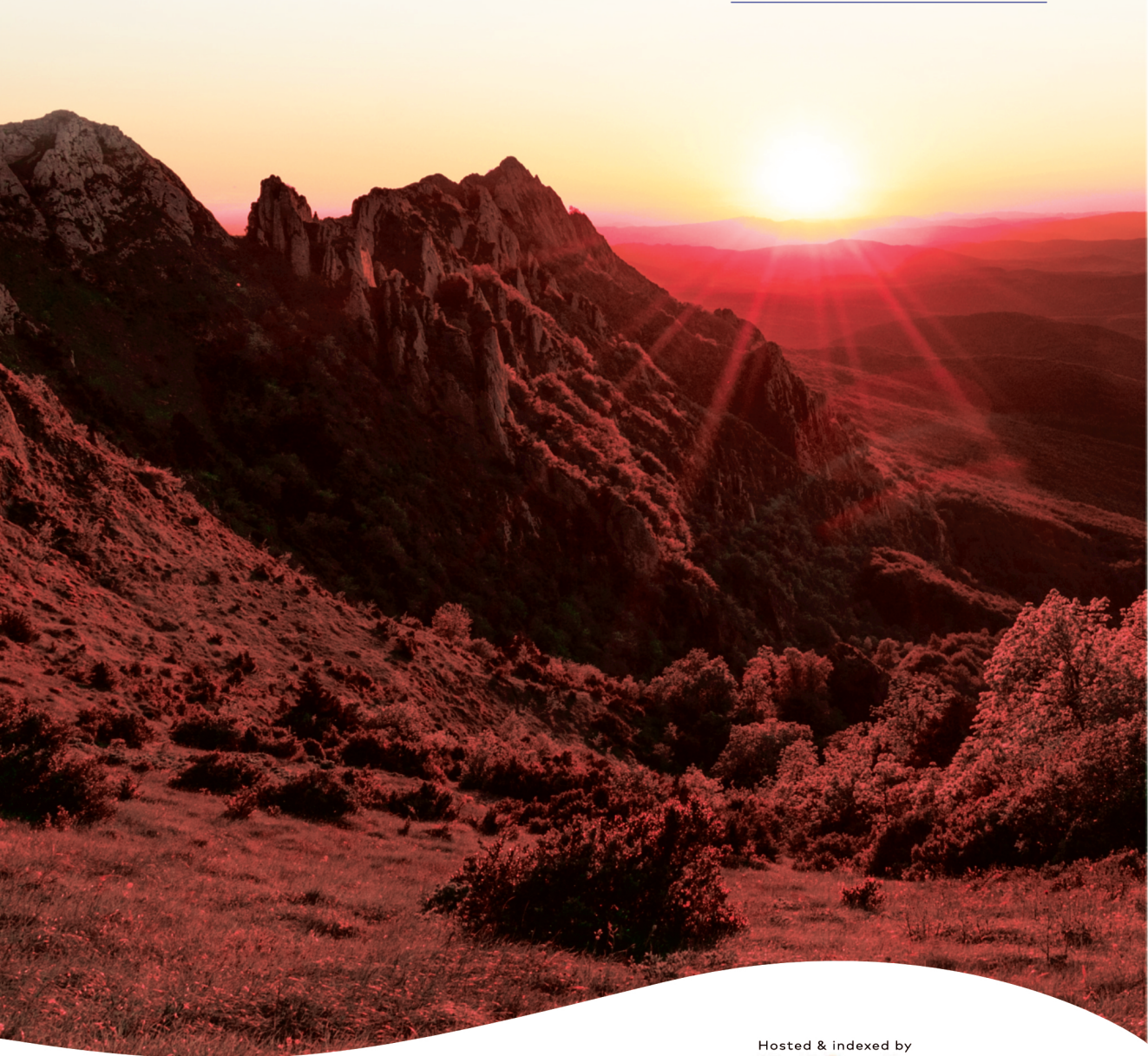


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Indigenous knowledge systems and character formation among Shona boys and men

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Abstract

This article interrogates the key dimensions of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) that shape behaviour and character formation among Zimbabwean boys and men. IKS has historically functioned as a springboard for cultivating positive behavioural attributes such as self-discipline, integrity, humility, empathy, confidence, and self-esteem. However, it is also critiqued for reinforcing some of the challenges confronting Zimbabwean men today. This study, therefore, examines how IKS simultaneously fosters positive and negative masculinities, internalised through socialisation processes. The analysis is framed by Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) and Ecological Systems Theory (EST), offering a comprehensive lens for addressing the behavioural and social challenges facing Zimbabwean communities as they mould boys into responsible men. A qualitative research design was adopted, drawing on in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and secondary data analysis. Purposively selected male informants (n=25), aged between 18 and 65 and with demonstrable IKS backgrounds, were recruited from both rural and urban communities. Ethical protocols were observed, including obtaining informed consent and using pseudonyms to ensure anonymity. Data were analysed thematically using a web-like analytical strategy to capture interrelated patterns. Findings reveal that IKS operates as a two-edged sword: while it can be harnessed to instil positive behaviour and strengthen communal responsibility, if poorly managed, it risks entrenching harmful gender norms, toxic masculinities, and regressive practices. The study concludes that community institutions should strategically leverage IKS to reinforce its constructive dimensions while mitigating its damaging effects. Doing so would help nurture culturally grounded, socially responsible, and gender-sensitive citizens capable of responding to contemporary societal challenges.

Keywords: Indigenous Knowledge Systems, masculinity, rites of passage, behaviour, Zimbabwe

Introduction

In Zimbabwe, Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) have historically played a crucial role in shaping social fabric and cultural identity, especially in the upbringing and socialisation of boys into men. Character formation and behavioural development are vital aspects of human growth, affecting how individuals interact, make decisions, and contribute to society. IKS includes philosophies and practices developed by societies with long-standing engagement with their natural and social environments (Mapara, 2009; Mawere, 2013). At the core of this system are cultural values such as *Ubuntu/Unhu* (humanity towards others), respect for elders, and community responsibility, which collectively guide boys and men to prioritise collective wellbeing over individual interests (Ramose, 1999; Makore, 2022).

These values are embedded in daily communal practices. Activities such as collective farming (*humwe* or *nhimbe*), rotational cattle herding (*majana*), and collaborative hunting or fishing not only ensure subsistence but also instil principles of collectivism, accountability, and interdependence. For instance, under *majana*, community members take turns herding cattle, a system that fosters responsibility by holding individuals accountable for livestock, which are symbols of wealth in Shona society. Similarly, *nhimbe* mobilises the community for large-scale agricultural tasks, reinforcing the ethos of reciprocity and shared responsibility while embedding *Ubuntu* as a moral philosophy that rejects individualism in favour of communal solidarity (Pfukwa & Maganga, 2024).

However, modernisation and globalisation have eroded many of these traditions, weakening their role as moral guides (Makaudze, 2021). Increasing family breakdown, combined with the spread of digital technologies that replace face-to-face cultural practices, has deepened generational disconnection from indigenous roots (Saad, Subri, & Zolkifli, 2023). Historically, colonial discourses further delegitimised IKS, branding it as ‘primitive’, ‘backward’, or “pagan” (Gadgil & Vartak, 1975). Such negative portrayal contributed to poor documentation, weak preservation efforts, and the marginalisation of indigenous practices, many of which remain highly relevant to social cohesion and moral development (Dorji, 2009; Dove, 2006; Reniko, Mogomotsi, & Mogomotsi, 2018).

This erosion has heightened concern about the behaviour and character of contemporary Zimbabwean boys and men, especially amidst increasing challenges such as substance abuse, gender-based violence, and delinquency

(Mangena, 2023; Taringa, 2014). Although IKS retains potential as a powerful tool for positive socialisation, its practices are not without issues. Certain elements may perpetuate harmful gender roles, limit emotional expression, and reinforce toxic masculinities (Balogun, 2010; Sarfo, 2023). Furthermore, some practices conflict with modern rights-based frameworks, creating inner conflict among young men as they navigate multiple value systems (Mokhoathi, 2020). In this context, this study examines the dual potential of IKS, both its constructive and regressive aspects, in shaping behaviour and character among Zimbabwean boys and men through mechanisms such as taboos, totemic symbols, proverbs, folktales, and traditional courts.

Masculinity, as a social construct, is dynamic, multifaceted, and context-dependent. It refers to attributes, behaviours, and roles culturally associated with men and is shaped by prevailing norms, expectations, and power relations rather than biology (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Mangena, 2023). As Mangena (2023) observes, traditional practices and beliefs continue to influence how men negotiate their identity and social roles within contemporary Shona communities, even as these meanings are constantly redefined under pressures of urbanisation and globalisation. This paper, therefore, examines the question: who are boys and men within the Shona cultural framework? Within this context, the distinction between boyhood and manhood is not primarily determined by age, physiological maturity, or cognitive development, as is common in modern frameworks, but by social roles and responsibilities mediated through rites of passage (Hudson-Weems, 1993; Chitauro-Mawema, 2006).

Rites of passage in Shona culture constitute a lifelong process of transition, from birth through boyhood, adulthood, and ultimately death, through which social responsibilities are gradually assumed (Mbiti, 1990). Successful completion of physical and spiritual initiation legitimises a young man's status as a fully integrated member of society, expected to emulate the roles and responsibilities of his elders. In this worldview, a boy (*mukomana*) is a young male not yet married or a father, while a man (*murume*) is recognised as a household head or husband, irrespective of offspring (Chitauro-Mawema, 2006). Manhood is validated not merely by age but by qualities such as bravery, wisdom, resourcefulness, and courage, transmitted through oral genres such as proverbs, folktales, and riddles (Masaka & Makahamadze, 2013; Mapara, 2013). These cultural tools, therefore, function as critical mechanisms of socialisation and behavioural regulation, warranting systematic exploration within the broader discourse on masculinity and indigenous epistemologies.

Literature Review

This Scholarship demonstrates that IKS can be mobilised as a powerful tool for moulding behaviour and character in Shona communities. The family is widely recognised as the primary agent of socialisation, transmitting cultural values, moral codes, and community obligations through oral traditions such as proverbs, taboos, totemic symbols, folktales, and traditional courts. This early socialisation lays the foundation for order, responsibility, and respect, preparing boys and men to assume constructive roles within society (Mudzanire & Gondo, 2013; Mapara, 2013; Makore, 2022).

Taboos

Taboos (*zviera*) constitute a key mechanism of behavioural regulation and moral education. They set boundaries for acceptable conduct and reinforce restraint, especially in areas of sexuality, privacy, and respect (Tatira, 2000; Chiwome, 1996). For instance, prohibitions such as *Ukadongorera munhu achigeza unoita showera* discourage voyeurism and premature sexual activity, while instilling discipline and self-control (Makaudze & Shoko, 2015). Taboos also safeguard human dignity by discouraging discrimination against those considered “different,” as seen in *Ukapfira musope unozovvara musope*, which protects people with albinism (Tatira, 2013).

Recent research highlights their ecological dimension: taboos preserve biodiversity by restricting destructive practices such as indiscriminate hunting or tree-cutting (Makaudze, 2021; Reniko, Mogomotsi, & Mogomotsi, 2018). In this sense, taboos function as repositories of Ubuntu/Unhu, cultivating social conscience, environmental stewardship, and cultural solidarity (Mawere, 2013; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020).

Traditional courts (*matare*)

Matare are key institutions in Shona law and education. They go beyond dispute resolution to act as cultural “schools” where boys and young men learn practical skills in accountability, negotiation, and restorative justice (Matsika, 2012; Gwaravanda, 2011; Masitera, 2019). Proverbs used in these settings, such as *Usafananidza nguwo nedzaTarubva* (Do not compare your clothes with Tarubva’s) highlight virtues like contentment and resilience, helping to counteract social comparison pressures (Gondo & Nyoni, 2019).

Elders who preside over *matare* embody authority and mentorship, transferring intergenerational wisdom and strengthening leadership skills among youth

(Falade, 2013; Mudzanire & Gondo, 2013). Contemporary studies show that such institutions remain relevant in promoting communal reconciliation and reducing gendered violence when integrated into hybrid governance systems (Mutanda, 2022).

Folktales and storytelling

Folktales (*ngano*) are deeply embedded in Shona pedagogical traditions. They transmit values of honesty, cooperation, diligence, and accountability through narrative metaphors (Mapara, 2013; Makaudze, 2013). Tales such as *Mhuka dzaichera tsime* (Animals digging the well) highlight collective action as a condition for survival. Once confined to oral settings, folktales are now being revitalised through digital platforms to enhance their accessibility and relevance for younger generations (Dorji, 2009; Nopasari, Rozak, & Wiradinata, 2023; Saad, Subri, & Zolkifli, 2023). Their capacity is to instil cultural pride and counter moral decay positions them as vital resources for character formation in the twenty-first century (Pfukwa & Maganga, 2024).

Proverbs

Proverbs (*tsumo*) embody Shona philosophy, shaping moral, relational, and communal wisdom. They are employed to regulate sensitive areas such as marriage, sexuality, and social obligations (Masaka & Makahamadze, 2013; Makaudze, 2020). For instance, *Mukadzi wemumwe ndiambuya* (Another man's wife is your mother-in-law) emphasises marital respect, while *Kandiro kanoenda kunobva kamwe* (A small plate goes where another comes from) illustrates reciprocity, a core principle of *Ubuntu* (Balogun, 2010). Proverbs enhance cognitive and problem-solving abilities, fostering critical thinking among youth (Magwa, 2019). Nonetheless, critics argue that some proverbs reinforce gender hierarchies and perpetuate patriarchal stereotypes, trivialising women's roles (Taringa, 2014). Recent feminist analyses call for the re-interpretation of proverbs to align with equality and human rights discourses whilst maintaining their educational value (Mangena, 2023).

Totems

Totems (*mitupo*) function as cultural identifiers, ecological regulators, and moral compasses. They reinforce clan-based solidarity, ecological stewardship, and prohibitions against incest (Pfukwa & Maganga, 2024). Associations with animals and plants, such as lions, elephants, or sacred trees, shape values of resilience, reverence, and environmental consciousness (Makaudze &

Shoko, 2015). Totemism also links men to ancestral spirituality, embedding a cosmological sense of accountability that transcends individual life cycles (Mbiti, 1990). By reinforcing kinship ties and ecological ethics, totems operate simultaneously as cultural signifiers and ethical anchors, inspiring self-reflection and collective responsibility.

The reviewed literature highlights IKS as a multi-dimensional system of behavioural regulation, moral education, and ecological stewardship. Mechanisms such as taboos, *matare*, folktales, proverbs, and totems serve to cultivate responsibility, solidarity, and respect. However, these same mechanisms risk perpetuating harmful gender ideologies and patriarchal practices when applied uncritically (Balogun, 2010; Mangena, 2023). This duality emphasises IKS as a 'two-edged sword', a system capable of fostering both socially responsible masculinity and regressive identities. Such ambivalence calls for nuanced scholarly engagement and adaptive strategies that align IKS with contemporary human rights and development frameworks.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to capture the depth and complexity of IKS in moulding the behaviour and character of Zimbabwean boys and men. Male informants (n=25) aged 18–65, purposively selected for their experiential knowledge of IKS as traditional leaders, elders, parents, or cultural custodians, were recruited from both rural and urban communities to ensure diversity of perspectives (Etikan & Bala, 2017; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The sampling approach combined purposive and snowball strategies, with the latter allowing initial participants to recommend others with recognised expertise in indigenous practices, thereby enhancing data richness and credibility (Patton, 2015; Saunders et al., 2019). Ethical protocols were rigorously observed: institutional clearance was obtained, participants were fully informed of the aims, procedures, risks, and benefits of the study, and written and oral consent was secured voluntarily, with confidentiality, anonymity, and withdrawal rights guaranteed (Nowell et al., 2017; Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). To protect identities, pseudonyms were used throughout.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and documentary analysis of secondary cultural texts, enabling triangulation and flexible exploration of participant narratives (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Nopasari et al., 2023). Interviews and group discussions encouraged detailed reflections on the meanings, roles, and contemporary significance of

IKS in shaping boys' and men's socialisation, responsibility, and masculinity. Transcribed data were subjected to thematic analysis, with inductive coding to generate categories aligned with the study objectives, which were subsequently refined into themes and subthemes capturing recurrent and divergent patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Nowell et al., 2017). This iterative process facilitated the identification of both expected and emergent findings, thereby providing a comprehensive, contextually grounded, and ethically robust account of IKS practices. The methodology thus not only ensured analytical rigour but also foregrounded participants' lived realities, offering a deeper understanding of how traditional knowledge systems continue to influence behaviour and character formation amidst shifting socio-cultural contexts (Makaudze, 2021; Pfukwa & Maganga, 2024).

Theoretical Framework

This study is supported by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (EST) (1979) and Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) (1986), both offering strong frameworks to understand how IKS influence the behaviour and character of boys and men. EST highlights the layered influence of environmental systems, microsystems (family, peers), mesosystems (community, schools), exosystems (institutions), and macrosystems (culture, traditions), on human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Tudge et al., 2009).

The ecological framing was particularly relevant in the Zimbabwean context, where socialisation practices embedded in communal living, rites of passage, and cultural rituals situate boys and men within networks of accountability and belonging (Ramose, 1999; Mapara, 2009; Mangena, 2023). Positive interactions within these systems foster pro-social values such as empathy, respect, and cooperation, while negative or disrupted ones contribute to antisocial behaviours, violence, or substance abuse (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020). In this sense, EST demonstrates that the very cultural environments that shape boys' and men's challenges also contain potential pathways to solutions through the revitalisation of traditional practices such as taboos, folktales, and totemism (Makaudze, 2021; Pfukwa & Maganga, 2024).

Complementing the perspective is the SCT, which explains how behaviour is acquired and sustained through observation, modelling, and reinforcement (Bandura, 1986; Zimmerman, 2000). Within IKS, role models are embodied in elders, cultural leaders, and symbolic constructs such as totems, which promote emulation of desired traits such as bravery or wisdom, while taboos act as

behavioural regulators by sanctioning violations (Tatira, 2013; Mudzanire & Gondo, 2013). SCT's emphasis on reciprocal determinism, where personal factors, environmental conditions, and behaviour continually interact, aligns with the dynamic nature of IKS as both a transmitter of values and a site of negotiation in contemporary society (Nowell et al., 2017; Mangena, 2023). Together, EST and SCT provide a synergistic framework for analysing how Zimbabwean boys and men internalise positive and negative masculinities through traditional socialisation. Importantly, they suggest practical applications: policymakers, educators, and community leaders can harness IKS-informed strategies to promote cultural preservation, strengthen positive role modelling, foster intergenerational learning, and mitigate harmful practices.

Results

The study identified six major themes that illuminate the role of IKS in shaping the behaviour and character of boys and men in Shona communities.

Taboos as social regulators

Taboos (*zviera*) were strongly emphasised as indispensable instruments of moral and social regulation. Participants explained that taboos set behavioural boundaries for children and young adults, particularly in areas concerning sexuality, respect for authority, and communal responsibility. A parent, Mr Zhou (pseudonym), affirmed:

Zviera zvinobatsira kudzoreredza vana vanenge varasika nokudaro zvinofanirwa kushandiswa muraramo yanhasi" (taboos help discipline children who go astray and should be applied in everyday life).

Similarly, elders observed that taboos instilled respect for elders and delayed premature sexual activity, thereby contributing to faithfulness in marriage later in life. In addition to their social functions, taboos were reported to carry environmental significance. One elder, Mr Mutimbapasi (pseudonym), explained:

Zviera zvinobatsira kuti vana vachengetedze zvisikwa nemiti iri munharaunda mavo" (taboos help children preserve animals and trees in their environment).

This resonates with traditional pro-environmental norms, in which prohibitions against cutting down fruit trees or killing certain animals reinforced biodiversity conservation. However, some participants, especially among younger cohorts, questioned the relevance of certain taboos in the contemporary context, viewing them as outdated or overly restrictive. This ambivalence underscores both the

enduring utility of taboos as social and ecological safeguards and the challenges of sustaining their legitimacy in modern times.

Totemism and communal identity

Totemic symbols (*mitupo*) were identified as key markers of identity, unity, and intergenerational continuity. Participants described totems as mechanisms that cultivate *Ubuntu/Unhu*, strengthen kinship, and regulate marriage practices. For instance, Mr Hove (pseudonym) stated:

Mitupo inobatanidza vanhu vari munharaunda zvichiita kuti pave nehumwe chete (totems unite individuals within a community, promoting a shared sense of purpose).

Elders further noted that totems safeguarded biodiversity by prohibiting overhunting of animals associated with clan identity. In interviews, participants stressed the combined role of totems and taboos in ecological conservation. Mr Rukuni (pseudonym) remarked:

Mitupo nezviera zvinoshanda basa rimwero, rinokosha rokuchengetedza zviwanikwa zvakaita senharaunda nemhuka dzesango (totems and taboos play a key role in preserving resources such as forests and wild animals).

Contrastingly, younger participants expressed scepticism. A young man, Kudzai (pseudonym), argued:

Mutupo unotitadzisa kudya nyama yatinoda uye kuroora musikana wandinoda (totemism prevents us from eating the meat we want or marrying the girl we love).

Such sentiments reflect a generational tension in which totems are perceived by youth as restrictive and incompatible with personal autonomy, despite their positive cultural and ecological contributions.

Proverbs as educational tools

Proverbs (*tsumo*) were identified as vital tools for moral instruction, cognitive development, and communal socialisation. Participants reported that proverbs inculcated values of cooperation, humility, and collective responsibility. For example, Mr Chimuti (pseudonym) observed:

Tsumo dzinodzidzisa vana kukoshesha mushandirapamwe nokusema mweya weumbimbindoga (proverbs teach children the value of teamwork and to despise selfishness).

Widely cited sayings such as “*chara chimwe hachitswanyiri inda*” (a single finger does not crush a louse) and “*rume rimwe harikombi churu*” (a single man cannot surround an anthill) indicate that the Shona worldview is that collective success outweighs individual achievement. Participants also recognised proverbs as cognitive tools. Tendai (pseudonym) explained:

Tsumo dzinorodza njere dzevechidiki nokuvabatsira kuti vave neunyanzvi hwekugadzirisa matambudziko oupenyu (proverbs sharpen the intellect of the youth and help them develop problem-solving skills).

However, some criticisms were raised. Female participants noted that proverbs were sometimes selectively invoked to subordinate women, with one participant, Tiki (pseudonym), stating:

Tsumo dzinodzvinzirira vanhukadzi zvichikonzera kuti vasaremekedzwa uye kushungurudzwa (Proverbs oppress women, causing them to be disrespected and abused).

This aligns with scholarly critiques that certain proverbs entrench patriarchal ideologies, trivialising women's roles. Thus, while proverbs remain integral to moral education, they can also perpetuate gender inequities when misapplied.

Traditional courts as training grounds

Traditional courts (*matare*) were consistently identified as institutions where boys and men acquire life skills, social values, and communal accountability. Participants stressed that court proceedings functioned as informal schools where youths learned dispute resolution, patience, and respect. Headman Gurudza (pseudonym) explained:

Dare rinopa vakomana nevarume unyanzvi hwekugadzirisa makakatanwa, kuremekedza vamwe nokutevedzera hurongwa huripo pavanoona zvichiitwa nevakuru (the court session trains boys and men in dispute resolution, respect, and adherence to social order through observing elders).

Chief Matyoramiti (pseudonym) reinforced this collective ethos, stating:

Muchivanhu chedu mhosva kana yakaparwa inobata munhu wose (In our culture, a crime affects everyone).

Such perspectives highlight how traditional courts extend justice beyond the individual to the community, cultivating a sense of collective responsibility.

Parents also underscored the pedagogical role of courts. Mr Tevedzerai (pseudonym) asserted:

Vana vayaruka ngavapinde panotongwa nyaya vadzidze kuve nemwoyo murefu, kuremekedza vamwe, kuregererana nokuyanana (Young adults must participate in court proceedings to learn patience, respect, forgiveness, and reconciliation).

This view reflects a broader consensus that traditional courts not only enforce justice but also model virtues essential for peaceful communal living.

Folktales as pedagogical resources

Folktales (*ngano*) emerged as another critical component of IKS, valued for instilling moral lessons while entertaining audiences. Parents and elders described folktales as tools for rewarding virtuous behaviour and punishing deviance. For instance, Mr Gumbo (pseudonym) remarked:

Ngano dzaisimbisa nyaya yemaitiro akanaka kuburikidza nokuranga nhubu (Folktales reinforced good behaviour by punishing deviants).

Elders also highlighted their relevance in addressing contemporary challenges. Mr Chihota (pseudonym) explained:

Ngano dzinogona kubatsira pakugadzirisa matambudziko ekurasa unhu ari kuwanikwa mune vechidiki mazuvano (Folktales can help solve problems of moral decadence among today's youth).

Younger participants advocated modernising folktales, suggesting that digital platforms could be used to preserve and disseminate them. Takudzwa (pseudonym) stated:

Ngano dzinogona kunakidza apo dzinoshandiswa kutidzidzisa tsika dzakanaka kuburikidza nokashandisa tekinoroji muzvikoro (Folktales can be entertaining when used to teach morals through technology in schools).

This reveals a generational consensus that folktales remain relevant but require adaptation for contemporary audiences.

Potential negative impacts of IKS

Despite the predominantly positive perspectives, findings also revealed potential drawbacks of IKS. Participants reported that certain practices could perpetuate harmful gender roles, reinforce toxic masculinities, or normalise substance use. Ritual ceremonies such as *mukwerera* (rainmaking), *kurova guva* (bringing back the spirit), and *marooro* (traditional marriage rites) were described as contexts where alcohol consumption was widespread, with potential for addiction and social harm.

Participants also highlighted the tensions between IKS and Christianity. Younger men in particular described experiencing moral dissonance, as cultural expectations often conflicted with Christian teachings. One participant expressed that this duality led to selective adherence, superficially embracing IKS while privately turning to Christian doctrines for guidance. Such findings suggest that while IKS offers a reservoir of positive values, uncritical application

risks entrenching regressive practices or creating identity conflicts in modern contexts.

Discussion

The findings reveal the paradoxical nature of IKS: they are both constructive and destructive, emancipatory yet potentially regressive. This duality places IKS within what Mbembe (2001) describes as the “ambivalence of tradition”, where cultural practices can foster both cohesion and constraint. Viewing through Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (EST) and Bandura’s Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), IKS appears as a dynamic arena of contestation where boys and men are socialised through rituals, symbols, prohibitions, and narratives that simultaneously nurture and discipline. Behaviour is not merely inherited but is modelled, reinforced, and enacted within a web of cultural systems; however, those systems can also ossify into dogma when detached from critical reflection.

Taboos, for instance, function as moral scaffolds, instilling restraint, fidelity, and reverence for authority, while simultaneously embedding ecological ethics into everyday conduct (Chiwome et al., 2000; Makaudze & Shoko, 2015; Reniko et al., 2018). They exemplify *Ubuntu/Unhu*’s insistence on relational accountability. However, as younger participants observed, many taboos now appear archaic, inhibiting personal autonomy and clashing with modern aspirations. What once operated as an invisible conscience risk being dismissed as superstition. The same tension permeates totemism: it unites clans, secures biodiversity, and prevents incestuous unions (Pfukwa & Maganga, 2024), but also frustrates youthful desire and narrows the horizon of choice. These contradictions epitomise the fragile line between cultural preservation and cultural ossification.

Proverbs and folktales intensify this complexity. They remain reservoirs of ethical wisdom, teaching reciprocity, humility, and communal responsibility (Masaka & Makahamadze, 2013; Makore, 2022; Mapara, 2013). However, as feminist critiques rightly note, they have also been weaponised to legitimise patriarchal dominance (Taringa, 2014). The proverb ‘*mukadzi inyama*’ is not a benign metaphor but a semiotic violence that reduces women to consumable objects. Here, the SCT mechanism of modelling becomes double-edged: young men internalise not only virtues but also oppressive gender scripts. Unless radically reinterpreted, proverbs risk transmitting toxic masculinities across generations under the guise of cultural fidelity.

Traditional courts (*matare*) stand out as pedagogical arenas where justice, reconciliation, and restorative ethics are publicly performed (Masitera, 2019; Mutanda, 2022). They embody Mbiti's (1990) dictum, "I am because we are," reinforcing the communal ontology of African jurisprudence. However, even this institution is vulnerable: in contexts where globalised legal rationalities privilege individual rights over communal accountability, the authority of *matare* can be eroded or co-opted. The danger, then, is not only that IKS may fade, but that it may survive in hollow form, deployed selectively, stripped of its ethical grounding.

The participants' reflections on folktales reveal similar ambivalence. Stories such as Mhuka dzaichera ttime once nurtured moral imagination and communal responsibility. Today, however, folktales risk becoming obsolete unless they are re-mediated through digital technologies (Nopasari et al., 2023; Saad et al., 2023). Here, EST is instructive: the macrosystem of globalisation has redefined the cultural ecology, forcing IKS to adapt or perish. Digitalisation may, therefore, be the only viable route through which ngano maintain their pedagogical power for contemporary youth immersed in digital lifeworlds.

Most troubling are the negative resonances of IKS: the ritualised normalisation of alcohol, the silencing of emotional vulnerability in men, and the dissonance with Christian values (Sarfo, 2023; Mokhoathi, 2020). These frictions illustrate that IKS is not an uncontested heritage but a living site of struggle between tradition, modernity, and religion. The result is often what Bhabha (1994) terms a "*third space*": young men oscillating between cultural obligation and Christian morality, between inherited authority and modern individualism. This liminality can generate resilience, but it can also engender profound moral disorientation.

What then emerges is a picture of IKS not as a static repository of wisdom but as a contested discursive terrain, a site of both empowerment and peril. Its power lies in *Ubuntu/Unhu's* communitarian ethos, in ecological stewardship, and in the moral architectures of taboos, proverbs, and courts. Its peril lies in the uncritical reproduction of gendered oppression, the entrenchment of dogmatic practices, and its vulnerability to manipulation under modern pressures. Thus, the challenge for policymakers, educators, and community leaders is not to reject or romanticise IKS, but to *re-imagine* it, pruning its regressive elements while amplifying its emancipatory possibilities. Only then can IKS function not

as a relic of cultural memory but as a critical resource for forging responsible, resilient, and gender-just masculinities in Zimbabwe.

Strategies for bridging the gap between traditional and modern generations

Bridging the chasm between tradition and modernity in Zimbabwe's IKS is not merely a matter of cultural preservation. However, an existential demand, for what is at stake, is the ontological grounding of boys and men in an era of fractured identities, as Mbembe (2001) reminds us that postcolonial subjectivities are forged in the tension between inheritance and rupture, where cultural memory becomes both weapon and burden. In this liminal terrain, IKS functions as a palimpsest: an archive of *Ubuntu/Unhu* ethics, communal labour, and ecological stewardship, yet also a repository of gendered exclusions and semiotics of violence inscribed on bodies through taboos, proverbs, and ritual.

The task, then, is not to romanticise IKS as an uncorrupted precolonial wisdom nor to dismiss it as an outdated remnant, but to reconfigure it within what Bhabha (1994) would describe as a "third space" of negotiation, where traditional forms intersect with digital modernity without merely mimicking. This demands urgent action: policies that legally safeguard traditional intellectual property; digital interventions that revitalise oral genres through mobile apps, animations, and virtual archives; and pedagogical integration of IKS into curricula to restore its performative vitality. In this way, *ngano* or *dare* are no longer seen as mere relics but become technologies of memory, made comprehensible to 21-century youth.

Yet, this reanimation must be coupled with critical excision. Certain IKS practices, those that reinforce toxic masculinities, silence women, or sanction exclusion, must be interrogated under the ethics of *Ubuntu/Unhu* itself, which prescribes dignity, reciprocity, and relational humanity. Here lies the paradox: *Ubuntu* demands both fidelity to ancestral wisdom and courage to prune the elements that perpetuate domination. Semiotics of violence embedded in certain proverbs or rites must be transposed into the semiotics of care. To fail to do so is to risk producing what Mbembe terms "necropolitics", a culture where life is diminished under the guise of tradition.

Future research must, therefore, extend these debates by examining how boys and men negotiate identity under competing epistemic regimes: the authority of IKS, the disciplinary gaze of Western education, and the destabilising flows of digital media. Moreover, the gendered transmission of IKS remains under-

theorised; how women embody, contest, and reconfigure these knowledges is central to whether IKS functions as emancipation or incarceration. In this sense, IKS is a battlefield of meaning, a shifting site where cultural identity is constantly rewritten.

Ultimately, the strategy is not compromise but transformation: a radical, dialogical rearticulation of IKS that honours its ontological depth while refusing its oppressive residues. If successfully pursued, IKS will cease to be a two-edged sword and become, instead, a double helix of continuity and innovation, a cultural DNA capable of sustaining Zimbabwean boys and men in the unfinished project of becoming.

Conclusion

This study has highlighted the ambivalent power of IKS in Zimbabwe: totemic symbols, proverbs, taboos, folktales, and traditional courts serve both as anchors of moral development and as potential sources of exclusion. As the findings show, these cultural tools are not dormant remnants of the past but active mechanisms of socialisation that shape the behaviour and character of boys and men, teaching discipline, respect, and communal responsibility. However, as a double-edged sword, IKS also carries the risk of perpetuating toxic masculinities, silencing women, and conflicting with emerging ethical frameworks.

The urgency is in rethinking IKS not as nostalgia but as praxis. To keep its relevance, Zimbabwe must involve all stakeholders, including elders, policymakers, educators, parents, and the youth, in developing interventions that are culturally sensitive, critically blended, and responsive to modern realities. Only through such dialogue-based reinvention can IKS prevent becoming rigid and instead become what Bhabha (1994) would call a “third space” of cultural negotiation, where ancestral wisdom engages with contemporary challenges without loss.

Philosophically, the imperative is to harness *Ubuntu/Unhu* as the normative compass: to amplify values of dignity, reciprocity, and solidarity, while excising those elements that perpetuate domination or violence. Mbembe’s (2001) warning against necropolitical logics resonates here: if IKS is deployed uncritically, it risks becoming an apparatus of symbolic death rather than a force for cultural life. Conversely, when rearticulated with reflexivity, it becomes a reservoir of resilience, a cultural DNA capable of carrying Zimbabwean boys and men through the disorientations of global modernity.

Based on the findings, the study concludes that IKS plays a significant role in shaping the behaviour and character development of Zimbabwean boys and men. However, if not carefully monitored, these same elements can inflict harm. Zimbabwe must, therefore, commit to intervention strategies that blend tradition with modernity in culturally grounded ways, ensuring that IKS supports rather than stifles human flourishing. This study offers a foundational lens, but its greater promise lies in inspiring further inquiry into intersections with modern education, digital technologies, gendered experiences, and policy frameworks. Future scholarship must thus seize this momentum, ensuring that IKS is not merely preserved but reconfigured as a force for social cohesion, cultural continuity, and sustainable development in the twenty-first century.

Ultimately, the future of Zimbabwean boys and men will not be secured by unthinking imitation of the past or blind acceptance of the present, but by developing a new way of understanding being where Indigenous Knowledge Systems are seen as tools for life rather than mere remnants of survival. To reclaim totems, taboos, proverbs, and folktales as living philosophies is to reject both cultural amnesia and cultural dictatorship. The task is urgent: to transform IKS into a horizon of possibilities, an ethical guide that grounds identity, resists violence, and leads Zimbabwe towards a future where tradition and modernity do not clash but work together in creating humane, dignified, and responsible men.

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Interviews

1. Mr Zhou (pseudonym) interview on the 25th of November 2024
2. Kudzai (pseudonym) interview on the 29th of November 2024
3. Headman Gurudza (pseudonym) interview on the 10th of December 2024
4. Chief Matyoramiti (pseudonym) interview on the 23th of December 2024
5. Mr Rukuni (pseudonym) interview on the 13th of January 2025
6. Mr Hove (pseudonym) interview on the 18th of January 2025

Focus Group Discussion

1. Takudzwa (pseudonym) participated on the 25th of January 2025
2. Mr Gumbo (pseudonym) participated on the 25th of January 2025
3. Mr Chimuti (pseudonym) participated on the 25th of January 2025
4. Tendai (pseudonym) interviewed on the 25th of January 2025
5. Tiki (pseudonym) interviewed on the 25th of January 2025
6. Mr Tevedzerai (pseudonym) interviewed on the 25th of January 2025
7. Mr Chihota (pseudonym) interviewed on the 25th of January 2025