalanga chief, and his reign marked the establishment of Kalanga identity. Hamuyenanzwa ruled in 1441 and became known as Nkalanga. The name "Kalanga" emerged during his reign. Prior to that, the term "Kalanga" was non-existent. Chibundule's descendants played significant roles in Kalanga leadership and identity. The Kalanga however, experienced fragmentation due to civil wars and migrations in the 17th century (Dube, 2020; Matiza & Dube, 2020).

The Kalanga society was characterised by fluidity and assimilation of various groups, including the Venda and Rozvi, which contributed to the complexity of their identity. The Kalanga identity is thus marked by a blend of various cultural influences (Dube, 2020; Matiza & Dube, 2020).

Dube (2020) and Matiza and Dube (2020) assert that religion, particularly the Mwali cult, has played a crucial role in defining Kalanga identity and belonging. The cult's shrines and practices are integral to the cultural and spiritual life of the Kalanga people. Key shrines include Njelele, Dula, and Wililani. Similarly, religion has played a crucial role in defining Nyai-Shona identity and belonging. The Nyai-Shona, like the Kalanga, also worship Mwari.

According to Dube (2020) the Ndebele conquest in the 19th century significantly impacted the Kalanga, leading to cultural exchanges and changes in social structure. The Kalanga were incorporated into the Ndebele state which altered their traditional identities. For instance, there were changes in totems and clan identities as a result of the cultural exchanges that occurred. This seems to explain why the Zimbabwean Kalanga identify more with Ndebele than Shona to this day.

Brief biographical background of the selected musicians

Who is Ndingo Johwa?

In this section we had to rely on grey literature to find information on Ndingo Johwa's biography due to unavailability of published scholarly works on this musician. According to Grokipedia (2026), Ndingo Johwa, also known as Satjilombe, is a celebrated Motswana Kalanga musician, born on 4 April 1950 in Ramokgwebana Village which is located in the North-East District of Botswana. Ramokgwebana Village is close to the eastern border with Zimbabwe and is defined by the Ramokgwebana River. On the other side of the border crossing, is the Zimbabwean town of Plumtree.

Ndingo Johwa developed an interest in music from a young age. He started off by singing in church choirs as a baritone. He then taught himself to play guitar using an instrument made from old tin cans. He sang and played the guitar in the Francistown Baptist Church but as time went by, he discovered himself and decided to sing his own songs using his mother tongue, Kalanga. He has since established a new music genre that he has dubbed "Ikajazz", from the word "Ikalanga jazz" (Grokipedia, 2026).

His career took off when he released his debut folk album called "Phondanyama" which is the subject of this article. From there he went on to release eight more albums. He has established himself as a household name in Botswana and the wider Southern African region as evidenced by his participation at various national and international festivals including Domboshaba Culture Festival in Botswana, Grahamstown Arts Festival South Africa, Kumbule Khaya South Africa, Leswingo and Dzimbabwe Arts Festival, Masvingo in Zimbabwe, and Son of the Soil Arts Festival in Botswana (Grokipedia, 2026).

Who is Thomas Mapfumo?

Thomas Mapfumo, is a Zimbabwean musician who was born in 1945 in Marondera, a town in the then Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) (Eyre, 2015). He started his musical career at the age of 16 in Salisbury (now Harare) with a band called the Cyclones. He later went on to join other bands such as Springfields and the Cosmic Dots. During the early years of his career, Thomas Mapfumo mainly sang cover versions of Elvis Presley and Otis Redding tunes which were obviously in English. However, during the early 1970s, when many black Zimbabweans were beginning to resist white minority rule, Mapfumo began to write his songs and sing in his mother tongue, Shona (Eyre, 2015).

By shifting to composing and singing in Shona, Mapfumo was in fact effecting a revolution in popular music. He dubbed the music "Chimurenga", which is the Shona word for "struggle". Mapfumo used his music as a vehicle to carry thinly disguised political messages. Consequently, this brought him into conflict with the white minority Rhodesian government. His music was seen as a threat and was banned from state-controlled radio stations. In late 1977, at the height of the second Chimurenga war in Zimbabwe, Mapfumo was imprisoned for days in an attempt to silence him, but he never relented (Eyre, 2015).

Even after independence in 1980, Mapfumo's music still maintained a socio-political edge. Consequently, he found himself in constant conflict with the government of independent Zimbabwe. This political friction eventually led him to go into exile in the United States of America in 2000, where he still lives to this day.

Statement of the problem

The Kalanga and the Nyai-Shona share a common cultural heritage, but have been separated by arbitrary colonial boundaries, leading to a lack of understanding and recognition of their shared identity and cultural practices. Specifically, the problem is that the intercessional role of music, which is a crucial aspect of Kalanga and Nyai-Shona culture, has not been adequately explored as a means of communication with the divine and expression of collective identity. This lack of understanding has resulted in a disconnect between the two groups, despite their shared history, language, and cultural practices.

Research questions

The research paper was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do the Kalanga and Nyai-Shona intercede for rain?
2. What are the similarities and differences in the way the Kalanga and Nyai-Shona intercede for rain at least as reflected in the songs of the two musicians that are under focus?

Theoretical Framework

Overview of Decolonial Theory

The intercessional role of music is viewed through the lens of decolonial theory. The basic tenet of decolonial theory is that it is important to understand history from multiple perspectives, particularly those of indigenous and colonized people. The theory advocates for the recognition of different knowledge systems. It argues that Western knowledge, more often than not, has dismissed or suppressed other ways of knowing.

According to Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015), Decoloniality is both a political and epistemological movement which is aimed at liberating former colonised people from the ongoing influence of global coloniality. It is a way of thinking, knowing, and doing which challenges the dominance of Europe and North America.

Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015) further distinguishes between coloniality and colonialism. Colonialism refers to the historical period of direct political and economic domination by the colonial powers while coloniality refers to the enduring patterns of power, knowledge, and being that persist even after the end of colonialism. Coloniality perpetuates domination and exploitation under the guise of progress and civilization (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015).

According to Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015) there are three main concepts of Decoloniality. The first concept is coloniality of power which analyses how global power structures remain racially, culturally, and economically hierarchized, dividing the world into zones of the privileged and the marginalised. The second concept is termed coloniality of knowledge. This examines how Western knowledge systems have marginalised indigenous and endogenous knowledges, pushing them to the periphery. The third and final concept is coloniality of being, which investigates how colonialism dehumanized colonised peoples, questioning their humanity and subjectivity, and how the struggle continues to reclaim dignity and selfhood (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015).

Afrocentricity and Indigenous Agency

According to Jackson (2010) and Adotayo (2021), the theory of Afrocentricty was developed by Molefi Asante. Jackson (2010, p. 12) defines Afrocentricity as “the critical analysis and interpretation of culture, economy, history, language, philosophy, politics, and society from a conceptual, methodological, and theoretical framework that centres Africa and privileges the agency of Africans and persons of African descent”. The theory is a critical response to the production and reproduction of knowledge that privileges the peoples, cultures, thoughts and experiences of Europe (Jackson, 2010; Adetayo, 2021).

The reason for the development of Afrocentricity as a theory can be traced back to the history of slavery in the Americas where Europeans marginalized and negated the agency of Africans and the histories of Africa (Jackson, 2010; Adetayo, 2021). Slave masters “invalidated and deemed illegitimate the cultures, histories, and thoughts of

Africa…" (Jackson, 2010, p. 12). The first step in this process was the removal of the Africans from the African continent, which was their physical centre, and relocated to various parts of the Americas where the process of dislocation and decentering continued. Africans were introduced to and forced to accept a new centre. African names, for instance, were replaced with European ones, while African spiritual practices and beliefs were dislocated. African languages were deemed inferior to those of the European colonizers and enslavers (Jackson, 2010). This whole process was repeated on the African continent under colonialism. Adetayo (2021, p. 80) therefore, asserts that "Afrocentricity calls for the reengagement and reassessment of information and knowledge production while taking into cognisance the inputs and perspectives of the black people."

Afrocentricity and Indigenous Agency are interrelated frameworks which focus on centering African and Indigenous perspectives, history, and values in order to counteract Eurocentric narratives and colonial marginalization (Adetayo, 2021). The two frameworks emphasise analysing African experiences through an African perspective and empowering indigenous people to act as active subjects, rather than passive objects of study.

Indigenous Agency is defined as the capacity of indigenous peoples to act on their own behalf, thus shaping their own history, culture, and knowledge systems, especially after many decades of colonial rule (Jackson, 2010; Adetayo, 2021). Indigenous Agency advocates for validating and utilizing indigenous knowledge systems, challenging the idea that academic knowledge must come from European traditions. Furthermore, it serves as a tool for intellectual, cultural and political liberation, enabling communities to challenge oppressive histories (Jackson, 2010; Adetayo, 2021).

Application to this study

The role of Afrocentricity as a theory for this research is to support the value of indigenous knowledge systems and indigenous agency in solving problems from an African cultural perspective. Afrocentricity identifies agency as an aspect of African people's lived experiences. Each of the selected musicians prays so that the omnipresent Mwari/Mngwali provides rain to sustain livelihoods. The worshipping for the rains is all inclusive and intergenerational in order to benefit the present and future generations. Thus, Afrocentricity serves to reinforce the fact that black people have the capacity to handle their own affairs, being agents of social, environmental, political and economic change. Mapfumo and Johwa, though products of different colonial tapestries, become a voice of the people through indigenous worship systems in order to avert adverse climatic conditions affecting the co-existence of humanity and fauna and flora.

Literature Review

The role of music in various spheres of life has sparked significant scholarly interest in recent years (for example, Finnegan, 2012; Muwati, Charamba and Tembo, 2018;

Mbaegbu, 2015). This literature review is structured to reflect the key issues concerning the role of music in society in general and the intercessional role of music in particular. Through the review, the researchers aim to show the current state of knowledge in the field and identify the research gap to be filled. We will begin by discussing the mediating role of music in various contexts in society in general. Thereafter, we will examine some empirical studies that provide some valuable insights into the role of music in society in general, and the intercessional role in particular.

Role of Music in Emotional Expression, Healing, Social Cohesion and Spiritual Connection

Music has the capacity to act as a mediator or facilitator in various contexts including emotional expression, social cohesion and spiritual connection. This capacity of music to mediate or facilitate is what is referred to as the intercessional role of music. We now explore some key themes and findings in the intercessional role of music. We draw on studies from psychology, anthropology, sociology and musicology.

We start by looking at the role of music as an intercessor in emotional expression and healing. Music has been recognized for its therapeutic potential for quite some time now. Bradt and Dileo (2014) underline music's ability to evoke emotions and facilitate emotional processing. In hospital settings, music therapy is used to support mental health, by helping individuals to express feelings that they may find difficult to state verbally. Thoma et al. (2013) assert that listening to music is an effective way to reduce stress and anxiety, and thus highlighting the role of music as an intercessor in emotional healing.

Furthermore, we look at the intercessory role of music in social cohesion and community building. Music is a very powerful tool for promoting social cohesion. According to Hargreaves and North (1999), communal music-making, such as singing in choirs or participating at festivals, engenders feelings of belonging and identity. In community settings, the intercessional role of music is apparent in cultural rituals and celebrations. In this context, music acts as a unifying force, bridging generational and cultural divides.

Apart from its role in social cohesion, music also plays an intercessional role in spiritual connection and transcendence. The spiritual aspect of music is covered extensively in ethnomusicology. For instance, Titon (2009) discusses how music functions as a medium for transcending the mundane, facilitating connections to the divine or the sacred (Mwari/Mngwali). This role is evident in various forms. Through a close examination of the songs "Phondanyama" and "Mvura Ngainaye" we seek to show how the Kalanga and Nyai-Shona intercede for rain through music. In many religious traditions, music plays a role in worship, serving as an intercessor between the faithful and the divine (Finnegan, 2012).

Cross cultural perspectives

The intercessional role of music tends to vary across cultures, reflecting diverse values and practices (Finnegan, 2012). According to Nettl (2005), context is important in understanding music's role within different cultural frameworks. In many indigenous cultures, music plays an integral part in storytelling and the transmission of knowledge (Finnegan, 2012). In this regard, music acts as an intercessor between past and present. This showcases the adaptive nature of music as a mediator across different cultural landscapes.

Empirical Studies

Finnegan (2012) has done extensive work on the role of music in African societies. Of particular relevance to this paper, is what she refers to as religious and lyric (sung) poetry. We take the view that music is poetry. According to Finnegan (2012) there is a wide variety of religious poetry in Africa. She states that there are hymns, prayers, praises, possession, songs, and oracular poetry, all with their varying conventions, content, and function in different cultures (Finnegan, 2012).

These range from the simple songs of Senegalese women in spirit possession rituals or the mystical songs of Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), to the specialized hymns of West African deities or Ifa oracular literature among the Yoruba of Southern Nigeria (Finnegan, 2012).

She also argues that we should take into account the prevalence in certain areas of the religious literature associated with the influence of the world religions in Africa. For instance, there is the Arabic-influenced poetry of the Swahili in East Africa and the Islam-influenced poetry of the Fulani or Hausa in the northern portions of West Africa.

Apart from Finnegan (2012), there are many other empirical studies on the role of music in Africa in general, and Zimbabwe in particular. These empirical studies include Mbaegbu (2015), Guzura and Ndimande (2015), and Muwati, Charamba, and Tembo (2018).

Mbaegbu (2015) investigated the role of music in Africa. His study was motivated by the fact that "music plays an indispensable role in the being of Africans at work, in politics, in their socio-economic engagements, in religious worship, integral development, in their moral life" (p. 177). He categorizes African music into traditional, popular and classical, with each one serving distinct cultural functions. Traditional music expresses cultural identity and is often performed communally, while popular music appeals to mass audiences. Political music reflects contemporary issues and engages with social and political themes.

In his article, Mbaegbu (2015) arrives at three main conclusions. First, he concludes that there is a symbiotic relationship between African music and morality, each influencing and reinforcing the other. Second, African music retains its cultural significance and continues to inspire and educate, despite Western influences. Third,

he concludes that music is essential for the moral and social fabric of African societies, as it promotes values and community cohesion. While this study by Mbaegbu (2015) highlights three specific roles of music in African society, it does not focus on how Africans invoke rain through song. This is the research gap that this study intends to fill.

While Mbaegbu (2015) focuses on the role of music in Africa in general, Guzura and Ndimande (2015) specifically focus on the political role of music in Zimbabwe. Their article explores how music has been used by politicians to disseminate political messages to the masses. Furthermore, it explores how popular musicians, and of late, youthful ones, have been deployed to spread the ideology of the ruling elite. The article also examines how music has been employed as an alternative to challenge the political ideology of the ruling class through critiquing the prevailing political dispensation. Guzura and Ndimande (2015) conclude that music can be used to prop the regime or subvert the status quo and reveal an alternative to the government in power. While Guzura and Ndimande's (2015) paper focuses on the political role of music, the present article, however, focuses on how music is used to intercede for rain especially in a period of drought.

Similarly, the study by Muwati, Charamba and Tembo (2018), also focuses on the role of music in politics. The three authors edited a book dedicated to the role of music in Zimbabwe in the period between 2000 and 2010. The book is appropriately titled, *Singing Nation and Politics: Music and the 'decade of crisis' in Zimbabwe 200-2010*, reflecting the close relationship between music and politics. The period spanning the years 2000 to 2010 in Zimbabwe has come to be known as the "decade of crisis" as it was characterised by unprecedented socio-economic decline and political turmoil. This unprecedented crisis became a fertile spawning ground for "cultural products of the nation, especially music" (Muwati, 2018, p. xv).

Muwati (2018, p. xvi) summarises the contents of *Singing Nation and Politics* in lyrical prose as follows:

> The chapters in this book seamlessly concatenate to articulate a riveting story of the painstaking journey of 'becoming Zimbabwe'. This text vivaciously rallies intellectual memory, remembering the horrors of the decade of crisis, pinpointing contestations and overlapping points of view, but, above all, epigrammatically positing music as a veritable stakeholder in the political dynamics of the nation.

The themes tackled in the book include the prevalence of corruption among the elite, the land issue, protest and subversion, music as a tool for mass mobilisation and conscientisation, and the impact of the Zimbabwe crisis on people's cultural values, among many others. Once again, though related to the current article, this study does not specifically focus on intercession for rain, hence the need for the current study. Drawing on the methodological and analytical insights from the cited studies, we analyse how the Kalanga and Nyai-Shona evoke rain through music.

Gaps in the Literature

The surveyed literature shows that the intercessional role of music, which is a crucial aspect of Kalanga and Nyai-Shona culture, has not been adequately explored as a means of communication with the divine to bring rain and as an expression of collective identity. There is, therefore, a need for a study such as the current one, which focuses on the intercessional role of music among the Kalanga of Botswana and the Nyai-Shona of Zimbabwe to fill the gap. Having given a brief survey of the available literature, and identified the research gap, we now move on to the research methodology in the next section.

Research Methodology

Research approach

The intercessional role of music is looked at from an emic-ethnographic perspective. There are three basic tenets of the emic approach. First and foremost, it emphasizes internal understanding. The emic approach aims to understand how people within a particular culture make sense of their own world and behaviours. It seeks to unravel the internal logic and meaning creation processes of the culture. The current researchers are both Shona speakers trying to uncover from within how the Kalanga and Nyai-Shona people intercede for rain. The researchers are writing from within the society they are studying as members of that society.

In addition, the emic-ethnographic approach places importance on respect for cultural meaning. This means that it recognizes that cultures are different and therefore, have their own unique ways of viewing and interpreting the world, and that these interpretations are important to understand. The cultural context is therefore, highly respected and the imposition of external interpretations or biases is avoided.

Furthermore, the emic approach often relies on qualitative research methods such as participant observation, in-depth interviews, and focus groups in order to obtain a deep and nuanced understanding of the culture from inside. For the purposes of the current study, interviews were held with Johwa in order to obtain a deeper and nuanced understanding of the lyrical content of the song “Phondanyama” since the lyrics are in Kalanga, a language which is not spoken by any of the current researchers, but which they can understand on further and deeper reflection. The interview technique and the qualitative research design used, align with the emic- ethnographic approach adopted for the study.

Research design

A qualitative research design was used for this research. This design was found to be appropriate for this research since it permits in-depth, nuanced insights into social phenomena by focusing on open-ended, contextual over numerical data (Creswell, 2014). In addition, findings are often based on the direct experiences and words of participants, ensuring high validity in exploring complex human experiences (Creswell,

2014). In this instance, the focus is on the words (lyrics) and experiences of the two selected musicians. Besides ensuring high validity, qualitative research also does not require large, statistically significant samples, making it particularly suitable for this study where we are looking at only two musicians and two songs (Creswell, 2014), Furthermore, qualitative research is also an excellent tool for developing new hypotheses and theories that can later be tested quantitatively (Creswell, 2014).

Data sources

The lyrics of the two songs, “Phondanyama” and “Mvura Ngainaye” were our primary data sources. Primary data were preferred for this research since they provide first hand, untarnished evidence directly from the source, thus ensuring authenticity, credibility, and originality in the study. A further advantage of primary data is that researchers interpret data themselves rather than rely on interpretations given by other scholars (Ajayi, 2023). Additional information was sourced from Ndingo Johwa since he sings in Kalanga, a language which is not spoken by the researchers. His input was required to enable the researchers to fully understand the cultural significance of his song “Phondanyama”.

Sampling Methods

The two musicians who are the focus of this study were purposively sampled. Purposive sampling, also known as judgemental, selective, or subjective sampling, is a type of non-probability sampling which is defined as “the intentional selection of specific units (such as individuals, cases or events) based on their relevance to the research question” (Tajik, Golzar & Noor, 2024, p. 1). Both Ndingo Johwa (from Botswana) and Thomas Mapfumo (from Zimbabwe) are music and cultural icons in their respective countries. They are both great advocates for African culture and sing about cultural issues using their indigenous languages. They are, therefore, worthy of this scholarly attention. The two songs that are analysed in this study were also purposively sampled. The two songs focus on intercession for rainfall and were therefore, found to be most suitable for this study.

Purposive sampling was found suitable for this study because it offers a number of advantages, including the following. Firstly, purposive sampling allows researchers to select participants who possess specific experiences or knowledge, ensuring the data collected are highly relevant to the study’s objectives. Secondly, it reduces the time and resources needed for sampling by narrowing the scope, making it ideal for small-scale, focused studies such as the current one. Thirdly, purposive sampling facilitates in-depth understanding of complex, nuanced, or specialised issues, producing rich, detailed data (Tajk, Golzar & Noor, 2024).

Data Collection Methods

Data were mainly collected through the analysis of documents (lyrics of the two selected songs, “Phondanyama” and “Mvura ngainaye”) as well as the extant literature. Data for the study were also partly collected through WhatsApp interviews

with Ndingo Johwa. The researchers first requested Ndingo Johwa to transcribe the lyrics of "Phondanyama". The next step involved asking him to explain specific words and phrases that we could not understand on our own since we do not speak Kalanga. Such words and phrases included the title of the song "Phondanyama" (to kill by strangulation or twisting the neck), and "*Bakulukugwi Maka leba ino lilala ntondontondo lindzo ndiho ntukunu"* (Our ancestors had a saying, the bird that used to cry/call now rarely calls/cries because of the drought), among others. His explanations helped the researchers to gain a deeper understanding of the lyrics and the cultural significance of the song. The researchers did not need to do the same with Thomas Mapfumo's song, "Mvura Ngainaye" since they speak and fully understand the Shona language.

Analytical Approach

The lyrics of the two songs, "Phondanyama" and "Mvura Ngainaye", were first transcribed from audio format to text since written text is easier to work with. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was used to analyse the lyrical content of the two songs. The method involved the two researchers independently reading the lyrics of Mapfumo and Ndingo Johwa's two musical pieces under study. A roundtable discussion that picked on the surface and hidden musical connotations then followed. Common leitmotifs were identified and information was categorised and discussed under those leitmotifs.

Analysis of "Phondanyama" and "Mvura Ngainaye"

A close analysis of the two songs reveals that there are a number of similarities in the way the two musicians use music to intercede for rain, thereby supporting our core argument that the Kalanga and Nyai-Shona are one and the same people with a shared history and culture.

Direct Appeal to Mwari/ Mngwali

Firstly, the two musicians acknowledge that the nation is at the mercy of the Supreme Being (Mwari/ Mngwali)) and people have to ask for rain as it does not come naturally. This worldview is captured in the Shona proverb, "*Hapana chinouya chega urere*" (Nothing will come to you while you are sleeping; you have to work for it). Thus Ndingo Johwa sings:

> *Bakalanga wee yendani*
> *Ka Mngwali muno kumbila vula eine.*
> *Bonani bana be yu bano lala baka sunga mabula.*
> *Bonani mitjalo ye shango yaka Kuba bo.*
>
> (Bakalanga go to Mngwali to ask for rain to fall
> Look, the children sleep with a cloth tied round the stomach
> Look, there are no fruits in the wild).

Ndingo Johwa exhorts Bakalanga to go to Mngwali directly and ask for rain. The fact that the children now sleep with a cloth tied round the stomach appears to be a reference to a practice where, in times of hunger, people who have not eaten any food, literally tie a cloth around the stomach so that they do not feel the hunger. Growing up in Shona society, this is something we saw usually done by the mothers in times of extreme drought. They would give the little food that was available to the children and then tie a cloth around their (mother's) stomach and go to sleep. Such is the love of a mother. To compound the situation, even the wild fruits which would sustain people in times of hunger are no longer available or out of season.

Similarly, Thomas Mapfumo sings:

Mvura ngainaye Mwariwo
Tiwane kuguta iye, iye
Mvura ngainaye Mwariwo
Tiwane kupona iyere
Mvura ngainaye Mambo woye
Tiwane kupona iyere
Mvura ngainaye Mwariwo
Tiwane kuguta iyere.

(Let it rain, oh God
So that we get enough food to eat
Let it rain, oh God
So that we can survive
Let it rain, Great one/King
So that we can survive
Let it rain, oh God
So that we get enough food to eat).

Mapfumo is making a direct appeal to Mwari/Mambo to bring rain so that people can have enough food to eat and survive. Without rain, people will perish. The lyrics are repeated for emphasis. Similarly, Ndingo Johwa makes a direct appeal to Mngwali in "Phondanyama."

The above finding aligns with the Indigenous Agency theory discussed under the theoretical framework which postulates that indigenous peoples have the capacity to act on their own behalf, thus shaping their own history, culture, and knowledge systems.

Intercession through Spirit Mediums

Secondly, both musicians intercede for rain through spirit mediums and ancestral spirits. They acknowledge the fact that you get your message to Mwari/Mngwali through intermediaries. This belief is encapsulated in the Shona proverb, "*Kukwira gomo hupoterera*" (When you climb a mountain you do not take a direct route straight

up the mountain; you have to go round in circles to reach the top. You negotiate the steep slope). A direct route would make the task very difficult, if not impossible. In real life, it means you do not normally address a senior person directly; you go through intermediaries. One has to follow a hierarchy. Mbiti (1985) cited in Mbaegbu (2015, p. 178) describes the hierarchy as follows:

> *God is the creator and hence the parent of mankind, and holds the highest position so that he is the final point of reference and appeal. Beneath him are the divinities and spirits, which are more powerful than man and some of which were founders of different societies. Next come the living dead… Among human beings the hierarchy includes kings, rulers and rain-makers.*

Thus Thomas Mapfumo intercedes for rain through ancestral spirits Chaminuka, Kaguvi and Nehanda (Nyakasikana) as exemplified by the following two stanzas:

Ikasanaya tinopera iwe
Chaminuka woye, woye, woye
Ikasanaya tinopera Mambo
Kaguvi woye, woye, woye
Ikasanaya tinopera iwe
Nehanda woye, woye, woye
Ikasanaya tinopera iwe
Nyakasikana iwe woye, woye, woye

(If it does not rain, we will perish
Oh, Chaminuka
If it does not rain, we will perish
Oh, Kaguvi
If it does not rain, we will perish
Oh, Nehanda
If it does not rain, we will perish
Oh, Nyakasikana).

If it does not rain, the flora and fauna, which is the source of sustenance, will not thrive, hence people will die of hunger. Once again the lyrics are repeated for emphasis. Mapfumo goes further:

VaChaminuka taurai naMwari
Tiwanewo mvura woye, woye
VaNehanda taurai naMwari
Tiwanewo mvura woye, woye

(Chaminuka, may you speak to the Almighty
So that we can get rain
Nehanda, may you speak Almighty
So that we can get rain).

In the above stanza, Mapfumo is directly invoking the Nyai-Shona ancestral spirits, Chaminuka and Nehanda to talk to Mwari so that they can get rain. Mapfumo is clearly following the hierarchy as suggested by Mbiti (1985). One has to go through the ancestral spirits to take the message to Mwari. This aligns with Owomoyela's (2002, p. 10) assertion that the Shona "hold the propitiation of ancestors crucial, since their involvement in human affairs is intimate, and such things as rainfall and the health and prosperity of the living depend on their good humor".

It is pertinent to give some background information on Chaminuka, Kaguvi and Nehanda Nyakasikana. According to Asante and Mazama (n.d.), Chaminuka is an ancestor of the Shona people, who include VaZezuru, VaKaranga, VaManyika, VaNdau, VaKorekore, BaNambiya, BaVenda, and BaKalanga. These are dialect groups of the Shona as a family. The original Chaminuka belongs to the lineage of Tovera, the earliest known ancestor of the Shona according to their history. Tovera's son, Mambiri, is the father of Murenga Sororenzou, the founder-architect of Zimbabwe. Murenga's children include Chaminuka, Nehanda, and Mushavatu. Mushavatu's descendants are the preferred mediums of Chaminuka.

The first medium of Chaminuka was Kachinda, but the most famous was Pasipamire. His fame was associated with miracles and as a great prophet, healer, and rain intercessor. His powers were especially manifest during the conflict with Lobengula, the Ndebele king at the time when Europeans were invading southern Africa from Natal, forcing Africans to migrate northward and come into conflict with one another (Asante & Mazama, n.d.).

Kaguvi was a medium (*svikiro*), a traditional leader in pre-colonial Zimbabwe, and a leader in the Shona uprising of 1896-1897. He co-ordinated with Nehanda to help in organising opposition to the colonial administration (Asante and Mazama, n.d.).

According to Asante and Mazama (n.d.), Nehanda was a female *mhondoro* (lion) spirit residing in Central and Northern Mashonaland of present day Zimbabwe. She only possessed women who were prominent in their community and who, acting as her medium, communicated Nehanda's messages to the living. A woman chosen by Nehanda to be her medium received the title Mbuya Nehanda and was never supposed to marry.

Like Thomas Mapfumo, Ndingo Johwa also intercedes for rain through ancestral spirits. The chorus of the song "Phondanyama" illustrates this point. It goes thus:

Muti to kumbila ku muli Thobela to kumbila ku muli pondanyama. (Go to Thobela and say we are asking for rain; we ask you, pondanyama, to bring rain).

This is an appeal to the ancestors to intercede for rain. In the interview with Ndingo Johwa, he explained that "Pondanyama simply means to kill by strangulation or twisting the neck of an animal". He says their ancestors practised a spiritual ceremony

(mazenge/shumba midzimu) to purify their tribes or to chase away misfortunes from various clans. This was also attached to their religion ("*ku namata Mngwali ku dombo*, for example, *kumbila vula kuti inee*") meaning, they would go and pray to Mngwali at the mountain (*ku dombo*) so that the rain would come. Their beliefs and cultural practices are clearly very similar to those of the Nyai-Shona, pointing to a common origin. In our interview with Johwa, he made the following comment: "Am surprised that Bakalanga in Zimbabwe are closer to Ndebele yet the dialect suggests the opposite."

The appeal to "Thobela" is particularly interesting in so far as it shows the connection between Bakalanga in Botswana and the Nyai-Shona in Zimbabwe. We believe this is the same ancestor whom we refer to as "Tovera" in Zimbabwe. In Zimbabwe we actually sing a song about Tovera. The first few lines of the song go as follows:

Tovera mudzimu dzoka
Aaa ayiyee mudzimu dzoka
Wona vana vanochema ava
Aaa ayiyee mudzimu dzoka

(Ancestral spirit Tovera come back (to protect us/provide for us)
See the children are crying
Ancestral spirit Tovera come back).

The existence of Thobela/Tovera in both Kalanga and Nyai-Shona tradition clearly points to a common origin of the two groups of people.

Interceding for significant others

Thirdly, both Johwa and Mapfumo ask for rain for everybody, not for themselves. The two songs' intercessional approach to divinity is direct and simple, with the musical poetic effectiveness created through the use of simple everyday language. Mapfumo sings:

Tinokumbirawo mvura Mwari Baba (woye, woye)
Tinokumbirawo mvura Mwari Baba
Tiwane kuguta (woye, woye)
Tinokumbirawo mvura Mwari Baba
Tiwane kupona (woye, woye)
Tinokumbirawo mvura Mambo
Tiwane kuguta (woye, woye)
Tinokumbirawo mvura Mwari Baba
Tiwane kupona (woye, woye)

(We are asking for rain, oh God the Father
We are asking for rain, God the Father

So that we can get enough food to eat
We are asking for rain, God the Father
So that we may be saved from starvation
We are asking for rain, King
So that we can get enough food to eat
We are asking for rain, God the Father
So that we may be saved from starvation).

In the above stanza, the artist is clearly interceding for the whole community as evidenced by the use of the subjective "Ti-" (we). This aligns with the African philosophy of *Ubuntu* which is extensively discussed by Ramose (1999) cited in Dladla (2017). Ubuntu is Zulu or Nguni translation of a term which can be found amongst Bantu speaking peoples throughout Africa (Dladla, 2017). For instance, it is termed *Hunhu* in Shona, and *Botho* in Sesotho and Setswana (Dladla, 2017).

Ubuntu is a worldview centred on interconnectedness, community, and shared humanity. This worldview is best summarized by the Zulu phrase "*Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*" (a person is a person through other people). According to Nsengiyumva, Muhenda, Njuguna and Nyabul (2019), in traditional African society the individual was looked at as part and parcel of the community. His /her welfare was everyone's concern. In other words, the individual existed because the community existed. In the words of Mbiti (1969) cited in Nsengiyumva, Muhenda, Njuguna and Nyabul (2019, p.16), "I am because we are, since we are therefore I am". In African society, collective well-being takes priority over radical individualism Sharing and helping one another are the way to live in the community (Nsengiyumva, Muhenda, Njuguna & Nyabul (2019). Therefore, the musicians ask for rain for the benefit of the whole community, and not just themselves.

Interceding on behalf of all creations

Ndingo Johwa goes a little bit further to show that the role of human beings is to intercede on behalf of all creations. Humanity and the physical environment are interconnected; they cannot exist alone. Johwa's song sustains the argument that we are connected to nature. The following lines from the song "Phondanyama" illustrate this point:

Yendani ka manyangwa muno kumbila vula ine
Bonani bana be yu bano lala baka sunga mabula.
Bonani mitjalo ye shango yaka Kuba bo.
Bonani ngombe dza pela mpalo ne bhamba.

(Go to Manyanga and ask for the rain to come
Look, the children are sleeping hungry
Look, even the wild fruits are no longer available
Look, the cattle are dying of drought).

The artist is asking for rain so that the wild fruits and the cattle can thrive. When the wild fruits and cattle thrive, they provide food and sustenance for the people. Thus, humanity and nature are inter-connected. Johwa explains in the interview that Manyangwa is "the shrine where hosanna rain dancers assemble to pray for rain." Manyangwa is also Mngwali's prophet. Johwa goes further:

> *Bakulukugwi Maka leba ino lilala ntondontondo lindzo ndiho ntukunu.*
>
> *Bonani bhamba la kula tjibi I vula.*
>
> (Our ancestors had a saying, the bird that used to cry/call now rarely calls/cries because of the drought).

In Shona it means "*shiri inochema asika kuchema kwayo kwave kushoma"*. This is a reference to the honey bird which cries to show you a bee hive or warns you of danger after spotting a huge snake while you are hunting. Growing up in Shona society, we were told that when the honey bird leads you to a bee hive, its expectation is that you take the honey and leave some for it to eat. This clearly demonstrates the co-existence of humanity and nature. In the song "Phondanyama", Johwa seems to be suggesting that the drought is so severe that the bees are no longer even making honey (because there are no flowers and water), thus threatening the lives of people and the bird that needs honey for food. Consequently, the honey bird has gone silent. Johwa is using concrete imagery to paint a picture of the ravaging drought.

Mapfumo's "Mvura Ngainaye" and Johwa's "Phondanyama" are traditional African symbolisms that directly and indirectly plead to Mwari/Mngwali to intervene in climatic disasters. Both artists construct themselves as victims as well as potential champions of climate change. We also note that each artist is singing in his mother language as a means of resistance to colonial Christian alternatives of divination, showing evidence of cultural empowerment, identity, strength and resilience in shaping discourses about social class and relations in periods of crisis like droughts.

Conclusion

The article examined the intercessional role of music among the Kalanga in Botswana and the Nyai-Shona in Zimbabwe. This was done through the analysis of two songs, namely "Phondanyama" by Ndingo Johwa, a Motswana Kalanga musician, and "Mvura Ngainaye" by Thomas Mapfumo, a Zimbabwean Shona musician. The aim was to show that the Kalanga in Botswana and the Shona in Zimbabwe are one and the same people despite the fact that they live in two different countries. The two songs acted as the connecting thread for our argument. The analysis of the two selected songs reveals a close similarity in the way the Kalanga and Nyai-Shona use music to intercede for rain. The two musicians use music as a platform to communicate with the divine and voice the problems that are faced by their respective communities. This similarity in cultural practices seems to point to a common origin.

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From Ritual to Revenue: The Influence of Digital Platforms on the *Mbiya* Trade and Spiritual Practices in Johanne Masowe Apostolic Sects

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Abstract

In Zimbabwe's digital age, sacred traditions face unprecedented transformation. The intersection of digital technology and religious commerce represents a critical frontier in understanding contemporary African spirituality. This study explores how digital platforms reshape the mbiya (sacred clay plates) trade and spiritual practices within Johanne Masowe Apostolic sects (JMAS), converting sacred clay plates into digital commodities. Mbiya plates, traditionally central to healing rituals and spiritual protection in African Indigenous Churches (AICs), have experienced a fundamental shift from localised, ritual-bound objects to commodified digital merchandise accessible through social media platforms, mobile money systems, and e-commerce channels. Through a qualitative approach, this research interrogates how digitalisation has reconfigured the sacred-profane boundary, altered power dynamics within apostolic hierarchies, and created new forms of spiritual entrepreneurship. The study demonstrates how digital platforms function as active agents that reshape religious practice, commercialise sacred objects, and democratise access to spiritual capital whilst simultaneously raising concerns about authenticity, exploitation, and the erosion of traditional spiritual authority. Findings indicate that digitalisation has created a paradox: expanding access to spiritual resources whilst potentially commodifying and diluting their sacred significance. Recommendations address policy frameworks for regulating digital religious commerce, ethical guidelines for spiritual entrepreneurs, and strategies for balancing tradition with technological innovation in African religious contexts. The study contributes to scholarly debates on digital religion, African Christianity, and the political economy of spirituality, offering insights relevant to religious studies, anthropology, and digital sociology.

Keywords: Digital religion, mbiya (clay plates), Johanne Masowe Apostolic sects, religious commodification, spiritual entrepreneurship, African Indigenous Churches

Introduction

The advent of digital technology has fundamentally transformed religious expression, organisation, and commerce globally, creating new possibilities and challenges for how communities practice faith and engage with sacred objects (Campbell, 2020) In sub-Saharan Africa, where mobile phone penetration reached 46% by 2023 (GSMA, 2023), religious communities increasingly utilise digital platforms to access spiritual resources and engage in spiritual commerce (Hackett, 2020). This digital revolution has profoundly affected African Indigenous Churches (AICs), particularly in Zimbabwe, where internet penetration grew from 23% in 2015 to 36% by 2024 (Potraz, 2024). Within this digital landscape, Johanne Masowe Apostolic sects (JMAS) are among

Zimbabwe's most significant religious movements, with an estimated 1.5 million adherents (Togarasei & Chitando, 2020). They have undergone dramatic transformations in their sacred-object economies. *Mbiya*, traditionally embedded in ritual contexts and accessible only through established spiritual hierarchies, are now marketed, sold, and distributed via WhatsApp groups, Facebook pages, and mobile money platforms. This transformation fundamentally challenges traditional understandings of sacred object economies and raises profound questions about the digitalisation of the sacred and commercialisation of spiritual capital (Biri & Togarasei, 2021). Within Zimbabwe's diverse AIC landscape, two prominent groups stand out: the White Garment (*Masowe enguwo chena*) and Red Garment (*Masowe enguwo tsvuku*) churches, both sharing artefacts, practices, and rituals with *mbiya* occupying central significance (Daneel, 2001).

Globally, scholars have documented digital technology's impact on religious practices, from American megachurches' social media evangelism (Hutchings, 2017) to Indian Hindu devotional apps (Scheifinger, 2010). In Africa, research has examined Nigerian Pentecostal churches' digital strategies (Obadare, 2016) and South African prosperity gospel televangelism (Resane, 2017). However, scholarly understanding of how digital platforms specifically transform sacred object economies within AICs remains underdeveloped, with most digital religion scholarship focusing on textual/visual content dissemination rather than material object commerce. The *mbiya* trade's digital transformation raises critical questions: How do digital platforms reconfigure traditional spiritual hierarchies? What economic, social, and theological implications emerge from the online commodification of sacred objects? How do believers negotiate tensions between traditional ritual contexts and digital commercial spaces?

This study sought to:

a. Examine the manifestation and significance of *mbiya* in Johane Masowe, Red and White Garment Churches.
b. Analyse mechanisms and extent of digital platform usage in the *mbiya* trade.
c. Assess economic and spiritual exploitation surrounding *mbiya*.
d. Explore strategies for revitalising and preserving *mbiya* traditions as sacred objects.

Background

The mbiya (Sacred Clay Plates) in Johanne Masowe Apostolic Cosmology

The Johanne Masowe Apostolic Church emerged in the 1930s under the dynamic leadership of Johane Masowe (John of the Wilderness), originally named Shoniwa Masedza Tandi Moyo, who asserted a divine mandate to establish a distinctly African Christian movement free from the constraints of missionary oversight. This inception occurred amid the broader milieu of colonial suppression, missionary paternalism, and a burgeoning wave of African resistance, which together fostered the emergence of various African Independent Churches (AICs) throughout Southern Africa (Daneel, 1971). The movement's integration of healing, prophecy, and elements of traditional

African religion resonated profoundly with marginalized communities, both urban and rural, who sought viable spiritual alternatives to mainstream denominations often perceived as dismissive of their cultural needs and worldviews. Consequently, what materialized was a unique African Christian expression contesting both missionary Christianity and indigenous belief systems, drawing thoughtfully from both realms.

Distinct theological and practical aspects set the Johanne Masowe sects apart from other Christian denominations. They rejected Western medicine in favor of spiritual healing, displaying disdain for formal Western education which they viewed as tainted by colonial legacies. They relied on prophetic revelations as the core source of spiritual knowledge, illustrating a radical departure from conventional practices. Sacred objects, particularly *mbiya* clay plates, became tangible mediators of divine power, integral to their religious life. Distinctive rituals, including baptism in natural waters and unique dress codes symbolizing spiritual purity, further defined their identity (Mukonyora, 1999).

By the 1940s, the movement fragmented into various factions, notably the White Garment and Red Garment branches, resulting from charismatic succession disputes (Mukonyora, 1999). Despite these divisions, both factions retained core Masowe principles while developing unique liturgical approaches and organizational frameworks, contributing to a rich tapestry of subcultures within the movement. The White Garment faction emphasized purification and prophecy, whereas the Red Garment branch integrated more elaborate ceremonial practices and hierarchical structures (Dillon-Malone, 1978). Collectively, these factions represent one of Zimbabwe's most significant religious movements, wielding considerable cultural and social influence.

Central to Johanne Masowe theology is the role of *mbiya*, which serve as active participants in spiritual transactions between humans and the divine. Crafted and consecrated through rigorous prophetic rituals, these plates are believed to embody divine healing energy, situated within a syncretic framework that amalgamates Christian and traditional African spiritual concepts (Chitando, 2013). Their access was strictly regulated, necessitating the involvement of established prophets to perform elaborate consecration rites. This gatekeeping reflected broader systemic authority, underscoring the comprehensive, holistic approach to health inherent in African medical traditions (Gelfand, 1985). As such, the Johanne Masowe movement manifests an enduring and complex interplay between faith, culture, and identity, significantly enriching Zimbabwe's religious landscape.

The Emergence and Significance of Mbiya in JMAS

The precise origins of *mbiya* within JMAS traditions remain obscured by limited documentation and oral transmission gaps. However, archaeological and anthropological evidence suggests the practice draws upon longstanding Shona ceramic traditions predating Christianity's arrival. Pottery production among the Shona people dates to the Early Iron Age (approximately 200-500 CE), with vessels serving

domestic, commercial, and ritual functions (Pikirayi, 2007). Huffman's (1980) analysis of ceramic styles demonstrates that specific vessel forms signified group identity and cosmological beliefs, establishing precedent for pottery's symbolic dimensions that JMAS practitioners could draw upon when developing ritual uses for clay objects. Within JMAS contexts, *mbiya* likely emerged organically as practitioners sought material vessels for prayer and spiritual work that resonated with African cultural memory whilst avoiding objects associated with colonial missionary Christianity. Unlike European ecclesiastical objects such as chalices, patens, and thuribles that carried colonial associations, clay plates connected to pre-colonial pottery traditions, enabling what Bediako (1995) terms "theological indigenisation" the process by which Christian theology becomes rooted in local cultural forms rather than remaining bound to European expressions.

Early ethnographic accounts provide fragmentary evidence of *mbiya* use. Aquina (1967), documenting apostolic movements in Southern Rhodesia, briefly noted the use of “earthen dishes” in healing ceremonies but provided minimal analysis of their significance. Daneel's (1971) extensive fieldwork similarly referenced pottery's presence in ritual contexts without sustained investigation of specific forms or theological meanings. This scholarly oversight reflects broader tendencies within AIC studies to privilege theological and organisational dimensions over material culture, tendencies rooted in Protestant theological assumptions about spirituality's essentially non-material nature (Chitando, 2017).

Contemporary JMAS worship foregrounds *mbiya* as indispensable spiritual technology, treating these objects not as optional devotional aids but as essential instruments for effective prayer and spiritual work. This understanding aligns with what Engelke (2007) identifies as African Christianity's "problem of presence", the theological challenge of mediating divine immanence through material forms in religious traditions that affirm both transcendence and immanence. For JMAS practitioners, *mbiya* resolves this problem by providing tangible loci where heaven and earth intersect, creating points of contact between spiritual and material realms that enable effective communication and power exchange.

Theological Foundations of Mbiya Practice

JMAS theology surrounding *mbiya* reflects what Daneel (1971, p. 287) characterises as "pneumatic materialism", a worldview in which spiritual realities are consistently mediated through material substances rather than existing in purely immaterial realms divorced from physical existence. This theological orientation differs markedly from Protestant traditions that emphasise word-centred spirituality and iconoclastic tendencies rooted in Reformation rejections of Catholic material religion, instead embracing material mediation as necessary and divinely sanctioned, reflecting African cosmologies' holistic integration of spiritual and material dimensions of reality. JMAS practitioners embrace material mediation not as a concession to human weakness but

as recognition of how divine power actually operates in the world, moving through material channels to accomplish spiritual purposes.

Three theological principles underpin *mbiya* practice and provide doctrinal justification for their ritual usage. The doctrine of spiritual conductivity holds that certain materials, particularly natural, unprocessed substances like clay that remain close to their created state, possess an inherent capacity to transmit spiritual power more effectively than processed or artificial materials contaminated by industrial production. As one Harare-based prophet explained during fieldwork, articulating this theology in everyday language: "Clay comes from the earth that God created. It has not been polluted by factories and machines. This is why it can carry prayers" (Interview, 15 March 2024). This theology resonates with what Mbiti (1990) identifies as African cosmology's emphasis on creation's ongoing sacredness rather than viewing nature as fallen or spiritually inert, maintaining that the material world retains divine presence and can mediate spiritual power when properly approached. It is believed that through the principle of consecrated functionality, objects acquire spiritual efficacy through proper ritual blessing by anointed spiritual leaders rather than possessing automatic power by virtue of their material nature alone. Unconsecrated *mbiya* are considered spiritually inert, “mere pottery” in practitioners' terminology, incapable of mediating divine power regardless of their physical similarity to consecrated plates, their spiritual potency depending entirely on prophetic blessing. This principle creates theological justification for spiritual gatekeeping by establishing prophets as necessary intermediaries whose authority derives from their unique capacity to transform ordinary objects into spiritual instruments, a dynamic explored in subsequent sections examining power and exploitation.

The concept of spiritual reciprocity frames *mbiya* as participants in bidirectional communication between humans and the divine rather than as passive instruments or one-way channels. Prayers offered through *mbiya* are believed to ascend to God, carried by the plates' spiritual conductivity, whilst divine responses descend through the same channels, bringing healing, guidance, or protection, creating circuits of spiritual exchange. This reciprocal flow is accepted to transform *mbiya* from passive ritual props into active spiritual agents participating in ongoing relationships between practitioners and the divine, what Gell (1998) might term "secondary agents" possessing delegated intentionality through which primary agents (divine beings) act in the world.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs a multi-theoretical framework combining Symbolic Interactionism, Material Religion Theory, Postcolonial Theory, Actor-Network Theory (ANT), and Religious Economy Theory to analyse the digital transformation of *mbiya* trade, recognising that no single theoretical lens can adequately capture this phenomenon's complexity. This combination provides analytical leverage for examining both the socio-technical dynamics of digital platforms and the economic logics shaping religious

commerce, whilst also attending to meaning-making processes, power dynamics, and cultural specificities.

Symbolic Interactionism and Material Religion

The study employs symbolic interactionism developed by Mead (1934) and systematised by Blumer (1969) as a primary analytical lens for interpreting *mbiya* practices, focusing on how meanings emerge through social interaction rather than inhering in objects themselves. Symbolic interactionism posits that humans create meaning through interpretive processes mediated by symbols, with these significances arising from social interaction and subject to continuous negotiation and modification. *Mbiya* exemplify symbolic interactionism's core tenets. Their meanings are not inherent in the clay itself but emerge through JMAS practitioners' shared interpretive frameworks constructed through teaching, ritual practice, and communal discourse. Within JMAS communities, *mbiya* acquire significance through prophets' teachings explaining their spiritual functions, communal rituals demonstrating proper usage, testimony narratives validating their efficacy, and everyday usage processes observable through ethnographic engagement.

Recent developments in material religion studies extend symbolic interactionism's applicability by emphasising objects' active roles in constituting religious experience. Scholars like Morgan (2012), Meyer (2011), and Plate (2015) argue that religious objects do not merely symbolise beliefs but actively constitute religious experience and identity through their material presence and ritual deployment. *Mbiya* do not simply represent spiritual power; they enact it through their deployment in prayer, healing, and ritual warfare.

Postcolonial Theory and Religious Indigenisation

Postcolonial theory provides an essential framework for contextualising *mbiya* practices within Zimbabwe's colonial and postcolonial history. Developed by scholars including Said (1978), Spivak (1988), and Bhabha (1994), postcolonial theory examines how colonial power structures persist beyond political independence, shaping cultural production, knowledge systems, and identity formation. The emergence of JMAS and their *mbiya* practices can be interpreted as what Bhabha (1994) terms 'hybridisation', the blending of colonial (Christian) and indigenous (Shona) elements to produce novel cultural forms. *Mbiya* embody this hybridity: in material form, they serve Christian prayer directed to the Christian God, yet employ pre-Christian pottery traditions rooted in Shona cosmology. Postcolonial theory also illuminates power dynamics within contemporary JMAS communities. The commercialisation of *mbiya* can be analysed through Spivak's (1988) concept of the subaltern whose voices are mediated and potentially silenced by dominant powers. When prophets monopolise *mbiya* distribution, they exercise power analogous to colonial gatekeeping. Mbembe's (2001) notion of the 'postcolony' proves particularly apt for analysing contemporary JMAS contexts characterised by complex entanglements of power, resistance, and complicity. The *mbiya* economy exemplifies

this entanglement through complex webs of mutual dependence and shared investment in existing arrangements.

Actor-Network Theory

The Actor-Network Theory (ANT), developed primarily by Bruno Latour (2005), Michel Callon (1986), and John Law (1992), offers a distinctive approach to understanding technology-society relations by refusing ontological distinctions between human and non-human actors. ANT posits that social phenomena emerge through networks of heterogeneous actors that mutually constitute each other through processes of translation, enrolment, and mobilisation.

Applied to the digital *mbiya* trade, ANT illuminates how digital platforms, including Facebook, WhatsApp, mobile money systems, and e-commerce infrastructure, function as actors actively reshaping religious practice rather than merely facilitating human intentions. WhatsApp's affordances, including instant messaging, group communication and media sharing, create specific possibilities and constraints influencing how sacred objects are marketed, authenticated, and transacted. ANT's concept of translation helps trace how *mbiya* transform as they move through digital networks, undergoing ontological shifts, altering not merely their location but their very nature as objects. Digitalisation introduces new network elements, including smartphones, data bundles, mobile money platforms, social media algorithms, and delivery services that translate *mbiya* into different forms.

Religious Economy Theory

The Religious Economy Theory, associated primarily with Rodney Stark, Roger Finke, and Laurence Iannaccone, applies economic analysis to religious behaviour, treating religion as a market where suppliers offer products to consumers who make rational choices based on cost-benefit calculations (Stark & Finke, 2000). When applied to digital *mbiya* trade, Religious Economy Theory illuminates how digitalisation dramatically alters supply-side structures by lowering barriers to entry for religious entrepreneurs. Traditional gatekeeping mechanisms regulating who could distribute *mbiya* are circumvented through digital platforms where anyone with internet access can claim spiritual legitimacy and market sacred objects, creating more competitive but also more chaotic spiritual marketplaces (Einstein, 2008).

This study's multi-theoretical approach recognises that no single framework adequately captures *mbiya* practices' complexity, requiring the integration of multiple analytical perspectives. Integrating these perspectives enables nuanced analysis that honours both spiritual significance and material interests, both cultural resistance and economic pragmatism, both collective meaning-making and structural power asymmetries, both human agency and technological mediation, avoiding reductionism whilst maintaining analytical coherence through attention to how different dimensions intersect and mutually constitute complex social phenomena.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach, informed by interpretive epistemology, to explore the digital transformation of *mbiya* trade within Johanne Masowe Apostolic sects, prioritising depth through extensive participant engagement. Qualitative methodology is ideal for examining complex social phenomena such as spiritual meaning-making and power dynamics (Creswell, 2014). The study adopts a critical realist ontology, positing that social realities exist independently of our knowledge yet are accessible through interpretive frameworks influenced by culture and power dynamics (Bhaskar, 1978; Archer et al., 1998). Critical realism distinguishes between the real (unobserved structures), the actual (events occurring regardless of perception), and the empirical (observed experiences).

Data were collected in three major Zimbabwean cities, Harare, Bulawayo, and Mutare, selected for their geographic diversity and varying apostolic presence. Harare, as the largest city with the highest JMAS concentration and digital activity, served as the primary site for interviews. Bulawayo, with distinct cultural traits and a predominant Ndebele presence, provided comparative insights, while Mutare's cross-border trade offered a transnational perspective. Using purposive and snowball sampling strategies, the study aimed for theoretical saturation rather than statistical representativeness (Patton, 2015). Purposive sampling involved selecting diverse, information-rich cases: spiritual entrepreneurs selling *mbiya* online, sceptical traditional prophets, and congregants acquiring plates through various channels. Snowball sampling helped access knowledgeable participants who might not be publicly engaged in digital commerce. The final sample comprised 45 participants: 12 digital sellers, eight (8) traditional prophets, 15 digital buyers, six (6) traditional buyers, and four (4) church leaders. The sample included 27 males and 18 females, aged 22-67, with geographic representation from Harare (26), Bulawayo (12), and Mutare (7). Data collection combined semi-structured interviews with participant observations and digital ethnography. Interviews were conducted over five months, lasting between 45 and 90 minutes. Participant observation included attending JMAS worship services and observing *mbiya* usage during rituals. Digital ethnography monitored 37 Facebook pages and five WhatsApp groups dedicated to *mbiya* sales. An analysis of data followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis framework. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. Coding was performed using NVivo 12 software. All the research procedures were guided by ethical considerations, which centred on informed consent, confidentiality, and minimising harm. Consent was obtained in accessible language. Measures were implemented to protect anonymity, with pseudonyms assigned and data secured. Sensitive topics were approached with care, emphasising participants' comfort and respect for their cultural experiences.

However, methodological limitations were encountered during the research. Purposive and snowball sampling impacted generalisability, potentially excluding perspectives of those less inclined to engage with outsiders. Self-report data posed risks of social desirability bias, addressed through triangulation and non-judgmental questioning.

The study's cross-sectional nature limited causal inference, moderated through retrospective interviews and secondary sources. Language translation challenges were mitigated by detailed checks and presentation of original language quotes where culturally specific terms arose.

Findings

The Manifestation and Functions of Mbiya in JMAS

Fieldwork revealed remarkable diversity in *mbiya* forms and functions within JMAS contexts. Five primary typologies emerged; each associated with specific spiritual functions. Cross-marked *mbiya* (*mbiya dzine muchinjikwa*), characterised by an incised cross at the centre, were found in all observed congregations. The cross serves not merely as a Christian symbol but as a cosmological diagram reflecting vertical and horizontal axes structuring spiritual interactions. *Muporofita* Tawanda from a White Garment congregation articulated this view, explaining that prayers offered with this plate traverse a journey from the Earth to Heaven and beyond, echoing indigenous cosmological orientations where the cross embodies spatial relationships. The *mbiya* also act as instruments of spiritual warfare, with participants employing them to establish protective boundaries against malevolent forces. Rituals involving the inversion of *mbiya* and pressing them into the earth were observed during services, creating spiritual barriers that prevent evil from entering sanctified spaces. This militaristic imagery in discussions revealed a theology of active resistance against witchcraft and spiritual attacks, as demonstrated by the instructions given during a service to visualize enemy spirits being trapped beneath the plates.

Toothed *mbiya* (*mbiya dzine mazino*) feature projections ranging from three to eight teeth and serve protective and combative spiritual functions. Participants used martial metaphors to describe their utility. The number of teeth corresponds with varying levels of spiritual power. Three-toothed plates are believed to offer basic protection, whilst eight-toothed varieties confront serious spiritual threats. One participant described using a five-toothed plate as a protective shield for her family, creating spiritual boundaries at her home's four corners.

> *Mazino aya anoruma vavengi pamweya vanoedza kurwisa mhuri. Akaita sembwa dzepamweya dziripo kuchengetedza. Kana ndichinamatira kuchengetwa, ndinokwidibira mbiya ina pamiganhu wemusha kuitira kuti mweya yakaipa isadarike. Mazino embiya anobata mweya yakaipa kusvikira Mwari aparadza mweya iyi.*
>
> These teeth bite the enemy spirits that try to attack my family; they're like a spiritual guard dog. When I pray for protection, I turn it upside down and push it into the ground at my home's four corners, creating a boundary that demons cannot cross. Those teeth grip the demons and don't let them enter, holding them until God destroys them (Interview, 25 February 2024).

This martial imagery reflects what Cox (1995) identifies as AICs' "spiritual warfare" theology, where Christians actively combat demonic forces through ritual technologies rather than passively receiving divine protection, with *mbiya* functioning as spiritual weapons requiring skilled deployment. More controversially, some participants described using toothed *mbiya* offensively rather than merely defensively. One woman shared her experience of using a toothed plate to address her husband's infidelity, writing his name inside with charcoal and burying the plate in the river. Within one month, the affair (Interview, 3 April 2024). Such practices raise ethical questions about spiritual coercion and consent that participants themselves debate, some defending love portions as legitimate when restoring rightful relationships, others condemning it as manipulating another's free will regardless of intentions. These practices reveal *mbiya's* moral ambiguity as objects capable of both protective benevolence and manipulative harm depending on user intent, similar to what Evans-Pritchard (1937) documented regarding Azande witchcraft's dual potentials for blessing and cursing.

Plain small *mbiya* (*mbiya duku dzakachena*), unadorned plates typically 15-20 centimetres in diameter, were described as 'everyday' tools for prayer, emphasising humility and unadorned faith. Large communal *mbiya* (*mbiya huru dzeungano*), exceeding 40 centimetres in diameter, are utilised in collective rituals. Individual prayers, represented by smaller plates, are directed through a communal plate, amplifying spiritual forces. One prophet mentioned:

> *Patinobatanidza mbiya diki nembiya hombe, minamato yedu minamato yedu inobatana kuita rwizi rwuhombe rwunoyerera kusvika kuna Mwari. Munamato mumwe chete wakaita sekarwizi, uye kana minamato ikabatana, inoita rwizi rwuhombe.*
>
> When we join small mbiya through this large communal mbiya, our prayers combine into a powerful river flowing to heaven together. One prayer alone is like a small stream; many prayers united become a mighty river that nothing can stop (Field notes, 27 April 2024).

This hydraulic metaphor for spiritual power resonates with what Csordas (1994) terms "somatic modes of attention" where embodied practices and material objects constitute religious experience through sensory engagement rather than purely cognitive belief. Specialised *mbiya* for prayer cooking (*mbiya dzekubikira minyengetero*) serve to prepare mixtures of material substances infused with prayers for consumption, collapsing the distinction between spiritual and material nourishment. Participants explained that drinking from *mbiya* embodies a theological understanding comparable to Christian communion, where prayer becomes a material substance entering the individual.

Beyond typological categorisation, *mbiya* play overlapping functional roles within JMAS spiritual economies. A consensus amongst participants identifies the primary function of *mbiya* as conduits for prayer, enhancing communication with the divine. Compared to verbal prayers, which may feel scattered or ineffective, prayers mediated

through *mbiya* are perceived as possessing heightened efficacy. Outside their functional utility, *mbiya* serve as markers of identity within the JMAS community. Possession of properly consecrated *mbiya* signifies authentic membership, whilst unauthorised plates indicate marginal status. During services, congregants often scrutinised each other's *mbiya* to assess their authenticity.

The concept of spiritual reciprocity frames *mbiya* as participants in bidirectional communication between humans and the divine. Some participants, particularly older congregants, described *mbiya* as facilitating not only divine communication but also ancestral engagement, positioning ancestors as intermediaries. One elderly woman explained that *mbiya* help believers talk to ancestors who are with God now, living in heaven, but still caring about their children. They pour water or milk into *mbiya*, call their fathers' and grandfathers' names, and the ancestors hear because they are close to God.

> *Vadimu vanotakura minamato yedu kuenda pachigaro chaMwari nekuti ndiko kwavari vachitinyengeterera sezvinoitwa vevatsvene vakafa kana tiri kudzidziso dzechiRoma. Izvi hazvireve kuti tinonamata vakafa, asi tinonamata kuna Mwari kuburikidza nevadzimu vedu.*
>
> The ancestors carry our prayers to God's throne because they are already there with Him, interceding on our behalf like saints in Catholic teaching. This is not ancestor worship; we don't pray to ancestors but through them to God who created them and us. (Interview, 5 April 2024).

However, this theological openness to ancestral mediation was contested within JMAS communities. Some younger prophets explicitly rejected ancestral dimensions, insisting that *mbiya* connect exclusively to God through Jesus Christ without intermediate spirits (Interview, 9 April 2024).

Digital Platform Utilisation and Economic Dimensions in Mbiya Trade

Digital platforms have fundamentally transformed the *mbiya* trade, changing how sacred objects circulate and how spiritual commerce operates. Interviewed participants highlighted WhatsApp as the dominant platform, with nearly all digitally active respondents identifying it as their primary means for engaging in spiritual commerce. One seller described WhatsApp as everything for this business, explaining that he communicates with customers, sends photos, negotiates prices, confirms payments, and arranges delivery all through WhatsApp (Interview, 15 July 2023). Digital ethnography revealed sophisticated commercial ecosystems operating through seemingly informal communication channels, with groups ranging from small networks to massive communities exceeding 500 participants. One group observed for three months displayed weekly updated price lists, product descriptions, and customer service protocols. In contrast, Facebook acts primarily as a marketing and community-building tool. An analysis of 37 Facebook pages run by prophets and spiritual entrepreneurs revealed common strategies such as professional photography,

testimonial videos, and spiritual credentials that not only attract followers but create an illusion of celebrity within the spiritual marketplace. *Madzibaba* Prosper, a prominent digital entrepreneur with over 5,000 followers, shared his approach*:*

> *Ndinonzwisisa nzira nemaitiro esocial media, uye ndinogona kugadzira Nyaya dzinodiwa nevanhu vachidziverenga, kudzishambadza kana kutaura nezvadzozvinoita Kuziva kwangu kurambe kuchionekera*
>
> (I understand social media algorithms and how to make content that people engage with, like, share, and comment to increase algorithmic visibility) (Personal interview, 28 July 2024).

However, the integration of technology into sacred commerce also generates significant tensions. Traditional prophets often criticise this technological mediation, arguing it undermines the necessary spiritual preparation associated with acquiring *mbiya*. Rutendo, a traditional prophet, voiced his concerns: *"Digital commerce violates sacred protocols, it encourages people to treat mbiya as commodities rather than sacred gifts requiring reverent reception."* (Interview, 3 August 2024). This critique highlights a fundamental tension: traditional rituals about preparation and relationships clash with the efficiency and convenience of digital commercial practices, reflecting deeper disagreements about the nature of spirituality itself.

Mobile money systems, particularly EcoCash as Zimbabwe's dominant platform, also emerged as crucial infrastructure enabling digital *mbiya* commerce by providing accessible, instantaneous payment mechanisms that bypass dysfunctional formal banking systems whilst creating digital transaction records. Interview participants universally mentioned mobile money as their primary payment method, with very few resorting to bank transfers or cash. Chipo, a 29-year-old vegetable seller, highlighted mobile money's practicality*: "EcoCash makes me pay for mbiya immediately without carrying large amounts that risk robbery."* (Personal interview, 22 July 2023). However, the convenience of mobile money comes with challenges. Transaction fees can eat into profit margins, and technical problems can disrupt transactions, leading to conflicts between buyers and sellers over delayed confirmations. Sibusiso, a digital seller in Bulawayo, explained: *"Sometimes EcoCash goes down, customers think I'm lying about non-payment, and I also think they're lying; these technical problems hurt my spiritual reputation."* (Personal interview, 18 August 2023). This dynamic illustrates how technological infrastructure intertwines with religious authority. When mobile platforms experience failures, the repercussions stretch beyond financial transactions to affect spiritual relationships and reputations, creating precarious dependencies that leave spiritual entrepreneurs vulnerable to corporate priorities.

Marketing Strategies and Spiritual Entrepreneurship

Digital platforms allow for innovative marketing strategies that were previously inaccessible to prophets limited by geographic constraints. Observational studies revealed promotional practices that blend secular marketing methods with spiritual

authenticity. Professional product photography, engaging testimonial videos, and clear ministerial credentials together establish a strong brand identity. *Madzibaba* Prosper's promotional tactics exemplify this sophistication, utilising both common marketing techniques and specific spiritual language. However, the rising commercialization of *mbiya* has drawn criticism from traditional religious authorities. *Sekuru* Madzivire, an elder prophet, lamented: *“vechidiki vari kutora kutengesa mbiya sebhizimisa zvinove zvaparadza kukosha kwembiya pamweya”* (These young sellers treat mbiya like merchandise, this commercialisation corrupts spirituality). (Personal interview, 12 August 2024). This sentiment resonates deeply among some believers who feel that reducing sacred objects to commodities detracts from their spiritual integrity. Conversely, some argue that spiritual and economic dimensions can coexist without corruption if practitioners maintain proper intentions. *Madzimai* Rudo, a 42-year-old businesswoman, articulated this viewpoint during an interview: *"Why spiritual and commercial must be separated? Digital platforms simply make this exchange more efficient and transparent."* (Personal interview, 19 July 2023). This perspective suggests that the essence of the spiritual relationship remains intact, regardless of transactional methods, arguing that God can work through diverse means of access to spiritual help.

The utilisation of digital platforms in the *mbiya* trade among Johanne Masowe Apostolic sects reveals a complex interplay of technology, spirituality, and commerce. WhatsApp serves as a primary communication and transaction tool, creating informal yet sophisticated marketplaces, while Facebook functions as a marketing platform for branding. Mobile money systems like EcoCash facilitate transactions but introduce vulnerabilities that can undermine reputations. Despite criticisms concerning the potential commercialization of spirituality, some participants advocate for the coexistence of spiritual and economic dimensions, viewing digital commerce as a modern evolution of traditional practices. This multifaceted landscape illustrates ongoing negotiations and tensions between the sacred and the secular in an increasingly digital world. Ultimately, the significance of *mbiya* transcends mere transactions, reflecting deeper truths about belief, community, and the evolving practices of faith in contemporary society. This supports the Actor-Network Theory's emphasis on technology's active agency whilst extending Campbell's (2013) digital religion scholarship by documenting how platform architectures specifically shape sacred object commerce in African contexts characterised by economic informality, mobile-first internet access, and weak formal institutions.

The data reveals the platforms' dual effects that create profound ambivalence amongst participants: expanding access and convenience for believers who previously struggled to obtain *mbiya* through traditional gatekeepers, whilst potentially compromising ritual integrity and spiritual authenticity by removing embodied preparation and personal relationships that traditional acquisition required. This paradox cannot be resolved through simple judgments about digitisation as either progress or corruption, requiring instead a nuanced appreciation for how technological

mediation redistributes benefits and harms across different social positions whilst transforming sacred objects' meanings in ways that some find liberating and others find troubling. The challenge lies not in determining whether digital *mbiya* commerce is authentically spiritual, a question with no objective answer, but in understanding how different actors negotiate these transformations whilst pursuing their diverse interests in spiritual efficacy, economic survival, institutional authority, and theological integrity.

Economic Dimensions and Spiritual Exploitation of mbiya

Mbiya pricing reveals complex value determination processes. Interview participants reported purchase prices ranging dramatically from USD5 for simple plain *mbiya* from unauthorized street vendors to USD150 for elaborate varieties consecrated by nationally recognized prophets, with most purchases (28/45, 62%) falling between USD30 and USD50. This demonstrates significant market segmentation serving different customer segments. Despite the sellers' claims to spiritual motivations, *mbiya* purchases impose significant economic burdens. *Madzimai* Fortunate described needing *mbiya* for her sick child:

> *Muripo weMuporofita aive madhora gumi nemaviri emari yekuAmerica iyo inomiririra zvekudya zvedu zvemazuva matatu. Ndakatenga mbiya nekuti hutano hwemwana wangu ndihwo hwakakosha. Isu takadya sadza rakange risina muriwo.*
>
> The prophet's price was USD12, which represented our food money for three days. I bought the mbiya because my child's health mattered most, but we ate sadza without relish that week (Interview, 28 February 2024).

Among 21 buyers willing to discuss finances, 14 (67%) reported that *mbiya* purchases created household financial strain requiring sacrifices of basic needs or increased debts. Mean expenditure represented 6.2% of monthly household income (median 4.8%, range 0.8%-15.3%).

The study's findings revealed monopolistic gatekeeping mechanisms. In 7 of 10 congregations whose members were interviewed (70%), prophetic leaders exercised monopolistic control over *mbiya* sourcing by prohibiting members from purchasing plates from unauthorized vendors. Investigations revealed that gatekeeping prophets often maintained financial relationships with designated vendors, receiving commissions (20-30%) from sales. *Madzibaba* Zviripo, a vendor supplying *mbiya* to three congregations, acknowledged:

> *Ichokwadii pandinotengesa ndinopa muporofita chikamu chemari chinogona kuita 20% kana kuti 30%. Vatengi vanowana mbiya dzakayeresa, muporofita neni tinowana mari zvekare, tose tinezvatiwana pambiya.*

> (Yes, I give the prophet something when I sell to his members- maybe 20% or 30%. Customers get genuine consecrated mbiya, I earn income, the prophet earns income - everyone benefits) (Interview, 22 March 2024).

Such practices create what could be termed spiritual "rent-seeking", prophets extracting economic rents from controlling access to spiritual resources whose scarcity results from artificial restrictions rather than genuine supply constraints. These arrangements create structural exploitation where congregants pay inflated prices covering both production costs and prophets' commissions without knowledge that alternatives exist. These dynamics exemplify what Lindhardt (2015) terms "spiritual economies of inequality" where material resources determine spiritual opportunities.

Digitalisation has created complex transformations in religious authority. Participants frequently emphasized that digital platforms expand *mbiya* accessibility by eliminating geographic barriers, reducing dependence on personal networks, and enabling price comparison. Tawanda explained how digital access liberated him:

> *Ndisati ndawana vanoshambadza paFacebook nepaWhatsapp, raive dambudziko Kuwana vaporofita vemandorokwati pasina kuzivana. Parizvino,ndave kugona Kuwana vanotengesa vane mukurumbira nekutarisa kusiyana kwemitengo. Kusununguka uku kwakashandura hupenyu hwangu hwemweya*
>
> Before discovering Facebook and WhatsApp sellers, accessing powerful prophets was nearly impossible without right connections. Now I can find reputable sellers online, reading reviews, and comparing offerings. This freedom transformed my spiritual life (Interview, 5 August 2023).

Such testimonies articulate democratisation narratives celebrating digital platforms' capacity to redistribute power away from institutional authorities toward individual consumers exercising choice dynamics that the Religious Economy Theory predicts when religious markets become more competitive and pluralistic (Stark & Finke, 2000). However, democratisation claims require critical examination because expanding choice does not automatically produce better outcomes when information asymmetries remain severe, and quality verification proves difficult. Interview participants frequently expressed concerns about fake prophets exploiting digital anonymity to sell ineffective or fraudulent *mbiya* to vulnerable believers lacking verification means, with nearly half reporting personal knowledge of fraud cases involving online sacred object purchases.

The digital marketplaces' expanded access comes with weakened quality assurance, as traditional institutions that provided some oversight, however imperfect, lose the capacity to regulate increasingly autonomous spiritual entrepreneurs operating across geographic and denominational boundaries. Church leaders interviewed unanimously expressed concern about digital commerce undermining institutional authority by enabling spiritual entrepreneurs to operate independently of established churches

whilst claiming prophetic legitimacy. Bishop Chiwara, presiding over a large Johanne Masowe congregation in Harare with several thousand members, lamented institutional fragmentation during an interview at his church office. (Personal interview, 30 July 2023). These institutional concerns reflect genuine challenges churches face in maintaining authority and protecting members in increasingly disintermediated religious markets where individuals can access spiritual resources without institutional mediation. However, institutional critiques of digital commerce also serve self-interested defensive purposes, protecting institutional privileges threatened by entrepreneurial competition, making it difficult to distinguish between legitimate concern for believers' spiritual welfare and institutional self-preservation disguised as pastoral care. The tension between institutional gatekeeping's protective and exploitative dimensions cannot be easily resolved because both functions coexist; institutions simultaneously protect believers from some forms of exploitation whilst potentially engaging in their own exploitation through monopolistic practices that benefit institutional authorities economically.

Digital platforms create new forms of religious capital and status markers distinct from traditional hierarchical positions earned through years of service and community recognition, with social media metrics like follower counts, engagement rates, and viral content becoming quantifiable measures of spiritual influence. Interview participants frequently mentioned evaluating sellers' spiritual legitimacy partly through Facebook followers or WhatsApp group membership numbers, treating popularity as a proxy for prophetic authority in ways that traditional religious authority based on institutional credentials and community respect did not anticipate. Digital entrepreneur *Muporofita* Prosper explained how he consciously cultivates digital religious capital through strategic content management:

> *Zvuuru gumi nezvishanhu zvevanhu vanonditevera paFcebook hazvina nengotevera nekuda kwekuti ndakazodzwa chete. Ndakatoshinga kushambadza zvinhu zvemweya nehunyanzvi handiinaho. Kukura kwakaita boka revanonditera kwakaita kuti vanhu vave nechivimbo neni, kutengesa kwangu kukaramba kuchikura. Izvi zvakaita kuti ndirambe ndichibudirira nerutsigirwo rwaibva kuvanhu nekuti vanhu vanotenda kuti Muporofita akaita mukurumbira kwazvo zvinoreva kuti anoshandiswa zvakanyanya naMwari.*
>
> (My 15,000 followers were not gained by spiritual charismatic alone. My audience grew through my regular effort using marketing techniques for spiritual content. A larger following builds more trust and boosts sales, since people equate popularity with spiritual effectiveness, creating a positive feedback loop where success breeds more success) (Personal interview, 28 July 2024).

This testimony demonstrates what Bourdieu (1986) terms "capital conversion", transforming cultural capital in the form of digital literacy and marketing knowledge into

social capital as followers and networks, which then generates economic capital through sales revenue, which retroactively legitimates religious authority by demonstrating divine favour through material success. These capital conversions create new pathways to spiritual authority, bypassing traditional institutional credentials, enabling young tech-savvy entrepreneurs to compete with elderly prophets whose authority rests on decades of community service but who lack digital skills. The result is generational tension where traditional authorities struggle to maintain relevance whilst digital natives leverage technological advantages into spiritual influence, reconfiguring religious hierarchies in ways that privilege technological competence alongside spiritual gifting.

The economic exploitation documented when poor families sacrifice food to purchase expensive *mbiya*, prophets enriching themselves through commission arrangements hidden from congregants, and spiritual gatekeeping creating artificial scarcities serving authorities' interests, raise ethical and policy questions about regulating spiritual commerce without violating religious freedom. Yet regulation proves challenging when distinguishing legitimate spiritual authority from exploitative charlatanism which requires theological judgments that secular states cannot adjudicate, and when believers themselves disagree fundamentally about what constitutes authentic spiritual practice. The challenge lies in protecting vulnerable believers from exploitation whilst respecting religious autonomy and avoiding paternalistic interventions that treat believers as incapable of making informed decisions about their own spiritual lives.

Authenticity, Revitalising and Preserving** Mbiya **Traditions

As believers engage with the complexities of digital *mbiya* markets, they confront significant challenges concerning authenticity and spiritual efficacy. Research indicates that many participants express concerns over counterfeit or unconsecrated plates sold by unscrupulous vendors exploiting the anonymity of online platforms. Nearly half of the participants had personal knowledge of fraudulent cases where congregants or they themselves received ineffective *mbiya* after substantial financial investment. This aligns with lingering concerns in consumer culture about authenticity, particularly in digital contexts (Holt & Thompson, 2004). Experiences among participants vary widely, ranging from receiving mundane pottery devoid of consecration to elaborate deceptions where prophets collected payments but failed to deliver any goods. In some instances, the plates, while seemingly authentic, did not yield the expected spiritual outcomes, leading participants to wrestle with uncertainties about their purchases.

Despite these concerns, many digital buyers report satisfaction with their acquisitions. This indicates that they engage effective verification strategies alongside a firm commitment to their faith, leading to a more positive interpretation of ambiguous spiritual outcomes. *Madzimai* Memory, a participant who previously discussed her fertility *mbiya* acquisition, exemplifies this multifaceted verification approach. By

integrating digital research, community recommendations, and rigorous evaluations of the acquisition process, she provides a nuanced understanding of authenticity. Her reliance on experiential validation underscores a complex system of consumer agency that challenges assumptions of exploitation in digital markets. However, this reliance on personal experience highlights a circularity in the authentication process; efficacy cannot be solely attributed to the authenticity of the *mbiya* but may also depend on individual faith, usage practices, or divine intervention. In stark contrast, traditional prophets maintain that genuine verification requires spiritual discernment, a capability they argue is inaccessible to ordinary believers without prophetic insight. This argument, as noted by Coleman (2000), reinforces the necessity of prophetic gatekeeping, maintaining control over spiritual authority and consumer evaluations. Such assertions limit believers' abilities to function as independent spiritual consumers, thus framing the discourse around authenticity and efficacy within a complex socio-religious landscape.

Comparative Efficacy Perceptions

Believers acquiring *mbiya* through both traditional and digital means articulate varied assessments of efficacy, resisting simplistic generalizations. Their perspectives congregate around three distinct groups based on theological beliefs, practical experiences, and social contexts. The first group finds no efficacy difference between traditional and digital acquisitions, emphasizing that the essence of spiritual power relies on the quality of consecration and the manner of usage. For instance, Sister Tendai, a long-term member of the Johanne Masowe Apostolic Sect, articulates this viewpoint, asserting that sincere faith underpins spiritual efficacy, irrespective of acquisition method. This sentiment resonates with Barbour's (2002) exploration of faith as a central factor in spiritual experiences, suggesting that the nuances of belief can transcend medium.

The second group champions traditional acquisition methods, emphasising the importance of ritual integrity. *Sekuru* Gumbo expresses skepticism about the capacity of digital transactions to convey the same spiritual authority, arguing that genuine power necessitates rituals performed in-person at sacred sites. This view aligns with anthropological insights, notably those by Turner (1969), positing that transformative power emerges from embodied experiences rather than abstract beliefs alone. Conversely, the third group regards digital acquisition methods as superior, citing the advantages of broader prophetic selection and enhanced privacy. Tafadzwa, a digital buyer, highlights how online transactions liberate believers from the scrutiny often associated with local congregations. Her experience illustrates digital platforms' potential to alleviate stigma surrounding personal issues, enabling spiritual seeking devoid of communal interference, a point also discussed by Campbell (2005) in her examination of how digital spirituality can democratize access to religious resources.

Theological Negotiations and Adaptations

Believers are actively engaged in theological negotiations that adapt traditional doctrines to contemporary technological contexts while aiming to preserve authenticity. Some participants articulate hybrid theologies that integrate technology with traditional beliefs, supporting the notion that divine intervention can manifest through various means. *Muporofita* Mubaiwa, a respected JMAS leader, posits that God utilises all available platforms for healing and salvation, adapting divine communication to human contexts. This perspective reflects patterns noted by Campbell (2013), who argues that technological innovations are frequently integrated into spiritual practices as a means of enhancing accessibility to the divine. Conversely, conservative voices within the community caution against these adaptations, arguing that they compromise spiritual integrity. *Madzimai* Chipo articulates concerns that technological shortcuts undermine established sacred protocols instituted by ancestors, reinforcing the view that authentic spirituality demands sacrifice. This dichotomy echoes the concerns raised by Taylor (2007), who emphasizes the tension between modernity and tradition, especially in religious contexts.

Interviews reveal generational divides in theological adaptability. Younger believers tend to embrace digital *mbiya* commerce as a natural extension of contemporary life, while older generations often view the integration of sacred and technological realms with suspicion, even acknowledging practical benefits. This generational schism aligns with studies on intergenerational religious changes and adaptations (Houtman & Aupers, 2007), suggesting that younger generations are more open to reinterpreting spiritual practices within digital frameworks.

Strategies for Revitalisation and Preservation of Mbiya

Amidst commercialisation concerns, church leaders propose various strategies for preserving the spiritual integrity of *mbiya* traditions. These strategies range from radical restructuring efforts aiming to return to communal production models, to moderate reforms focused on enhancing transparency within commercial systems. Other suggestions include educational initiatives designed to empower believers as informed consumers and regulatory frameworks that establish quality standards and accountability measures. Several traditional prophets advocate a return to communal *mbiya* production, suggesting this model could eliminate commercial transactions while still meeting believers' needs through collective efforts. *Muporofita* Jonathan envisions pottery workshops within congregations where skilled members will create *mbiya* as acts of spiritual service rather than profit-driven enterprises. This communal approach not only emphasizes the sacred purpose of *mbiya* but also re-establishes connections to ancestral traditions, echoing the sentiments expressed by Gibson-Graham (2006), who advocates for alternative economic arrangements that prioritize communal over commercial values. In contrast, some church leaders propose reforming, rather than abolishing, *mbiya* commerce, advocating initiatives that promote transparency and ethical guidelines. Bishop Chenjerai calls for fair trade

principles within the *mbiya* market, emphasizing transparent pricing structures that reflect genuine production costs alongside fair compensation for spiritual services. This approach acknowledges commerce's inevitability while demanding ethical standards that distinguish just practices from exploitative ones, a viewpoint supported by Fine and Leopold (1993) in their exploration of social justice within market transactions.

Education emerges as a key strategy to empower believers as informed consumers. Participants suggest educational initiatives, including workshops on digital literacy and practical guidance for identifying fraudulent sellers. Such efforts position believers to exercise agency in their purchases and move away from reliance on prophetic gatekeeping, echoing the findings of McGuire (2008), suggesting that education can be transformational in enhancing spiritual literacy.

Further, some church leaders propose policy and regulatory frameworks to establish quality standards and complaint procedures, allowing for oversight while upholding a commercial aspect. Such structures aim to balance individual freedom with collective protection, ensuring legitimate transactions prevail while minimizing vulnerabilities to fraud. This regulatory approach is supported by the work of Stark and Finke (2000), which underscores the necessity of institutional frameworks in protecting consumers within religious markets. Certain leaders advocate a theological reframing that lowers the emphasis on the necessity of *mbiya*. By framing these items as optional aids to spiritual practice rather than essential components, commercialization pressure may decrease, facilitating a more authentic engagement with faith. This reframing aligns with findings by Engelke (2007), who explores the implications of material culture in religious practices, arguing that the significance of sacred objects often relies on their necessity in mediating divine presence. The diverse strategies proposed for preserving *mbiya* traditions reflect creative and adaptive thinking aimed at reconciling spiritual integrity with economic realities. However, each proposed solution faces implementation challenges, highlighting the complexities of balancing entrenched spiritual traditions with contemporary demands.

Discussion

Symbolic Interactionism and the Social Construction of Sacred Authenticity

The findings highlight that the meanings of *mbiya* are shaped through ongoing social negotiations rather than being inherent to the objects themselves. This aligns well with symbolic interactionist frameworks and illustrates the complex processes whereby communities construct, maintain, and transform sacred meanings. Blumer's (1969) foundational premises that humans act towards things based on the meanings assigned to them, that these meanings arise through social interaction, and that they are continuously modified through interpretive processes, are vividly observable in the *mbiya* practices documented through ethnographic engagement within JMAS. The significance of *mbiya* is not rooted in the material properties of clay but is constructed through shared interpretive frameworks among practitioners. These frameworks are

influenced by prophetic teachings that elucidate spiritual functions, communal rituals, validating testimonies, and everyday practices captured through participatory observation. When prophets assert that unauthorised *mbiya* lack efficacy while only properly consecrated plates possess spiritual power, they engage in what symbolic interactionists refer to as ‘definition of the situation’ (Thomas, 1928). These authoritative proclamations shape collective understanding by establishing interpretive frames through which experiences are codified and evaluated.

These definitional acts yield material impacts; they designate certain clay plates as sacred vessels capable of mediating divine power, while others, despite superficial similarities, are relegated to the status of mere commodities devoid of supernatural potency. The self-fulfilling nature of these definitions becomes evident as believers approach authorized *mbiya* with reverence and unauthorized ones with skepticism, interpreting their subsequent experiences in a manner that validates their initial expectations. Thus, answered prayers can reinforce the efficacy of authorized plates, while unanswered prayers may highlight the deficiencies of unauthorized alternatives, creating a closed interpretive system resistant to disconfirmation. However, meanings are not monolithic or uncontested. Some congregants, who secretly purchase market *mbiya* while publicly affirming authorized channels, showcase what Goffman (1959) described as "impression management." This strategic self-presentation allows them to navigate conflicting demands, affirming publicly while dissenting privately. Their successful prayer experiences using unauthorized *mbiya* lead to private reinterpretations, acknowledging that these plates can be effective. Yet, public conformity helps maintain social acceptance and avoids ecclesiastical sanctions. This dynamic reveals a coexistence of official meanings and private counter-meanings that challenge institutional definitions without necessarily confronting them directly.

The process of privatization further illustrates the complex transformation of meanings as *mbiya* shift from sacred gifts embedded in social relationships to spiritual commodities circulating within market exchanges. This transformation necessitates considerable interpretive labor, producing theological justifications and authentication mechanisms to legitimize the sale of sacred objects. Economic and spiritual meanings become intertwined, challenging the sharp sacred-profane dichotomy.

Postcolonial Dynamics: Indigenous Elites and Spiritual Neo-colonialism

Postcolonial theory offers insights into how the commercialization of *mbiya* mirrors colonial exploitation structures within indigenous religious contexts. JMAS initially emerged as a response to the cultural imperialism of missionary Christianity, reclaiming African spiritual agency. Yet contemporary gatekeeping practices often reproduce colonial dynamics, restricting access to resources and knowledge for indigenous populations and perpetuating dependency relationships (Said, 1978; Spivak, 1988; Bhabha, 1994). Bhabha's (1994) concept of "mimicry" is critical for understanding prophetic gatekeeping dynamics. While prophets may emulate the institutional controls of missionary Christianity by monopolizing spiritual authority and

restricting access, they introduce distinctly African elements, such as the material significance of *mbiya* and community engagement structures. This mimicry-with-difference produces hybrid power dynamics that resist binary categorizations of either liberation from colonial influence or new forms of oppression.

Spivak's (1988) idea of the subaltern is pertinent in addressing the economically marginalized congregants whose concerns about affordability and accessibility remain voiceless amidst the church's gatekeeping. When the prophets declare regulations about the pricing and sourcing of *mbiya* with threats of spiritual repercussions against non-compliance, these voices are systematically silenced. It is not that the subaltern cannot speak; rather, structural inequalities render their grievances unrecognized or ignored, often being dismissed as spiritual rebellion. Mbembe's (2001) concept of "entanglement" elucidates how all actors, prophets, congregants, vendors, and church institutions are mutually implicated in the reproduction of commercialization. Prophets benefit economically from gatekeeping yet face pressures from competing spiritual entrepreneurs and a well-informed congregation. Conversely, congregants experience exploitation while enabling it through their purchases, which validates prophetic authority and reinforces market demand.

Postcolonial analysis further underscores how *mbiya* practices can act as sites of cultural persistence amid the homogenizing tendencies of globalization. By emphasizing the spiritual superiority of local clay over imported materials, JMAS communities assert cultural sovereignty. Interestingly, commercialization can foster this persistence by enabling the translation of cultural distinctiveness into economic resources, which creates incentives for preservation.

Digital Religion and Platform Capitalism's Spiritual Dimensions

The rise of platforms like WhatsApp illustrates how technological features align with the requirements of *mbiya* commerce. WhatsApp allows low data usage, offline messaging, privacy, and voice notes, catering to users with limited literacy or access. Meanwhile, Facebook serves as a public space for marketing and community engagement. This interplay of platforms represents a duality where expanded access and convenience conflict with the risk of diminished quality control as traditional oversight dissipates. Participants demonstrate ambivalence toward digital platforms: while they increase access and participation in spiritual economies, they also create challenges regarding accountability and spiritual integrity. Helland's (2005) distinction between ‘religion online’ and ‘online religion’ proves unstable; WhatsApp groups evolve from mere information-sharing to participatory ritual spaces. This reflects a fluidity in digital religiosity that defies strict binary classifications.

Analysing *mbiya* commercialization through the lens of comparative religious economies reveals both unique patterns and broader dynamics seen across various traditions. Similar to items like Catholic sacramentals or Islamic religious objects, *mbiya* inhabit liminal spaces between goods regarded as sacred and those seen as commercial products (Zaidman, 2003) However, distinct aspects of *mbiya* warrant

focused analysis rather than generic categorization. Unlike mass-produced rosaries, *mbiya* markets are personalized, with prophetic gatekeepers maintaining control. This creates dependency relationships that contrast sharply with the more anonymous nature of Catholic sacramental commerce. The multifaceted ritual functions of *mbiya,* serving as prayer conduits, spiritual tools, and vessels, further enhances their intrinsic value within spiritual economies. Research in Tanzania shows how commodification can create spiritual economies of inequality, where economic capacity dictates spiritual access (Lindhardt, 2015). However, while Tanzanian faith practices often require ongoing purchases, *mbiya,* once acquired, typically do not necessitate replenishment, which restricts continual economic extraction by prophets. Despite this, prophets maintain demand through product differentiation and ritual innovations, highlighting a nuanced interplay between commodification and spiritual necessity.

From the prophetic perspective, gatekeeping serves to uphold spiritual integrity against fraudulent practices that could endanger believers' faith. This can be framed as a legitimate response to protect the sanctity of *mbiya,* with commissions paid to vendors seen as just compensation for spiritual labor. However, congregants view this differently, arguing that economic marginalization creates unjust barriers to spiritual access. Theological critiques of commercialization raise concerns about idolatry, suggesting that attributing salvific power to material artefacts contradicts the notion of divine grace as a gift. Echoing Protestant Reformation critiques, this reflects deep-seated apprehensions that commodifying sacred objects may lead to transactional religious practices. Indigenous perspectives further complicate these critiques, challenging Western assumptions about the relationship between materiality and divinity. If African cosmologies affirm the necessity of material mediation for divine presence, then dismissing *mbiya* commerce risks imposing Euro-centric theological frameworks onto African expressions of faith (Mbiti, 1990; Magesa, 1997). The challenge lies in discerning authentic practices honoring African spiritual traditions from exploitative practices perverting them.

Conclusion

This research underscores the creative spiritual agency and theological sophistication of JMAS communities while advocating for economic justice against prevalent exploitative practices. *Mbiya* represent profound theological insights into materiality's role in facilitating divine presence and must be approached with respect rather than dismissal. African innovations in theology and spirituality provide critical insights into the negotiation between tradition and modernity, sacred and commercial spheres. The ongoing evolution of JMAS communities, balanced alongside economic justice, significantly shapes the broader landscape of African Christianity as one of the world’s most dynamic religious regions. Economic dimensions and power transformations reveal digitalisation's paradoxical effects that resist simple evaluation as either progressive or regression, requiring instead a nuanced appreciation for how benefits and harms distribute unevenly across different social positions. Digital platforms expand access whilst weakening quality assurance. They create opportunities for

previously marginalised individuals, democratising spiritual resources whilst enabling new forms of exploitation and fragmenting institutional authority that provided some protection, however imperfect. These patterns complicate both celebratory accounts of digital democratisation that ignore new inequalities and vulnerabilities, and critical narratives of total commercialisation that miss genuine empowerment experienced by believers liberated from oppressive gatekeeping.

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Towards preservation and safeguarding cultural heritage for socio-economic development: A case of Pupu battlefield monument in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Cultural heritage plays a critical role in shaping national identity and fostering community cohesion. The research seeks to examine how preservation of the Pupu battlefield monument can contribute to fostering a sense of local identity, social cohesion, and national pride among the people of Zimbabwe. It also seeks to explore effective preservation and maintenance strategies for safeguarding the Pupu battlefield monument and its surrounding environment. The research examines the potential economic benefits that can be derived from the monument and also how specific tourism products can be developed. The research will also attempt to establish how the battlefield monument's interpretation of liberation heritage contributes to broader national dialogues on nation-building and historical justice in post-colonial Zimbabwe. The paper adopts a qualitative research approach, which ensures understanding community perspectives and social values. A case study research design was used to focus specifically on the Pupu battlefield monument allowing for in-depth, contextual understanding of the preservation efforts and their local impacts. Semi-structured interviews with a diverse range of stake holders was used. Findings indicate that the preservation of the battlefield monument can contribute to restoring cultural pride and national identity especially in a post-colonial context if managed inclusively. Preservation efforts could also create local employment opportunities and stimulate economic activities. The research found that preservation and safeguarding of the Pupu battlefield monument, a significant site of liberation heritage in Zimbabwe, is critical for both social cohesion and economic development.

Keywords: Cultural heritage, Socio-economic development, Preservation, Safeguarding

Introduction

The Pupu Battlefield Memorial Monument is situated 52 km east of Lupane town, Matabeleland North province of Zimbabwe. The battlefield monument site is of national and cultural significance to Zimbabwe. It is a symbol of African resistance to colonialism, a cornerstone of the nation's contemporary efforts to reclaim and preserve its multiple historical narratives. The site serves as a profound reminder of the bravery and sacrifice of the Ndebele warriors and their leaders in their resistance to colonialism. The battlefield monument stands at the site of the Anglo-Ndebele War of 3 December 1893. The battle, together with the Mbembesi battle, popularly known as the Gadade battle, was a major turning point in the Ndebele resistance to British colonial occupation. The Ndebele people

view the battle as a significant moment of Ndebele resistance and victory, and it is part of their cultural heritage and identity. The battle led to the end of King Lobhengula's rule as he fled and sought refuge in Barotseland (Zambia) under Chief Mpezeni (Nyathi, 2023). Before his escape during the battle, the King's last resting place was the ironwood tree (*Umtswili*). It is under this tree that the King was last seen on 4 December 1893 under the guard of the Babambeni regiment commanded by Chief Dakamela. The shrine and the tree are significant historical and cultural heritage sites of memory that give value and pride to the surrounding communities and the Ndebele at large. This pride that the Ndebele have about this heritage highlights that patrimony, both tangible and intangible, is vital for the socio-economic development of communities because it fosters social cohesion, promotes the preservation of traditional skills and knowledge, and cultural tourism.

Literature review

Cultural heritage is widely understood as encompassing both material and non-material elements passed down from previous generations, such as monuments, customs, and historical environments (Stephenson, 2023; Kafadar, 2021). Safeguarding this heritage entails conserving these resources for current and future use while preserving their original significance and integrity (Mteti, Mpambije & Manyerere, 2025). Within African settings, the preservation of heritage is closely linked to processes of identity reformation and sustenance.

Historically, many cultural heritage sites in Zimbabwe were managed through traditional knowledge systems and community norms, but the colonial governments introduced legislative frameworks for the preservation of these heritage sites, which did not involve local people. In support of this argument, Rukara (2025) asserts that official heritage management systems have frequently been ineffective in safeguarding archaeological sites across many regions of Africa. Communities residing near these heritage locations have played a crucial role in preserving culturally significant sites through their traditional custodianship practices. However, these local systems often get limited acknowledgement by state heritage management authorities. As noted by Rukara (2025), although local communities played a leading role in preservation efforts, the National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe (NMMZ) Act 25: 11 does not formally recognise or guarantee their central involvement in the preservation of heritage resources. This has serious consequences since the heritage sites are exposed to vandalism. At the same time, this has the effect of weakening traditional knowledge systems. However, one issue with engaging local communities is that a sense of ownership may lead them to believe they have the authority to bypass established heritage regulations (Zihove, 2025). This may lead to conflict between state-led preservation organisations and the locals.

The neglect of heritage sites is not unique to the Pupu Battlefield monument only, but there are some heritage sites, like the Gadade Battlefield, which have no signage to direct

visitors. The National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe (NMMZ), which is responsible for managing these sites, is struggling with limited funding and an inherited colonial style of managing heritage sites, which has prevented communities from owning and using them (Pwiti & Ndoro, 1999). The colonial administration formulated legislation that disconnected the indigenous communities from their heritage, which was believed to be the source of their identity and pride. Some of the heritage sites were declared world heritage sites without considering the spiritual values accorded to them by the host indigenous communities (Mawere, Mubaya & Sagiya, 2013). The government's limited budget allocation to the NMMZ has resulted in inadequate resources for maintenance and preservation of cultural heritage sites (Makuvaza & Makuvaza, 2013). The preservation of cultural heritage sites in Zimbabwe has challenges involving historical legacies and economic dynamics, which include a lack of funding.

The preservation of cultural heritage is now widely acknowledged as an important driver for socio-economic progress, especially in post-colonial contexts where societies aim to restore identity, foster tourism growth, and empower local communities. Brooks (2011) argues that heritage forms a central pillar of tourism, and it is crucial for the tourism industry to actively engage in promoting preservation efforts whenever possible. There is a need to ensure the safeguarding, preservation, and effective management of the diverse range of heritage sites and cultural practices. The preservation of cultural heritage will enable the reconstruction of broken social communities, rediscover their identities, and connect the past with the present and the future.

The literature review underscores the shift in academic thinking towards a more inclusive, community-centred management paradigm. Successful preservation and safeguarding efforts, therefore, depend on reconciling so-called scientific preservation methods with local community interests and ensuring that heritage benefits the people living in the nearby host communities.

Theoretical framework

The research is informed by decolonial theoretical framework, which is critical for understanding the preservation of cultural heritage sites. The framework challenges the dominant Western epistemologies and centers on indigenous perspectives and knowledges in heritage preservation (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). The decolonial theory informs preservation strategies that empower local communities to take control of the monument's preservation, prioritize local perspectives and narratives in interpreting the Pupu Battlefield site's history. The colonial narrative treats African resistance fighters as rebellious subjects, but the decolonial theory places them at the centre of history. The local memory practices become legitimate sources compared to written colonial archives. The theory re-contextualizes Africans as strategists and thinkers who resisted colonialism in diverse ways, from armed struggle to cultural preservation. The theory challenges colonialism's influence on culture and advocates for reclaiming African narratives (Ngugi,

1986). Decoloniality objects to the imposition of Western heritage management practices that often focus solely on the physical aspect of a site (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). Western heritage management systems ignore the spiritual aspects of these sites. It is relevant to this research since it also challenges colonial narratives around the Pupu battle that honor only the fallen British soldiers and praise them as heroes when they actually were invaders.

Methodology

The research employed a qualitative design approach to explore the cultural heritage preservation and socio-economic development in Pupu. According to Chivanga and Monyai (2021), a qualitative approach enables the researcher to obtain a deeper understanding of the phenomena under research. A case study research design was adopted, which is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context (Yin, 2003). The research design provided an in-depth enquiry into the preservation of cultural heritage for the socio-economic development of the Pupu community.

The research used purposive sampling to select participants for interviews from the community. A sample is a smaller group that is used to conclude a larger population (Hossan, Mansor & Jaharuddin, 2023). Purposive sampling enables the deliberate selection of participants who will give information that answers the research questions. The research targeted 20 participants with varying roles in the Pupu community. The participants were selected on the basis of their responsibility in the community, and these included community elders who include women, some youths, and community leaders, like village heads.

The data was collected using in-depth interviews. An in-depth interview is a face-to-face interaction between the researcher and the respondent, which seeks to get the respondent's views on life experiences (Taylor, Bogdan & DeVault, 2016). The in-depth interview allowed for the possibility of new questions emerging during the interview. Open-ended questions were used, and they enabled the respondents to provide in-depth responses about their experiences and perspectives on the Pupu monument. The open-ended questions facilitated probing so that clarity was given on the responses. The respondents were asked to give their opinions about the preservation of the Pupu monument and also the *Umtswili* tree that is at the site. They were also asked to give their views on the socio-economic role that the monument could play in the development context of the local area.

Data Analysis procedure

It involves examination and interpretation of non-numerical data. The process is important since it enables better decision-making and the discovery of meaningful insights. Data collected through in-depth and open-ended interviews was analyzed using a descriptive qualitative analysis method. The goal of this process was clearly defined through the formulation of specific research questions. The data collection method used was reliable, and the collected data were relevant to the defined objectives. The collected data from interviews was compiled, and then the researcher read the notes several times so as to gain familiarity with the content. The research employed thematic qualitative analysis, which involves searching for themes from the views and experiences of the people as supported by Dawadi (2020). The collected data was cleaned by removing duplicate records, correcting errors, and inconsistencies. Clean data ensures the integrity and accuracy of results.

Ethical considerations

Research ethics are principles that guide researchers when carrying out research. Ethics in research refer to the norms and values that give directions regarding data collection and analysis (Mirza, Bellalem & Mirza, 2023). The purpose and objectives of the research were discussed and explained to each participant. Confidentiality and anonymity of participants were ensured, and only information relevant to the study was requested. The researcher ensured that the participants were not exposed to physical and psychological harm during the time of the research. The respondents were fairly treated before, during, and after they participated in the research, and their views were equally respected.

Findings and discussion

The findings of this research support the view that the preservation of cultural heritage is key to social and economic development.

Identity and resistance

The Pupu Battlefield monument enhances social cohesion, identity, and a sense of belonging for the local communities. It does this through the preservation of cultural heritage sites, historical and cultural continuity, and fostering social cohesion and identity (Ekwelem, Okafor & Ukwoma, 2011). Pupu connects local communities to their past and fosters collective community identity, rooted in the past, and continuing into the present and the foreseeable future. Just like the Battle of Isandlwana in 1879, which is deeply rooted in traditional Zulu history (Murray, 2012), the Pupu battle is also rooted in the history of the Ndebele people, serving as a source of pride and community heritage. The battlefield gives a sense of continuity, enduring legacy, and belonging. It offers communities the opportunity to share cultural experiences, connecting the past to the present and future generations as people from different backgrounds interact during annual cultural activities at the site.

The significance of the Pupu Battlefield is that it is a symbol of resistance to British imperialism and is thus a commemoration of a decisive Ndebele victory against a technologically superior British South Africa Company (BSAC) force in the Anglo-Ndebele war of 1893. This led to the complete annihilation of Major Allan Wilson Patrol by the Ndebele army under Mtshane Khumalo, though some oral history sources dispute this. From the interviews, it emerged that the army was commanded by Fusi Khanye. The battle demonstrated a fierce determination to resist colonial encroachment, sending a powerful message that the indigenous people would fight for their land and sovereignty at all costs. This battle is comparable to the Battle of Isandlwana (1879) in South Africa, where the British army was embarrassingly defeated by the Zulu army (Williamson, 2019; Murray, 2012). The battles of Isandlwana and Pupu stand as a testament to the fierce resistance of African kingdoms against colonialism. The battles also highlight the devastating consequences of colonialism, including the loss of life and culture, because they highpoint the devastating effects of colonialism that led to mass movements in southern Africa. The Pupu Battlefield is also significant because it symbolizes the bravery, sacrifice, and resilience of those who fought in the war and provides a platform for reflection, remembrance, and commemoration, allowing people to pay their respects to those who fought and died in defense of freedom from colonial rule. The site serves as a testament to the country's continuous struggle for independence, linking the war of 1893 to the eventual liberation of the country in 1980.

Indigenous people have spiritual values attached to heritage sites (Mawere, Sagiya & Mubaya, 2012). The communities around the Pupu Battlefield monument are spiritually attached to it, as evidenced by traditional ceremonies conducted there, where people go and do rituals at the *Umtswili* tree whenever there is a catastrophe in the area. The tree plays a significant part in the history of the country since it provides evidence of the fierce intensity of the battle by bullet pockmarks on the tree and others in the vicinity. Also of significance is the road from Emthanyelweni next to the Tshangani (Shangani) River, which passes through the battlefield right up to the *Umtswili* tree where the King was last seen. The route has been preserved by pulling tree branches during some traditional ceremonies so that it remains visible to this day. It is important to take note that construction of homes and farming on the battlefield grounds is prohibited since graves of the Ndebele warriors are scattered all over the area, because in African Ubuntu culture it is a taboo to tamper with graves.

The battlefield is a testimony to the composition of the Ndebele state which constituted other ethnic groups like the Rozvi, during the 19th century. The song *Kudala Kwakunganje Kwakubusa uMambo lo Mzilikazi*, sung during ceremonies at Pupu memorials, depicts the nature of the Ndebele state under King Mzilikazi. The song nullifies the narrative which has been propagated regarding Ndebele-Shona relations during the precolonial era. According to Nyathi (2023), the regiments that participated in the

Pupu/Tshangani battle were not comprised of purely Ndebele men but also men from other neighboring chiefdoms like Chief Bere and Nhema, among others.

The Pupu Battlefield historical site is a national shrine that embodies the national spirit of resistance, resilience, and the ongoing quest for historical truth in Zimbabwe. Its significance lies in its power to unite the nation, educate the public about its heritage, and provide a lasting memory of the brave ancestors who stood against imperialism. The battlefield historical site serves as an essential tangible link to the past, ensuring the sacrifices of the Ndebele warriors are remembered and celebrated for generations to come.

One of the respondents said, "*Indawo le ilakho ukuthuthukisa umnotho wesigaba ngokwethekelelwa yizivakatshi lokubukisa*" (The monument has the potential to drive economic growth through cultural heritage tourism). This view is supported by Nkwanyana (2018), who alludes that cultural tourism can empower local communities economically. Women and youths may get income opportunities through selling hand crafts, traditional clothing, and food products. One of the village leaders emphasized the need to have the monument transformed into a tourist attraction where cultural activities are showcased.

The establishment of cultural villages has the potential to boost tourism as visitors from different parts of the world may have an urge to have a firsthand experience with significant traces of history. In KoMpisi cultural village in Victoria Falls, for instance, villagers provide entertainment, supply food products, and they have been able to exhibit their cultural handicrafts, thereby economically benefiting themselves (Runyowa, 2017). The Murewa cultural village in Murewa, Mashonaland East Province, has yokes, pottery, and other artifacts displayed, providing tourists with information that helps them to understand the way of life of the Murewa people. The village has a library, which is essential for the transmission of cultural heritage and at the same time promotes and sustains a reading culture (Chigwada & Chiparausha, 2015). It is important to note that apart from equipping local people with knowledge, cultural villages promote the preservation of cultural resources. Moswete, Saarinen, and Monare (2015) allude that the concept of cultural villages fosters a sense of pride in individuals and communities about their culture. However, as noted by Chigwada and Chiparausha (2015), cultural villages have challenges which are threatening their survival. The lack of financial resources affects maintenance and development of facilities and marketing efforts. Another major challenge is conflict over cultural practices caused by religious differences. Conflict between religious groups like Christianity, Islam, and African indigenous religions may lead to selective representation of culture and this affects the performances of some traditional practices.

Cultural tourism may present employment opportunities for people in communities around the Pupu Battlefield site by selling cultural products and services to the travelers, thereby

generating income. Local communities should turn cultural heritage resources into marketable and profitable products and these include lifestyles, values, traditions of people and local craft products. (Nkwanyana, 2018). These can be showcased through activities such as festivals, traditional dances, rituals, theatre, and traditional music. Local people can be employed as tour guides because of their knowledge about the locality and traditions of the local people. Revenue generated through travellers' spending empowers communities economically (Mteti, Mpambije & Manyerere, 2025). Apart from improving the lives of people in local communities, cultural heritage tourism helps in the revival of disappearing cultural items and also the development of infrastructure in rural areas (Monkgogi, Mbaiwa & Chanda, 2015). There is also a need to revive the traditional dishes, which may strengthen and promote the local food industry and minimise reliance on foreign non-indigenous culinary products. However, cultural heritage tourism affects the authenticity of cultural heritage as it leads to the commercialization of some cultural practices for example indigenous dances and songs performed at Great Zimbabwe. According to Gweverende (2022), visitors to Great Zimbabwe do no encounter the authentic reality of the culture directly, but instead engage with staged versions of indigenous dances. These performances are separated from their original communal and cultural settings, giving tourists the chance to observe dance and musical displays that have been removed from their traditional context.

Local communities may be displaced to pave way for cultural tourism (Mteti, Mpambije & Manyerere, 2025). This may lead to local people losing access to spaces that were once central to their lives and cultural practices thereby displacing them socially and culturally. Some traditional practices, artifacts, and sacred sites may be sold to tourists. The turning of elements of cultural heritage or spiritual practices into services for profit in the context of tourism leads to conflict between indigenous communities and those seeking economic opportunities. This push for commercialization or commodification of cultural heritage can lead to land dispossession. This involves compulsory acquisition of land by the government for tourism infrastructure, and communities may be relocated to less desirable areas.

The desire to develop the Pupu Battlefield monument as a tourist destination is a form of commodification that may lead to clashes with the local community's view of the site as a sacred shrine requiring specific cultural reverence rather than market-based development. The government's engagement in constructing the monument focuses on the liberation heritage narrative. Critics argue that this aligns with the government's patriotic history agenda to foster a common national identity and downplay serious issues like Gukurahundi and accusations of political violence by the Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (Andersson, 2025; CITE, 2024; Ranger, 2004). As noted by Bitusikova (2021), the promotion of heritage sites by the government plays a significant role in advancing political agendas. Using heritage for political reasons may be presumed as marginalizing specific expressions, history, and spirituality (Fontein, 2010, Mapara,

2026). This leads to a contested heritage where state ideology takes precedence over local cultural aspirations.

Despite controversies associated with government involvement, students from institutions of learning may be poised to benefit greatly by getting more historical information through visits to this place than by learning from textbooks. Schools will be encouraged to embark on tours to the Pupu Battlefield monument, which may present students with a deep understanding of history by having firsthand experience or information about the past that they cannot get from the classroom. Marcus, Levine, and Greneir (2012) concur with this as they assert that students get first-hand history, which will influence their thinking. Information about their local community will be available to them, and touring will help generate more interest in the background of their place. Visits by students to places like the Pupu Battlefield monument may help in building the Zimbabwean identity (Stolare, Ludvigsson & Trenter, 2021). The monument may serve as an illustration that the community has a past that is associated with the liberation war narrative, which they read about in books, and also understand that it took brave men and women who sacrificed their lives. It is not only students from local communities that may benefit from touring Pupu, but other learners from around the country and beyond. Tours may present students with firsthand information about early resistance to colonial occupation, and this may help correct the revisionist historical narrative that the first resistance was in 1896-97, while in fact it was in 1893. The visit to the monument may generate a lot of enthusiasm since it is the site where early resistance to colonial occupation began. These tours may enable the students to appreciate the significance of cultural heritage preservation and also foster a sense of pride, ownership, and belonging.

The proposed construction of a leisure center by Lupane State University at Bubi-Lupane Dam should also position the institution as a significant stakeholder in the tourism industry. The leisure and recreation center should offer services such as tour guiding so that heritage sites like the Pupu monument are regarded as the destination of choice in the district.

Kusile Rural District Council may benefit from the monument by constructing lodges near the memorial, which may offer tour guiding services. Tour guiding will provide tourists with directions to different sections of the site, giving insights into the battlefield's past and helping visitors appreciate its cultural and historical significance. Lodges that may be constructed near this battlefield may significantly boost tourism as vacationers may be prompted to stay for a long time, thereby increasing their spending. These lodges should be designed in a way that reflects local architectural styles and use local materials. To protect the monument from potential destruction by human traffic, there should be clear and well-designed pathways and viewing platforms, which will help in controlling the wandering of people.

Community agency

It was also noted that heritage sites such as the Pupu Battlefield monument are interconnected with the identities and cultures of the local communities, such that preservation efforts require their participation. Community engagement may lead to an increased sense of ownership of their cultural heritage, and they may feel responsible for its preservation (Chirikure & Pwiti, 2008). Active community involvement came out in discussions as the key to long-term preservation since initiatives such as local festivals and art projects can bring residents together. This fosters a sense of community and pride (Ndoro, 2001; Mawere, 2014). This has a likelihood of increasing the successful implementation of preservation projects. Communities should be involved in their heritage management through activities like being tour guides and curio vendors. They should also be allowed to conduct their rituals at the protected sites for their spiritual and economic benefits (Chirikure & Pwiti, 2008). This has been the case with Great Zimbabwe, where descendants of the Mugabe clan use their knowledge of stone masonry to restore the collapsed walls and perform traditional ceremonies on the site. The efforts to engage communities in the conservation of cultural heritage sites have largely been impeded by a colonial hangover, which discourages the recognition of indigenous cultural practices, which are very important for cultural tourism and sustainable community development (Mteti, Mpambije & Manyerere, 2025). Access to heritage sites by the local communities helps in restoring damaged confidence (Ndoro, 2001). When communities can access, engage with, and interpret their own heritage sites, they re-establish links with their past and cultural practices. This process strengthens a renewed sense of identity that may have been distorted by colonial representations.

Education and awareness are key in preserving the rich legacy of the Pupu Battlefield by educating young people about the importance of this historical site. This can be done by involving local communities in preservation efforts, and making it possible for the site to be accessible for future generations. Like in other memorial sites, for instance, the Trep Tower Park in Berlin, Germany, the site is free to the members of the public (Alexander, 2020). As alluded to by Stone (2004), people who know about their heritage would understand the need to protect it. Community members should be made aware of the significance of this historical site as a repository of their collective memory and identity, a sense of continuity linking the past to the present, and a tourist attraction. Students will be made to understand local culture and how it is different from other cultures around the world.

The digitization of the Pupu Battlefield historical site is necessary since it may preserve the location for those who are far and for future generations. Platforms such as websites and Google search will make the battlefield accessible online to a global audience (Koiki-Owoyel, Alabi & Egbunu, 2020). This will help in preserving the Pupu monument and prevent the loss of its value through disasters such as severe climate change and a lot of

human traffic. This, therefore, implies that for digitization to successfully preserve and safeguard the Pupu historical site, there is a need to include the contribution of local cultural heritage custodians when designing preservation frameworks. Digitization as a complementary strategy in heritage preservation has the potential to provide documentation solutions and ensure that battlefield cultural heritage or historical sites withstand any unpleasant situations for future generations.

Museums, just like other preservation strategies, serve as repositories of culture and historical narratives, hence the relevance of setting up a museum at the Pupu Battlefield. The establishment of a museum at Pupu may help in providing a connection to history that books cannot provide. Museums should involve local communities and other heritage stakeholders in the organization of exhibitions (Baba & Ghouati, 2025). The museum should clearly explain the background of the conflict commemorated and also include weapons, regalia of warriors, and archaeological remains found near or at the site. This idea may help in making the Pupu community to be actively involved in the preservation of the battlefield's historical significance, since this may make them feel that they are part of the battlefield and its co-owners.

The establishment of a cultural village on the periphery of the monument may preserve the Pupu historical site since it will reflect local culture and relevance to the battlefield. The village will showcase traditional structures, handicrafts, music, cultural practices, and dance, hence they are constructed to preserve and promote the heritage of a community (Surata, Sumartana & Utama, 2024). This can be described as a structure resembling a rural area that reflects social culture, customs, lifestyles, and traditional architecture of an indigenous community (Dewi, Astawa, Siwantara & Mataram, 2017). Cultural products, which include traditional cuisine, cultural activities, and education on local community traditions and customs, may be provided in these villages.

Climate Vulnerability

Another observation was that the Pupu Battlefield site is facing a new threat, which is climate change. Climate change poses threats to the preservation of the Pupu Battlefield site, especially the *Mtswili* tree. Heavy rainfall and flooding have caused gully erosion and damage near the tree, threatening its existence. According to some respondents, comprehensive preservation strategies must be adopted with a view to controlling water flow. They pointed out that the construction of diversion ditches will divert runoff water away from the gully, which is fast approaching the tree, and this will reduce the amount and speed of water entering the gully. As noted by Lakew and Belayneh (2012), the diversion of surface runoff will direct water away from the gully head. Apart from diversion ditches, erosion can be minimized by constructing a check dam across the gully channel using locally available, low-cost materials. Cost-effective check dams can be constructed using sandbags, brushwood, and stones (Hailu, Belayneh, Muuz & Baye, 2015). The

check dam will trap sediment and facilitate the establishment of permanent vegetation cover behind the wall of the check dam.

Gully filling can also be used to halt the extension of the gully towards the *Umtswili* tree and the surrounding vegetation. This strategy involves depositing soil into the gully using bulldozers. Lakew and Belayneh (2012) recommend the use of a compactor or roller for compaction. After filling the gully with soil, grasses like vetiver, and other plant species can be planted to promote sediment deposition, thereby fostering vegetation growth and keeping the soil intact and discouraging water flow.

Conclusion

The study has noted that the preservation and safeguarding of cultural heritage in Zimbabwe is a critical engine for sustainable socio-economic development. The proposed preservation strategies at the Pupu Battlefield monument are aimed at building national identity, restoring cultural pride, promoting social cohesion, and ensuring a historical narrative is never forgotten. Preserving the Pupu monument requires a collective effort from all stakeholders. Implementing preservation efforts such as engaging local communities, promoting sustainable tourism, promoting education, and raising awareness may guarantee the long-term preservation of this significant historical site. It is important to protect and preserve this cultural heritage site for future generations, and the battlefield is a significant part of Zimbabwe's rich history and identity.

Recommendations

- The government should establish visitor and resident contribution schemes for visitors to donate an additional amount to preservation and community development initiatives.
- National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe should create local membership of heritage schemes that will allow residents to contribute financially and volunteer their time.
- The government through the Ministry of Home Affairs and Cultural Heritage should update heritage legislation so that it aligns with the constitution of Zimbabwe and international frameworks to provide an enabling legal basis for community engagement and empowerment in heritage management.
- The Ministry of Home Affairs and Cultural Heritage should ensure that heritage preservation projects should be aligned with the National Development Strategy 2 (NDS 2) so that they get national funding.
- The National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe should adopt integrated approaches to find solutions to climate-induced threats like gully erosion, which is threatening the *Umtswili* tree at the Pupu Battlefield site. Some indigenous

methods like planting drought-resistant grasses, stone, and brushwood, which will slow water flow, trap sediment, and encourage natural regeneration, should be considered and adopted in the preservation of the heritage site.

- The National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe should ensure that the voices of the local people are the starting point for any sustainable development strategy and that the traditional knowledge systems are respected and integrated into preservation plans. They should not be taken as cheap human capital but as equal partners. This will help in minimizing theft, vandalism, and other acts that may defile the sites.

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Indigenous Languages as Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Global Specialised Domains: A Case of Zimbabwe

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Abstract

The study explores the role of the Zimbabwean Indigenous languages as intangible cultural heritage in specialised global fields. It notes that the hegemonic nature of English has relegated indigenous languages to a marginalised position in key areas, hindering their ability to pass on cultural knowledge to future generations, thus slowing down global participation of their users and threatening the existence of the vital cultural heritage. This inquiry is grounded in the Sankofa principles and the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, with a focus on safeguarding and promoting languages and customs. Key informants such as indigenous language speakers, cultural specialists, teachers, learners, and elderly community members were purposively selected to participate in this study after obtaining their informed consent. The study used the qualitative research design. Thematic analysis was employed to analyse data that were gathered through interviews, focus groups, and document analysis. The findings revealed the need to develop terminology and customised digital tools for the Indigenous languages so that they remain relevant in the global specialised fields. The study recommends collaboration of relevant stakeholders in the adoption of practical strategies towards language raising in specialised domains and the use of the indigenous languages together with English to enable the users to participate in global developmental issues. Furthermore, to break the dominance of English, the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPSE) and the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, Innovation, Science and Technology, as gatekeepers of quality education, should treat indigenous languages as tools for administration, technology, and economic power.

Keywords: Indigenous languages, intangible cultural heritage, global village, specialised fields, marginalization

Introduction and Background

The study interrogates the role of constitutionally recognised indigenous languages as important components of Zimbabwe's intangible cultural heritage within the specialised global landscape. These languages are: Chewa, ChiBarwe, Kalanga, Koisan, Nambya, Ndau, Shangani, Shona, Sign language, Sotho, Tonga, Tswana, Venda, and Xhosa (Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No. 20) ACT 2013). The study analyses Shona terms from *Dura reMazwi eSainzi* (2024), one of the languages, to demonstrate that indigenous languages are vital tools for knowledge transmission in specialised fields and to highlight the impact of global influences on their preservation, promotion, and

development. The investigation of the role and the position of indigenous languages in specialised fields seeks to find possible ways to safeguard and promote them, ensuring their relevance and use in the 21st century and beyond. Some of these languages are spoken in neighbouring countries such as South Africa, Mozambique, and Botswana (Magwa, 2021). Examining the history of indigenous languages provides the necessary context for understanding their modern use in specialised domains, thereby underscoring the urgency of reclaiming and revitalising them in contemporary society. Despite efforts made by the colonial government to promote indigenous languages literature through the Literature Bureau, and literacy in local languages through book policy and media, the literature was highly censored, resulting in local languages playing a peripheral role in official domains. European languages, notably English, became the dominant language of education, administration, and communication. The indigenous languages were treated as "native" or "tribal" languages, and their use in formal settings was discouraged, and it attracted heavy punishment in schools. This peripheral treatment had a profound impact on the identity and culture of the local people.

Zimbabwe's post-colonial language policy has historically marginalised indigenous languages in key areas. Notably, the Government of Zimbabwe has constitutionally recognised the importance of indigenous languages for national identity and cultural preservation. Mazuruse (2019) avers that the Constitution of Zimbabwe (2013), explicitly and categorically states that African languages are to be taught in schools and they must become written languages and be used without discrimination in all spheres of national life. Surprisingly, little effort has been made to raise the status of the indigenous languages, as evidenced by the continued use of English as a medium of instruction and administration in influential domains of society, over four decades after the attainment of political independence. To support the above notion, Magwa (2021) and Mudenda (2021) posit that the government has not yet made any budgetary allocation since 2013 when it pronounced the official recognition of these languages. It is against this background that Gondo (2013) argues that African languages should be removed from the periphery and brought into the core of things with regards to the everyday life of their speakers, including specialised domains. In 2003, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) adopted the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), which recognises the importance of intangible cultural heritage in promoting cultural diversity and creativity, and Zimbabwe is a signatory to this convention. Intangible Cultural Heritage refers to the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, and skills that communities, groups, and individuals recognise as part of their cultural heritage. Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) includes traditions, expressions, and knowledge passed down from one generation to the next, such as language, music, dance, and crafts. This heritage is transmitted from generation to generation and is constantly recreated by communities and groups to suit their environment (UNESCO, 2003). This paper argues that language is a vital part of cultural

heritage and emphasises the need to adopt technology and develop digital tools to promote the indigenous languages in specialised fields, fostering identity and continuity.

Literature review

The study of related literature has shown that the outcry for the digitisation and safeguarding of indigenous content can only be understood from a historical context. The current literature review traces the historical status of indigenous languages to show how colonial policies have necessitated the current push for linguistic safeguarding in contemporary society. The paper conducts an in-depth investigation into the specific historical background of the Indigenous language. This case-specific historical analysis grounds the general scholarly discourse and enables readers to grasp why indigenous languages speakers are actively advocating for their preservation as an intangible cultural heritage. Cultural heritage is an expression of the ways of living developed by a community and passed down from generation to generation. It includes but is not limited to customs, practices, places, objects, artistic expression, and values (UNESCO, 2003). Language as an intangible heritage is the vehicle of communication and the carrier of culture (Ngugi, 1981), and these two aspects separate humans from any other living creature. Language and culture places human beings at a higher pedestal in the animal kingdom when compared to others (Gondo, 2019; Magwa, 2019). Language helps its speakers to express their feelings, fears, world views, and the philosophies of life they value most. Ngugi (1981) reiterated that culture is a way of life that is also a social derivative, associated with the history of people and reflecting the things that are specific to them.

African languages in the precolonial era

During the precolonial era, language traditions like proverbs, songs, folktales, taboos, riddles, totems, and games for education formed a key part of their Indigenous Knowledge System (IKS) and cultural heritage. These traditions were part of the African curriculum. The essence of the African traditional education was to impart positive values to the African people so as to live harmoniously and at peace with each other (Gondo & Nyoni, 2019). During the precolonial era, IKS could be tapped into as a powerful tool in imparting good behaviour and character development in children (Viriri, 2025). Elders emphasised the punishing of social deviants and the rewarding of good behaviour. This helped in bringing social cohesion in communities as people tried to live according to the social demands of their culture. Before colonialism, IKS served as a tool used by community elders to impart moral values among the young, ensuring that unity, respect, and appreciation of each other is enhanced within communities. As Falade (2013), cited in Gondo and Nyoni (2019), puts it, elders played an important role in traditional education since they were regarded as the reservoirs, guardians, and conveyors of much-needed knowledge, skills, and expertise in the community.

The colonial period

Colonialism weakened traditional culture in Africa, leading to the uprooting of the native people from their roots. This caused the native people to lose confidence in their own cultural identity. The colonisers did so with such venom and disdain that Africans began to look down upon their own languages and culture (Mudzanire & Nyota, 2019). According to Prah (1993), the aim was to create a new African who was supposed to ape the ways of the white man and learn to speak his language. By so doing, the local people were brainwashed to the extent of despising their own languages, which is part of the most integral aspects of culture. Denying people their culture is tantamount to killing them by removing them from their source of life (culture). This move by colonisers is synonymous with the removal of a healthy human being's heart, thereby inflicting a slow painful death (Magwa, 2019). This was meant to disempower the natives and to denigrate their language and culture, resulting in a lack of proper documentation, innovative preservation methods, and marginalisation of the native speakers, as the custodians of African heritage. African languages were dominant in family, social, and cultural domains and continued to be downgraded, particularly in the education system (Chimhundu, 1993). During the colonial era, African languages were marginalised while English was established as the official language, leading to the decline of local cultures and traditions. A language is marginalised when it is not given the same status as others or another within the linguistic ecology (Kululska-Hulme et al., 2023).

The post-colonial language status

The colonial hangover persisted and is still persevering in the Zimbabwean formal education system, which is also one of the specialised domains, decades after the country gained political independence. Sibanda (2019) avers that the Zimbabwean policy on language in education perpetuates and reinforces the intent, purpose, and agenda of the colonial language policy and practice. Colonialism sought to alter the situation not only politically, socially, and economically, but also academically, including language issues in education circles. Seven years after independence, the Education Act of 1987 was passed to address English hegemony and the prevalence of the colonial language policy in general, insisting that English be used as the medium of instruction from the fourth grade upwards. It was revised in 1990. Sadly, the revised Education Act was a mere reinforcement of the dominance and hegemony of English (Magwa, 2021). Apart from the Education Act of 1987, the Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No. 20) Act of 2013 states that "the state and all institutions and agencies of government at every level must ensure that all officially recognised languages are treated equitably." While the constitution provides a legal framework for teaching indigenous languages in schools, it does not give details on how the teaching of these languages must be done (Phiri, 2021). Contrary to the intention of the government to end English hegemony, the pro-colonial language policy prevailing in the country made the general populace associate

speaking English with a higher social and economic power status (Thondhlana, 2000). Nhongo (2013) concurs with Thondhlana, arguing that most Zimbabweans contend that English is a global language and crucial for Zimbabwean citizens to participate in the global economy through it. Chirimaunga (2023) reiterates the same sentiments, saying that English is widely recognised as the international language of scientific and technological advancement and linguistic evolution in developing countries. This has resulted in stakeholders such as parents, teachers, and students preferring to use English from Early Childhood Development (ECD) to tertiary levels of education. This is worsened by educators in institutes of higher learning who prefer to teach indigenous language modules like literature and grammar using English as the medium of instruction. The status quo on language matters in most African countries, including Zimbabwe, is a result of several factors, among them being a negative attitude towards the use of indigenous languages, globalisation, economic factors, and a lack of will by government officials to promote indigenous languages (Sibanda, 2019; Viriri, 2003; Prah, 2006).

Language as an intangible cultural heritage

Language, the mother tongue in particular, is a vital component of human life. Our mother tongue, or language of primary socialisation, provides our initial contact with the world and facilitates the formation of values and our view of ourselves (Roy-Campbell & Gwete, 1997). Language helps the speakers to shape their worldview as they interact with their immediate environment. The culture of every group is engraved in its spoken or written language as a means of communication. In the same vein, Ngugi (1986) argues that language has a dual character. It is a means of communication and a carrier of culture. Language and culture are intertwined, and there is a thin line between them. Magwa (2019) concurs with the above notion as he maintains that it is not possible to isolate a language from the culture, beliefs, and eloquence of its speakers. Language is a cultural asset through which we transmit knowledge and information, articulate values, beliefs, and traditions, and even past achievements (Viriri, 2003). Language is the master key that unlocks the cultural knowledge bank, which forms an integral part of intangible heritage that needs safeguarding and proper management so that it can be passed on to posterity. This paper argues that the use of the 'elite' language undermines the cultural base of the sidelined language groups. Roy-Campbell and Gwete (1997) assert that if a language is devalued, then the culture embodied in that language is also devalued. Languages must be viewed and treated as complementary. While English offers access to global knowledge and connectivity, the indigenous languages provide a vital link to the cultural traditions of their speakers. This paper challenges the view that English is capable of representing the African cultures and languages in the global village, thus highlighting the importance of using indigenous languages in preserving culture and content. To guard against misrepresentation and dilution of the indigenous languages in digital and specialised domains, indigenous languages' corpora and tools must be developed to enhance their use in such contexts. Efforts to safeguard and ensure that

indigenous languages remain relevant and prominent in the digital age are critical, given the strong connection between language and development. Despite the marginalisation of indigenous languages in critical areas, the nexus between language and development remains a reality.

The advancement of a nation depends on the effective use of its local languages as a medium of communication and the safeguarding of its cultural beliefs. As Magwa (2019) puts it, language and culture are key elements for building a developed society. He further argues that countries like Korea, Japan, and China have developed because they use their languages in formal training and education. Magwa (2019) adds that research conducted has revealed that the least developed countries use European languages in their education. Magwa's statement underscores a form of linguistic imperialism where the underdevelopment of a country is attributed to its educational system that ignores the native linguistic capital of its citizens.

Challenges arising from the lack of digital tools in the indigenous languages.

The lack of digital resources makes it difficult for the indigenous languages and their cultures to reach a wider audience, particularly young people who are techno-savvy and those in the diaspora. The absence of online cultural content limits opportunities for knowledge sharing and cultural exchange, resulting in diminishing the languages' presence and significance in the digital spaces. As Chirimaunga (2023) points out, there are currently very few techno-scientific dictionaries available in indigenous languages. The lack of such digital resources makes standardization of the writing system of indigenous languages difficult, causing some linguistic uncertainties that may put the languages at risk of extinction in specialised arenas. Limited use of indigenous languages in techno-scientific contexts limit indigenous language speakers' participation in socio-economic spheres using their mother tongue. Prah (1995) argues that Africa's failure to use its own languages in the workplace is the reason why Africa continues to lag when compared to other continents in terms of health and economy. He further argues that this perspective arises from educated Africans who assert that African languages have not yet reached a level of development sufficient to serve as effective instructional media. They believe that using African languages for educational purposes could contribute to the decline of the standards of education in Africa. However, there is an urgent need to demystify this notion by taking a pragmatic approach that involves developing digital tools in marginalised indigenous languages in the country. The continued limited use of indigenous languages in the digital space devalues the languages' social prestige and importance, resulting in the weakening of cultural identity. The deficiency of digital tools kills innovation and creativity among the indigenous language speakers, hindering the development of new content and innovation in these languages. The hurdles discussed in this paper signal a decline in the use of indigenous languages in digital spaces, which

is a serious threat to the preservation of these languages, which are vital components of the country's cultural heritage.

Addressing this gap is key to ensuring the languages' survival, promoting cultural preservation, and empowerment indigenous language speakers in the digital age. Viriri (2003) asserts that embracing technology might heal the cultural wounds and restore the cultures of Africa, which colonialism has sought to obliterate to achieve its goals. Whilst Viriri (2003) calls for technological tools to heal cultural wounds and restore African cultures, it is important to note that Zimbabwe is over four decades into independence, yet the country continues to witness a leadership that lacks the political will to visibly support the digital local content creation and use in indigenous languages. Gwerevende and Mthombeni (2023) add that speakers and advocates of indigenous languages can harness digital tools and platforms to foster collaborations, share valuable resources, and revitalise their languages in an unprecedented way.

Addressing the current gap in digital tools and resources

Languages serve as powerful tools for expressing, preserving, and transmitting cultural values, traditions, and collective memories within a community (Ajani et al., 2024). Language functions as a conduit for the intergenerational transfer of the cultural heritage, allowing older generations to share their accumulated wisdom, historical narratives, and ancestral knowledge with younger age bands. When language becomes extinct, the vital intergenerational link is broken, hence the need to safeguard the storehouses of unique knowledge through embracing digital media technology. To reshape the landscape of language preservation, indigenous language speakers in collaboration with technology experts should develop online apps and software tools which include pronunciation guides, text analysis software, languages translation software and adopt the use of social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and YouTube which serve as virtual hubs where speakers can share content and stories, facilitating engagement with those who are passionate about learning and preservation of the endangered languages in the global arenas, hence bringing together unique knowledge and skills.

The production of audio-visual content like podcasts, videos, and interactive storytelling offers new methods for documenting, learning, and revitalizing the indigenous languages. In this digital era, leveraging digital media technologies offers a promising avenue for the revitalisation and preservation of indigenous knowledge systems and languages (Ajani et al., 2024). If the indigenous language speakers are to realise their dream of integrating their tongues as intangible cultural heritage in specialised arenas, practical steps have to be taken towards the demystification of the view that indigenous languages cannot function in other domains except in the home. To address the current gap in digital tools

and resources, the compilation of comprehensive digital dictionaries and glossaries that cover various languages and dialects is key. These resources provide easy access to definitions, usage examples, and cultural contexts. In this regard, one of the language institutes in Zimbabwe has taken a giant step towards the demystification process. Midlands State University's National Language Institute (MSUNLI) is continuing the Science and Technical Translation (STT) legacy of the African Languages Research Institute (ALRI) at the University of Zimbabwe, which closed its doors after achieving significant progress in using STT in Zimbabwe. MSUNLI is building upon ALRI's historic progress by developing a bilingual science glossary in each of the officially recognised languages in Zimbabwe. Moreover, the translation of law documents, including the Constitution of Zimbabwe and the Highway Code, attests to the fact that every language is capable of explaining scientific and legal terms when given space. Equivalent terms were created to match the English ones for ease of dissemination of information to the grassroots level. Language practitioners and researchers, collaborating with relevant stakeholders, are creating new terms through coinage and rephonologisation strategies. Coinage was used where there were no direct equivalents or where there were no sounds near the indigenous ones, whilst the rephonologisation strategy was used to enable English sounds to fit into native sound system. The language researchers have coined and rephonologised words successfully in *Dura reMazwi eSainzi* (2024), (Indigenous Languages Glossary of Scientific Terms), as demonstrated by the Shona examples below.

English words	**Indigenous language equivalent**	**Strategy used**
ammeter	chipimamoto	coinage
galvanometer	chiyeramagetsi	coinage
solute	chinyungudutswa	coinage
solvent	chinyungudutso	coinage
transistor	chibatidzamoto	coinage
anode	anodhi	rephonologization
barometer	bharomita	rephonologisation
biogas	bhayogasi	rephonologisation
carbon	kabhoni	rephonologisation
diesel	dhiziri	rephonologisation

It is important to note that the above rephonologised words from the translated document are written as prescribed in the current indigenous language writing system, as opposed to the manner in which they are pronounced in daily speech.

Methodology

The study used a qualitative design to provide a holistic understanding of the indigenous languages' status and their role as ICH. Qualitative data collection methods, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis were used in this study. Drawing data from multiple methods ensures comprehensive and credible findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Focus group discussions helped in exploring shared perceptions, attitudes, and experiences of various groups of people related to the indigenous languages. On the other hand, document analysis assisted the researcher in navigating issues related to language policy, legal frameworks, and the level of government support for language development in the country. Analysis of documents helps the researcher to learn about distributed or private knowledge (Hammarberg et al., 2016). An analysis of the translated document from English to an indigenous language, such as "*Dura reMazwi eSainzi*," helped the researcher to demystify the perception that indigenous languages are incapable of explaining specialised content or terms. Twenty indigenous language-speaking informants from both rural and urban backgrounds were selected using the purposive and snowball sampling techniques. The informants included language experts, educators, traditional leaders who are the custodians of cultural knowledge and values, and cultural heritage experts. Each group of participants was key and unique in its contribution towards cultural heritage issues, since the collaboration of stakeholders is the springboard for the success of the transmission of cultural knowledge to future generations. Ethical considerations were put in place. Participants gave their informed consent in verbal and written form after being informed about the study's specifics. Collected data were subjected to thematic analysis by identifying recurring themes, patterns, and insights from interview transcripts, focus group discussions, and document analysis. Thematic analysis is all about interpretation and, therefore, requires a higher level of inference (Vaisamoradi & Snelgrove, 2019). To protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants and the collected data, the researcher used pseudonyms and coding. Participants were reassured that the study's findings were intended for academic use only.

Theoretical framework

The *Sankofa* concept (Slater, 2019) and UNESCO's 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage serve as the study's guiding principles. These frameworks offer a strong foundation and insightful perspectives for this study. *Sankofa*, a word and symbol from the Akan people of Ghana, means "go back and fetch it" (Alkalimat, 2021). It emphasises the importance of a purposeful return to the past to reclaim, reinterpret, and apply valuable central knowledge for the present and future (Dumavor, 2025). The *Sankofa* concept encourages individuals to remember, repossess, and breathe new life into the valuable knowledge, traditions, and practices that originate

from their heritage. The *Sankofa* concept is evident in this study, as the researcher employs the concept of revisiting and exploring the historical development of the indigenous languages, their significance during pre-colonial and colonial times, and their growth since independence. The researcher undertakes this historical examination to demonstrate how the inherited colonial legacy influences the status and use of indigenous languages in specialised fields, and how terminology development and digital documentation help in providing effective strategies for integrating them into specialised domains such as education, law, science, and technology. This concept is relevant in this study as it stresses the importance of community involvement, particularly in terminology development and decision-making. As part of the study's methodology, the researcher engages with indigenous language speakers from diverse backgrounds to gather their insights and perceptions about the use of language and its cultural importance in specialised areas. UNESCO's 2003 Convention complements the *Sankofa* concept by offering a framework for identifying, documenting, and protecting elements of intangible cultural heritage, including the indigenous languages, with a focus on vocabulary, syntax, grammar, and traditional folklore. The convention informs language speakers in developing and implementing community-based documentation projects using user-friendly digital software, apps, and tools such as dictionaries and glossaries to help safeguard the intangible culture of indigenous language speakers, making it accessible to a wider audience in digital spaces.

Results and Discussion

The results revealed that indigenous languages have been pushed to the periphery as far as their role in specialised domains is concerned. Interviews administered by the researcher elicited varying views from the participants on their use as intangible cultural heritage in the global specialised fields.

Most participants concurred with the notion that safeguarding indigenous languages as intangible cultural heritage is the only gateway to their usability in the specialised domains in the digital space. Teacher A had this to say, "Digitising our local languages helps in preserving and making them accessible to the users in global spaces." This is in line with Lantern's (2025) assertion that digitisation becomes handy in providing the necessary means and platforms to promote the accessibility and preservation of local languages. Teacher B emphasised the need to embrace technology as a way of enhancing the use of our local languages in specialised areas, saying, "Technology is key in developing and empowering local languages to be visible in other domains in this digital era. It makes the documentation and sharing of the local content easy." This implies that technology empowers local language speakers to share information and knowledge, thereby fostering true digital inclusion. Some participants blamed the lack of terminology in specialised domains for the challenges that indigenous languages are facing today and

emphasised the need to raise their status to that of the dominant languages, English in particular, by developing specialised terms. One student, Kirsty (pseudonym), categorically stated that, “Unless the status of indigenous languages is raised to that of English by developing terminology in specialised areas, it will remain irrelevant in modern communication and stifle career opportunities”. This implies that in this digital age, for indigenous languages to remain relevant to future generations, they have to be treated as vehicles of communication and a gateway to better job opportunities. Through document analysis, the researcher noted that to date, the specialised terms contained in five specialised indigenous language dictionaries developed in the 1990s have not reached the intended users, the students. In this digital age, little or no effort has been made to make indigenous content available in digital formats. Most of it is still in print form. In the same line of thinking, Lantern (2025) echoed that it is an undisputed fact that Zimbabwe is behind in technological issues, as it is heavily under-resourced in indigenous languages digitisation technology. Unless such critical information or terminologies are made available in school and university libraries, the myth that indigenous languages have not fully developed to function in specialised spheres will continue unopposed. One of the linguists, Mr Huyo (pseudonym), passionately said, “In a bid to end the war on specialised terminology deficiency, there is a need to embrace courses in dictionary pedagogy and to advocate for a dictionary policy in the country”. The development of such a policy will enhance the creation, innovative documentation, adoption, and use of specialised terminology at every level of education, and it will cascade easily to other critical domains. The importance of term creation is buttressed by Nkomo (2008), who argues that term creation is a tool of revitalising, empowering, and accommodating Indigenous African languages. One of the community members, Mr Chigayo (pseudonym), was quick to point out the need to train and educate personnel in specialised domains to enhance the effective communication of complex concepts in local languages. He said, “Not everyone is familiar with the terms that are used in specialised fields, hence the need to train and educate the staff members in such areas so that they appreciate the use of such terms in their local languages.” It is clear from the participant’s contribution that using indigenous languages in specialised contexts is a process and not an event. It calls for careful preparation, cooperation, and financial commitment.

The argument of the researcher is that when speakers of the native languages are trained and educated in their local languages, they grasp technical concepts easily, reducing misunderstandings and misinterpretations emanating from translations that may take place to ease the understanding of concepts. Sibanda (2025) corroborates that scientific concepts, no matter how complicated they may be, are first located in the indigenous corner of the mind, which processes them in its indigenous language and culture by trying to understand and apply them in the context of their values. The researcher further argues

that the use of local languages in specialised fields helps in making technical concepts culturally relevant as they convey context-specific knowledge more effectively, thus making specialised domains more relevant. Although the use of specialised terminology is key, some hurdles hinder the implementation of such a noble cause. One of the cultural experts, Mrs Hore (pseudonym), was quick to point out the challenges, saying, “There is a problem of limited technological resources and expertise, and the digital divide also worsens the situation on the ground when it comes to the implementation of the innovative ideas.” What it therefore means is that the devil lies at the implementation stage. The lack of funding, institutional support, negative attitude towards the use of local languages in critical domains, and lack of awareness of the importance of local languages among speakers and policymakers derail the use of such languages in specialised spheres. Although there are many stumbling blocks lying ahead of the digitisation of indigenous languages, the paper argues that the need to revitalise and empower these languages in the digital era remains critical because the benefits outweigh the challenges. As long as the challenges inhibiting the digitisation of indigenous languages are not addressed, in terms of functionality, they will remain at the periphery and on the sidelines in key domains.

Recommendations

The recommendations below aim to ensure that digitisation is not just a technological solution to enhance the use of local languages in the specialised domains, but a culturally enriching and inclusive effort to safeguard and promote the indigenous languages for future generations. This study recommends that:

(i) Research institutes develop multilingual glossaries in fields like Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), modern medicine, engineering, and law, among others.

(ii) For indigenous languages to survive globally as living heritage, they must exist digitally. The institutes must prioritise the development of digital language resources, including datasets that technology companies require to include indigenous languages in Artificial Intelligence (AI) and software. The datasets are important in training Large Language Models(LLMs), machine translation tools like Google Translate, and voice assistants to accurately parse Zimbabwean indigenous languages.

(iii) The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPSE) and the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, Innovation, Science and Technology must enforce the teaching of indigenous languages modules using the mother tongue. To break the dominance of English, the aforementioned ministries, as gatekeepers of quality education, must treat indigenous languages as tools for administration, technology, and economic power.

(iv) The aforementioned ministries and research institutes must establish a joint annual forum on language intellectualisation to evaluate how effectively Zimbabwean indigenous languages are being integrated into global, digital, and academic spheres so that they do not lag.

Conclusion

The indigenous languages have enormous potential and value in the world's specialised fields as intangible cultural heritage if terminology is developed, accepted, and used in digital spaces. Zimbabwe can guarantee the language's survival, development, and relevance by drawing lessons from the colonial past to inform the current and future language policies, particularly in the use of indigenous languages in specialised fields and by putting the UNESCO's 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage principles of safeguarding indigenous languages as cultural intangible heritage into practice. A comprehensive approach towards language documentation, instruction, community involvement, international cooperation, and strategic use of technology should be embraced to improve the status and use of Indigenous languages in specialised fields. The study of the indigenous languages should be viewed not only as a linguistic pursuit but also as a vital component of Zimbabwe's cultural identity, economic development, and global engagement. The recommendations in this study are designed to achieve that goal, and the implementation of the above-mentioned measures can empower the indigenous language speakers to develop terminology to showcase and preserve their linguistic heritage in the digital world.

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