Reclaiming Ancestral Wisdom: A Systematic Review on Integrating African Indigenous Knowledges in Social Work Education and Practice in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Despite global recognition of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) in social work ethics and definitions, their integration into education and practice remains limited, particularly in postcolonial contexts like Zimbabwe. Social work in Zimbabwe continues to be dominated by Eurocentric paradigms, resulting in a disconnect between professional training and cultural realities of local communities. This study systematically reviews literature on the integration of African Indigenous Knowledge Systems, particularly Ubuntu and ancestral wisdom into Zimbabwean social work education and practice. Guided by PRISMA 2020 and employing the SPIDER framework, 612 records were screened across seven databases, yielding 13 eligible studies published between 2015 and 2025. Thematic synthesis revealed four primary contributions of IKS: promoting culturally responsive practice through Ubuntu, decolonizing social work education, revitalizing community-based care systems, and inspiring hybrid models that integrate local and global paradigms. However, key barriers persist, including the hegemony of Western epistemologies, institutional resistance, epistemological tensions with rights-based frameworks, and the lack of formal documentation of IKS. The review concludes that meaningful integration of IKS is not only a curricular concern, but a social justice imperative. For Zimbabwean social work to achieve contextual relevance and cultural responsiveness, IKS must be structurally embedded in pedagogy, policy, and practice. This calls for collaborative curriculum reform, Indigenous knowledge documentation, and the development of practice models rooted in African worldviews.

Indigenization Statement

We, the authors of "Reclaiming Ancestral Wisdom: A Systematic Review on Integrating African Indigenous Knowledges in Social Work Education and Practice in Zimbabwe," are citizens of Zimbabwe who grew up in Zimbabwe and had the privilege of witnessing Indigenous practices within our communities. Specifically, the first and second authors witnessed and were influenced by the Shona practices, while the third author witnessed the Tonga practices. As social work educators in Zimbabwe, we experienced firsthand the challenges of integrating Indigenous

knowledges into the social work curriculum, despite ongoing efforts to achieve greater harmonization. Currently, the first and second authors are teaching social work in Eswatini, a country with a rich cultural heritage that has also inherited a social work syllabus from its colonial past. The third author is now teaching social work in Australia, a country actively seeking to decolonize its social work education and practice. We acknowledge our positionality as Zimbabwean scholars with roots in and connections to the Indigenous communities of Zimbabwe, discussed in this manuscript. We recognize the importance of respecting and honoring Indigenous knowledges, practices, and communities of Zimbabwe. Our aim in this publication is to contribute to the discourse on integrating African Indigenous knowledges into social work education and practice, with a focus on Zimbabwe, in a manner that is respectful and beneficial to the Indigenous communities.

Introduction

Social work, as equally an art, science, and profession, is inherently dynamic, shaped by evolving socio-political, cultural, and economic contexts in which it operates. Despite its global expansion, the profession remains dominated by Western epistemologies, which often universalize theory and practice, marginalizing culturally grounded alternatives (Mupedziswa & Mushunje, 2021; Mugumbate et al., 2023). This universalization has led to persistent professional dissonance in the Global South, where practitioners struggle to reconcile local realities with international standards of practice and education (Mwapaura et al., 2024). In Zimbabwe, the mismatch between imported models and Indigenous needs has rendered social work interventions remedial, individualistic, curative, and culturally detached, especially in rural and marginalized communities (Muridzo et al., 2022; Kurevakwesu et al., 2023). Emerging decolonial frameworks across Africa now call for reclaiming of African Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) to restore relevance, sustainability, and community ownership in social service provision (Muzingili, 2025). Central to this resurgence is Ubuntu philosophy, which emphasizes relationality, collectivism, and restorative justice, principles that align closely with the ethical foundations of social work (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2019).

This study addresses a critical gap in decolonizing social work by systematically reviewing literature on the integration of IKS, with particular attention to Ubuntu philosophy, into Zimbabwe's social work education and practice. Rooted in the urgency to develop culturally relevant, sustainable, and context-responsive models of social service provision, the review seeks to examine both the potential value and structural complexities surrounding this integration. To achieve this, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the potential benefits of incorporating Indigenous Knowledge Systems, particularly ancestral wisdom and Ubuntu into social work education and practice in Zimbabwe?

2. What barriers hinder the integration of Indigenous Knowledge Systems into Zimbabwe's social work education and service delivery frameworks?

These questions are designed to explore not only the epistemological significance of IKS in enhancing relevance, legitimacy, and sustainability in social work, but also to critically interrogate the institutional, pedagogical, and policy-level constraints that limit their integration.

Understanding Social Work and the Imperative for Indigenous Integration

Social work is a globally recognized profession committed to promoting social change, human rights, social justice, and the empowerment and liberation of individuals and communities. The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) define social work as:

> A practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility, and respect for diversities are

central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities, and Indigenous knowledges… (IFSW, 2014).

This definition acknowledges IKS as a legitimate foundation for social work theory and practice. However, in practical terms, the incorporation of Indigenous worldviews into mainstream social work education, policy, and service delivery remains minimal and often tokenistic (Gray & Coates, 2020). Globally, social work operates through a variety of methods and approaches, including casework, group work, community work, policy advocacy, and research. These methods are often taught through a Euro-American theoretical lens, with models such as Biestek's principles, the person-in-environment framework, and clinical case management dominating curricula (Simbine, 2024; Mwapaura et al., 2024). While such models have proven effective in certain contexts, they are frequently misaligned with collectivist, relational, and spiritual worldviews held by many Indigenous communities globally (Muzingili, 2025; Mabvurira, 2018).

Social work's ethical obligations, as outlined in the Global Social Work Statement of Ethical Principles (IFSW, 2018), emphasize respect for human dignity, cultural diversity, and the right of people to make their own choices. These principles call for sensitivity to local cultures and the promotion of Indigenous knowledge. Yet, colonial legacies embedded in social work education and institutions continue to marginalize Indigenous voices, leading to epistemic injustice (Bhangyi & Makoha, 2023). The failure to meaningfully engage with IKS has created a professional dissonance, especially in the Global South, where practitioners often struggle to apply Western theories to local contexts (Mabvurira, 2018; Twikirize & Tusasiirwe, 2023). Indigenous communities possess rich bodies of knowledge, including oral traditions, spiritual practices, communal care systems, and nature-based healing, which are deeply aligned with social work's principles of relationality and well-being (Mabvurira, 2018).

Globally, scholars are increasingly advocating for the reconfiguration of social work to better reflect the cultural, historical, and social realities of diverse populations. For instance, Muridzo et al. (2022) argue that IKS offers not only culturally relevant practice frameworks, but also sustainable and empowering approaches rooted in community participation and shared responsibility. Similarly, Mugumbate et al. (2023) emphasize that the Ubuntu philosophy, with its focus on interconnectedness and collective humanity, offers a powerful lens for rethinking social work ethics and interventions. Incorporating Indigenous knowledge into social work is not merely an academic exercise; it is essential for ensuring epistemological justice, cultural relevance, and effective service delivery. It allows for the co-construction of knowledge between practitioners and communities and challenges the dominance of Western-centric paradigms that often fail to resonate with local populations (Kurevakwesu et al., 2023; Gray & Coates, 2020).

As the world grapples with complex social issues ranging from climate change to systemic inequality, there is a pressing need for contextualized, inclusive, and decolonized social work frameworks. This necessitates a shift from universalized practice models to those that are localized, blending global principles with local realities (Mwapaura et al., 2024). This systematic review is thus timely and essential.

Social Work Practice with Indigenous Communities: Global Empirical Lessons

Internationally, social work practice with Indigenous communities has increasingly come under scrutiny, with scholars and practitioners recognizing the inadequacy of dominant Eurocentric paradigms in addressing Indigenous peoples' unique cultural, historical, and relational needs. Empirical research from North America, South America, Oceania, Europe, and Africa points to both the challenges and opportunities in integrating Indigenous knowledge

systems (IKS) into social work practice, offering valuable lessons for countries like Zimbabwe seeking to decolonize their welfare services.

Empirical studies in Canada reveal that social work with Indigenous populations remains marked by distrust, stemming from colonial policies and intergenerational trauma. A study by Burke (2018) involving First Nations communities in Ontario showed that culturally disconnected welfare services led to service avoidance and high attrition rates among Indigenous clients. Participants emphasized the need for community-led programming, inclusion of elders in service design, and land-based healing as central to effective engagement. Similarly, Davidson-Cowling (2018) evaluated culturally grounded child welfare initiatives and found that incorporating ceremonies, storytelling, and kinship mapping not only improved outcomes but also restored cultural identity among Indigenous children in care. In the U.S., a qualitative study by Gray & Coates (2016) on Native American social service users across three reservations found that tribal sovereignty and self-governance in program delivery significantly increased trust and participation.

Australia's social work engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples offers important practical insights. A study by Bessarab and Wright (2019) on Indigenous clients and social workers, found that cultural responsiveness, defined by the ability to understand and respect Aboriginal kinship systems, was the most significant factor in effective intervention. The study also found that interventions designed with community co-creation had higher acceptance rates and reduced re-entry into the child protection system. Furthermore, a longitudinal evaluation by Duthie et al. (2013) of community-based mental health programs in Western Australia found that embedding Aboriginal healing practices, such as yarning circles and connection to country, led to improved mental health outcomes.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, social work is constitutionally shaped by the Treaty of Waitangi, mandating a bicultural approach. Empirical research supports the efficacy of Māori-led models. For example, a study by Walsh-Tapiata (2016) evaluated the Whānau Ora framework, a culturally embedded social service model. The findings demonstrated that when Māori values such as whakapapa (genealogy), manaakitanga (care), and tapu (sacredness) were prioritized, families reported higher satisfaction, better engagement, and long-term empowerment. In Latin America, Indigenous peoples in Ecuador, Bolivia, and Brazil have advocated for social work that aligns with their communal and spiritual philosophies. A field study by Fricas (2019) on Kichwa communities in Ecuador revealed that interventions that respected cosmovisión Andina, a worldview grounded in reciprocity, balance, and communality, were more successful in addressing domestic violence and substance abuse. Social workers who engaged Indigenous mediators and used ritual spaces for healing were perceived as more legitimate and trustworthy. Similarly, in Brazil, a participatory action research project by Duthie et al., (2013) among the Guarani people found that social programs grounded in ancestral storytelling, nature rituals, and communal decision-making helped reduce youth incarceration and fostered intergenerational solidarity.

In northern Europe, the Sámi people of Norway, Sweden, and Finland have also pushed for culturally grounded interventions. A study by Cambou and Ravna (2024) in Norway found that Sámi families were more engaged in child welfare processes when social workers involved Sámi language speakers, Indigenous reindeer herders, and spiritual leaders (noaidi) in interventions. The study emphasized the role of cultural brokers in bridging state services and Indigenous epistemologies. Within Africa, empirical studies point to the ongoing relevance of Indigenous systems. A study by Twikirize & Tusasiirwe (2023) in Uganda found that

community-based mechanisms such as elders' councils, clan-based care, and Indigenous conflict resolution were more trusted than formal welfare systems, especially in rural areas. Similarly, in South Africa, a case study by Naami and Mfoafo-M'Carthy, (2023) demonstrated that integrating Ubuntu philosophy into restorative justice programs led to reduced recidivism and enhanced community cohesion.

Social Work Education and Practice in Zimbabwe: Between Western Foundations and Indigenous Realities

Social work in Zimbabwe, as in many postcolonial African nations, has evolved under the shadow of colonial legacies, with its educational and practical frameworks deeply embedded in Western epistemologies. Despite over four decades of independence, the profession continues to grapple with the tension between foreign conceptual imports and the cultural, spiritual, and communal realities of Zimbabwean society (Mupedziswa et al., 2020; Chidyausiku & Bohwasi, 2021). This section explores the historical foundations and current state of social work education and practice, specifically assessing the extent to which the profession has integrated ancestral wisdom and Ubuntu.

Social work was formally introduced in Zimbabwe (then Southern Rhodesia) during the colonial period, primarily as a tool of social control rather than social justice (Chidyausiku & Bohwasi, 2021). Rooted in British models, early social work focused on managing urban African populations, controlling juvenile delinquency, and providing minimal welfare to the colonial elite and selected "deserving" Africans. As Muridzo et al. (2022) argue, this early model was remedial and paternalistic, with little regard for Indigenous methods of social care, such as kinship-based support systems, Indigenous conflict resolution, and spiritual healing.

The formal training of social workers in Zimbabwe was institutionalized in the 1960s, with curricula modelled after British and American social work schools (Mabvurira, 2018). These early curricula emphasized casework, social administration, and psychodynamic theory, with minimal engagement with local languages, philosophies, or Indigenous forms of welfare. Even after independence in 1980, the structure and content of social work education remained largely Western. Tertiary institutions have continued to teach core social work courses such as Human Behaviour in the Social Environment, Research Methods, and Clinical Casework using predominantly Western textbooks, theories, and case studies (Muzondo & Zvomuya, 2023; Muzingili et al., 2024). While some localized content has been introduced, such as discussions on Ubuntu and extended family systems, these are often marginal and theoretical, rather than foundational or practice-oriented (Mabvurira, 2018). Recent scholarship by Muzingili (2025) critiques the epistemological dominance of extractive Western research paradigms in social work education. Many academic social workers are advocating for a shift towards a decolonizing methodology, critical ethnography, narrative- and counter-narrative analysis and other participatory research approaches that are better suited to capturing lived experiences, oral histories, and spiritual dimensions of Indigenous communities.

In practice, social work in Zimbabwe continues to straddle the line between remedial intervention and developmental engagement. Casework remains the dominant mode of intervention in state and NGO settings, particularly in child protection, mental health, and probation services. These interventions often draw on Western practice models, with limited contextual adaptation (Mavuka et al., 2025). Group work and community work are also practiced, especially in HIV/AIDS programming, gender-based violence interventions, and rural development. However, as Simbine (2024) notes, these methods are often implemented through

donor-driven frameworks that prioritize measurable outcomes over cultural relevance. Community work tends to replicate top-down development models, sidelining Indigenous leadership structures and collective decision-making mechanisms.

There is growing recognition among practitioners and scholars that meaningful social work practice in Zimbabwe must be culturally congruent. Yet, as Mwapaura et al. (2024) observe, most practice frameworks used in Zimbabwe are either direct imports or slight modifications of Western models like the biopsychosocial model, systems theory, or strengths-based approaches. While these have utility, they often fail to incorporate Indigenous concepts such as ngozi (spiritual retribution), kurova guva (ancestral rituals), and nhaka (inheritance rituals), which are central to many clients' worldviews. Some emerging frameworks attempt partial indigenization. For instance, Ubuntu-informed approaches have been experimented within community-based rehabilitation programs and restorative justice initiatives (Muridzo et al., 2022). However, these remain fragmented and under-theorized, lacking institutional support or curricular integration.

Despite its long-standing presence, social work in Zimbabwe remains largely Western in its educational philosophy, research orientation, and practice frameworks. While there are growing calls for decolonization and indigenization especially in research methods, ethics, and community work, these shifts are nascent and often peripheral. The challenge ahead lies in systematically embedding Indigenous Knowledge Systems into both training and practice of social work.

Methodology

This study employed a systematic review methodology to reclaim ancestral wisdom and Ubuntu, into Zimbabwe's social work education and practice. The review was guided by the PRISMA 2020 guidelines. All three researchers were actively involved in each stage of the review process to ensure analytical depth, consensus, and quality assurance.

Stage 1: Identifying the Research Question

The first step in a systematic review involves defining a clear, focused, and answerable research question that guides the selection, analysis, and synthesis of relevant literature. This review was designed to examine both positive contributions and structural constraints surrounding the integration of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) in Zimbabwean social work. To ensure methodological alignment with systematic review standards, the SPIDER framework was employed to formulate research questions:

- **Sample (S):** Social work educators, practitioners, students, policy actors, and communities in Zimbabwe.

- **Phenomenon of Interest (PI): Integration** of African Indigenous Knowledge Systems (particularly Ubuntu and ancestral wisdom).

- **Design (D):** Empirical studies, theoretical articles, case studies, policy analyses, and conceptual papers.

- **Evaluation (E):** Perceived benefits, challenges, outcomes, or implications of IKS integration.

- **Research Type (R):** Qualitative, theoretical, and mixed-methods studies.

Based on this framework, two research questions were developed as stated above. These questions were deemed appropriate for a systematic review because they address both practical applications and structural issues, allowing for a comprehensive synthesis of empirical and theoretical findings within the Zimbabwean context.

Stage 2: Identifying Relevant Studies

The second stage involved the systematic identification of relevant peer-reviewed studies and grey literature that addressed the integration of IKS, particularly ancestral wisdom and Ubuntu into social work education and practice in Zimbabwe. To ensure that the search was both comprehensive and replicable, a multi-pronged search strategy was employed, combining electronic database queries with manual searches of reference lists and institutional repositories.

Databases and Sources

All searches were conducted between June 1, 2024, and January 15, 2025. The following scholarly databases and repositories were selected for their relevance to social sciences, African studies, Indigenous pedagogy and health and social work research as shown in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Databases and sources used in the systematic review

Database / Source	Rationale
Google Scholar	Wide coverage of academic and grey literature
African Journals Online (AJOL)	Africa-focused, peer-reviewed journals in social sciences
Sabinet African Journals	Southern African research repository with local journal access
PubMed	For interdisciplinary research involving health and social work
Scopus	High-quality peer-reviewed international journals
University of Zimbabwe IR	Institutional repository for dissertations and theses
ResearchGate	Access to working papers and preprints from regional scholars

Search Terms and Boolean Strategy

A combination of Boolean operators, truncation, and phrase searching was used to capture a wide range of relevant studies. Keywords were developed based on core concepts of research questions: Indigenous Knowledge Systems, Ubuntu, social work practice, and Zimbabwe. Table 2 shows the key search words used:

Table 2: Core Search Keywords

Concept	Keywords Used
Indigenous Knowledge	"Indigenous knowledge systems" OR "African Indigenous knowledge" OR "ancestral wisdom" OR "Indigenous knowledge"
Philosophy	Ubuntu OR "African philosophy" OR "communitarian ethics"
Social Work	"Social work education" OR "social work practice" OR "social services" OR "social work profession"
Country / Context	Zimbabwe

Search Yield and Management: Screening Process

The initial search across all databases yielded a total of 612 records. After de-duplication using Zotero reference management software, 487 unique records remained. These were then subjected to a two-stage screening process: title and abstract screening, followed by full-text review. Based on title and abstract relevance to the research questions and Zimbabwean context, 128 articles were selected for full-text assessment. After applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria, 41 articles were deemed eligible for in-depth quality appraisal. Following this rigorous review, 13 articles were selected for final inclusion in the synthesis, based on their methodological quality, contextual relevance, and contribution to answering the research questions. In addition to electronic database searches, manual backward reference checks were conducted on key articles to identify any potentially omitted studies. However, no new articles

meeting the criteria were identified through this method. All records were systematically

organized and annotated in Zotero, allowing for transparent tracking of decisions and inter-

reviewer collaboration. The above is shown in Table 3 below:

Table 3: Search Transparency

Database	Initial Hits	After Duplicates Removed	Included in Full-Text Review
Google Scholar	205	180	40
AJOL	120	98	30
Sabinet	85	61	18
PubMed	42	36	8
Scopus	56	52	10
UZ Repository	64	39	12
ResearchGate	40	21	10
Total	**612**	**487**	**128**

Stage 3: Study Selection

The third stage of the systematic review involved a rigorous, multi-tiered screening

process to identify the most relevant and methodologically sound studies that directly addressed

the research questions. This process ensured the final selection of studies was aligned with the

review's scope, objectives, and geographical focus.

Eligibility Criteria

The inclusion and exclusion criteria were developed based on the Population–Concept–

Context (PCC) framework and refined through preliminary screening discussions among the

three researchers. These criteria served as the foundation for both the title/abstract screening and

full-text review stages as shown in Table 4 below:

Table 4: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Geographical Scope	Studies focused on Zimbabwe or included Zimbabwe as a primary case.	Studies unrelated to Zimbabwe or where Zimbabwe was only peripherally mentioned.
Topical Relevance	Addressed Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), Ubuntu, or ancestral wisdom within social work education or practice.	Focused on IKS in general, without linking to social work education and practice.
Time Frame	Published between 2015 and 2025.	Published before 2015 or not yet publicly available.
Type of Literature	Peer-reviewed journal articles, theses, dissertations, grey literature (NGO/government reports).	Purely editorial, opinion pieces, or media publications.
Language	English.	Non-English publications.
Methodological Quality	Demonstrated clear research methods or conceptual frameworks.	Lacked methodological transparency or scholarly grounding.

These criteria were applied consistently throughout the screening process. Ambiguities or borderline cases were resolved through team discussion and consensus.

Inter-Rater Reliability and Consensus Building

To ensure the rigour and reliability of the selection process, all three researchers independently reviewed each study at all stages. Any discrepancies were discussed in review meetings and resolved by consensus. This collaborative approach enhanced the credibility and transparency of the review and allowed for triangulation of perspectives. The final sample of articles included is summarized in Table 5 below:

Table 5: Study Selection Summary

Stage	Number of Articles
Records identified	612
After duplicates removed	487
Screened by title/abstract	487
Full-text articles reviewed	128

Articles excluded after full-text	115
Final studies included	**13**

Stage 4: Data Charting

After finalizing the 13 studies for inclusion, the review team proceeded to extract and organize relevant data using a structured data charting process. This step was essential in identifying recurring themes, contextual patterns, and variations across the included literature. A standardized data charting template was collaboratively developed by the three reviewers, drawing on best practices in qualitative systematic review methodology. The template was designed to align with the review objectives and research questions. The data charting template captured several core variables. These included the study's authors and year, full title, type of study (e.g., empirical, theoretical, or review), and the aim or purpose of the research. In addition, the charting process documented the Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) concepts explored, particularly Ubuntu, ancestral wisdom, or other culturally embedded values and the contextual focus of the study (e.g., education, practice, policy, or community-based social work).

To ensure the validity and reliability of the data charting process, each study was independently reviewed and charted by at least two researchers. All extracted data were cross-validated during weekly team meetings. Where there were inconsistencies or divergent interpretations, the team revisited the original texts to reach consensus. This process helped to enhance the methodological transparency and dependability of the review, in line with best practices in systematic review methodology. The following Table 6 shows the summary of the findings from 13 selected papers used in the data presentation and discussion:

Table 6: Summary of Included Studies[1] (n = 13)

Author(s), Year	Type	Focus Area	Methodology	IKS Concept(s)	Key Contribution / Challenge
Kurevakwesu et al. (2023)	Empirical	Welfare Policy & Practice	Qualitative (Interviews)	Ubuntu (implicit)	Reveals institutional tensions in transitioning towards a developmental social work state.
Mabvurira (2018)	Theoretical	Practice, Philosophy	Conceptual/Philosophical	African Thought, Ubuntu	Calls for professional decolonisation and embracing African worldviews in practice.
Mundau & Zvomuya (2021)	Theoretical	Education & Development	Literature-based/Reflexive	Indigenization, Ubuntu	Identifies systemic impediments to Indigenizing social work for development.
Muridzo et al. (2022)	Theoretical	History, Policy	Reflexive & Literature-based	Ubuntu, Social Justice	Chronicles social work's dual role in social control and change; advocates anti-oppressive practice.
Mwapaura et al. (2024)	Empirical	Education & Human Rights	Mixed Methods	Ubuntu, IKS, Human Rights	Highlights tension between IKS and human rights frameworks in curriculum and practice.
Simbine (2024)	Theoretical	Casework Ethics	Philosophical Analysis	Ubuntu	Reframes Biestek's principles through Ubuntu, promoting relational and human dignity ethics.
Muzondo & Zvomuya (2023)	Theoretical	Practice with Families	Conceptual Model	Ubuntu	Proposes a culturally grounded Ubuntu model for individual and family social work.
Mugumbate & Chereni (2019)	Empirical	Child Protection	Qualitative	Ubuntu	Demonstrates Ubuntu's application in child-focused interventions in Zimbabwe.
Mavuka et al. (2025)	Systematic Review	Humanitarian Social Work	Systematic Review	Ubuntu, Decolonisation	Synthesizes literature on Ubuntu's role in transforming humanitarian social work.

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[1] Table notes: **Types** of articles are labelled as Empirical, Theoretical, or Systematic Review for clarity. **IKS Concepts** include Ubuntu, ancestral wisdom, kinship care, and broader Indigenous knowledge systems (IKS). **Findings** reflect either contributions or challenges, depending on the article's emphasis. **Terminology** such as "conceptual," "reflexive," and "philosophical analysis" accurately reflects methodological distinctions in theoretical work.

Nhapi (2020)	Theoretical	Education & Practice	Literature Review	Decolonisation, IKS	Discusses practical and ideological challenges in decolonizing Zimbabwean social work.
Bhangyi & Makoha (2023)	Theoretical	Field Education	Conceptual	Ubuntu, Decolonisation	Explores decolonising fieldwork approaches and challenges in African social work education.
Mtetwa & Muchacha (2017)	Theoretical	Childcare Practice	Case-based Conceptual	Indigenous Care Models	Advocates for decolonized childcare models rooted in rural, Indigenous approaches.
Mupedziswa & Mushunje (2021)	Theoretical	Historical Analysis	Historical Review	Kinship Care, ZunderaMambo	Highlights colonial disruption of Indigenous care systems and calls for their revival.

Ethical Considerations

As all three researchers are trained social workers from Zimbabwe, reflexivity and cultural

humility guided the analysis, particularly in representing marginalized perspectives and

vulnerable populations. This study is a scoping review based on publicly available literature,

therefore no human participants were involved. However, care was taken to avoid epistemic bias

and misrepresentation. The researchers adhered to ethical standards in conducting and reporting

the review by maintaining accuracy and proper citations. Only peer-reviewed sources were used,

ensuring academic integrity and transparency. While formal ethical clearance was not required

due to the nature of the study, the review was conducted in accordance with social work values

of dignity, justice, and respect for cultural diversity. These were the ethical anchors that shaped

our approach to literature selection and interpretation. Bias in data extraction and synthesis was

minimized using predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. The study also followed a

structured systematic review protocol based on PRISMA 2020 guidelines. Using the SPIDER

framework, researchers were able to develop focused research questions for the study. While the

protocol was not formally registered, it was developed and approved by all researchers prior to

the review and was adhered to throughout the study process.

Findings and Discussion

This section presents a detailed thematic synthesis of the findings from the 13 included

studies, organized to directly answer the two primary research questions of this systematic

review. The first part focuses on the contributions of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) to

social work education and practice, while the second part addresses the challenges affecting IKS

integration.

Contributions of Indigenous Knowledge Systems to Social Work in Zimbabwe

The findings show that IKS offers culturally grounded frameworks that enhance relevance,

ethical practice, and community engagement. Four key themes emerged from the review and are

discussed below.

Ubuntu as a Foundation for Culturally Responsive Social Work

A major contribution of IKS, particularly Ubuntu, is its potential to ground social work in

the cultural realities of Zimbabwean communities. Ubuntu's emphasis on interconnectedness,

collective wellbeing, and human dignity provides an ethical and philosophical framework that

closely aligns with local social structures. Studies such as those by Mabvurira (2018),

Mugumbate & Chereni (2019), and Muzondo & Zvomuya (2023) demonstrate that Ubuntu-

informed practices such as kinship-based foster care, community caregiving, and informal

support networks are not only culturally acceptable but often more effective than state-led

remedial interventions. These models draw on pre-existing communal norms of solidarity, making them highly sustainable and locally legitimate. In practice, Ubuntu can foster deeper empathy, strengthen relationships between practitioners and communities, and promote holistic wellbeing. By integrating Ubuntu into social work, practitioners become better equipped to build trust, understand clients in their cultural context, and co-create interventions that resonate with local values. This positions Ubuntu not as a supplement, but as a foundational framework for culturally relevant practice.

Decolonizing Social Work through the Inclusion of IKS

The reviewed literature strongly supports the integration of IKS into education and practice as a strategy for decolonizing Zimbabwean social work curricula. Scholars such as Nhapi (2020), Mabvurira (2018), and Bhangyi & Makoha (2023) argue that current training models rely heavily on Euro-American theories and case studies, producing graduates who are often ill-prepared to work within Zimbabwean cultural contexts. Including IKS especially Ubuntu offers an opportunity to centre African philosophies and challenge the colonial legacy of knowledge production. Empirical evidence from Mwapaura et al. (2024) reveals that both students and lecturers favour the integration of Ubuntu into course content, suggesting strong support for change from within academic institutions. This inclusion not only affirms African identity and knowledge systems but also equips students with context-specific skills and ethical frameworks. Moreover, it fosters critical consciousness and reflexivity, allowing learners to question dominant paradigms and engage with multiple ways of knowing. The result is a more grounded, locally competent, and socially conscious graduate.

Revitalizing Community-Based and Indigenous Helping Systems

Indigenous knowledge systems also contribute significantly to reinforcing and legitimizing informal care systems, which continue to play a central role in Zimbabwe's social welfare landscape. Studies by Mupedziswa & Mushunje (2021), Muridzo et al. (2022), and Mtetwa & Muchacha (2017) highlight how Indigenous models of care rooted in Ubuntu, ancestral wisdom, and kinship networks support vulnerable groups such as orphans, the elderly, and people with disabilities. These systems are not just survival strategies; they reflect long-standing cultural practices that prioritize communal responsibility, spirituality, and relational wellbeing. By recognizing and integrating these Indigenous helping systems into formal social work, practitioners can build on existing community assets rather than impose external models. This approach reinforces cultural legitimacy, enhances sustainability, and fosters local ownership of interventions. Moreover, it encourages participatory partnerships between social workers and communities, blurring the boundaries between "professional" and "Indigenous" forms of support. Such revitalisation strengthens social cohesion and can serve as an effective response, especially in under-resourced settings.

Development of Hybrid and Transformative Practice Models

Another emerging contribution of IKS is its potential to inspire hybrid models that combine Indigenous and Western social work paradigms. Rather than viewing IKS and Eurocentric methods as incompatible, several scholars such as Mavuka et al. (2025) and Mwapaura et al. (2024) propose integrative frameworks that blend the relational ethics of Ubuntu with global principles such as human rights, evidence-based practice, and therapeutic techniques. These models allow Zimbabwean social workers to maintain international professional standards while delivering culturally appropriate interventions. In the education sector, such hybridity

encourages critical engagement with multiple epistemologies, fostering analytical and adaptive

thinking among students. It also addresses the tension between local relevance and global

recognition, allowing institutions to meet international accreditation requirements without

abandoning Indigenous identity. Importantly, hybrid models provide a pathway for epistemic

justice by legitimizing African knowledge alongside Western frameworks. They reflect a

pragmatic and politically aware approach to curriculum reform, practice innovation, and

knowledge production in postcolonial contexts.

Challenges to the Integration of Indigenous Knowledge Systems

The literature reveals that Western epistemological dominance, institutional resistance, and

curriculum inertia among other challenges limit meaningful inclusion of IKS.

Hegemony of Western Paradigms in Social Work Education and Practice

One of the most persistent challenges to integrating IKS into social work is the dominance

of Western scientific paradigms. As documented by Nhapi (2020), Mabvurira (2018), and

Mwapaura et al. (2024), Zimbabwean social work curricula remain heavily influenced by Euro-

American theories and positivist notions of "valid" knowledge. Western textbooks, research

models, and case studies are routinely prioritized, while African philosophies like Ubuntu are

either ignored or treated as supplementary. This epistemological hierarchy delegitimizes IKS and

creates a curriculum that is often culturally misaligned with students' lived experiences.

Moreover, due to the pursuit of internationalized qualifications and global recognition,

universities feel pressured to conform to Western academic standards. This results in a

disconnect between education and practice, as graduates struggle to apply foreign models in local

contexts. The dominance of science as hegemony also undermines the development of alternative research traditions rooted in oral, spiritual, or communal knowledge, further marginalizing African worldviews in academia.

Institutional Resistance and Curriculum Inertia

Despite growing discourse on the importance of IKS, institutional change remains slow and uneven across Zimbabwean universities. Studies such as Mundau & Zvomuya (2021) and Bhangyi & Makoha (2023) reveal several barriers to meaningful curriculum reform. These include bureaucratic rigidity, lack of policy frameworks, limited faculty capacity to teach IKS, and the absence of incentives for innovation. Even when there is individual or departmental willingness to integrate Ubuntu or other Indigenous concepts, systemic constraints often prevent substantive implementation. Accreditation bodies and academic committees may also resist changes perceived as lacking academic rigour or global competitiveness. Consequently, IKS is often included in piecemeal or tokenistic ways such as a single lecture or optional module rather than being embedded across the curriculum. This inertia not only undermines genuine educational transformation but also signals to students that African knowledge is secondary. Overcoming this challenge requires structural shifts in policy, leadership, and resource allocation within higher education institutions.

Epistemological Tensions between IKS and Rights-Based Frameworks

The integration of IKS into social work practice also raises complex ethical and epistemological tensions, particularly when Indigenous values conflict with statutory or rights-based frameworks. While Ubuntu promotes communal harmony, respect for hierarchy, and

collective responsibility, these principles may sometimes clash with individual rights especially

in areas such as gender equality, child protection, and mental health. For example, Mtetwa &

Muchacha (2017) note that Indigenous child welfare practices can prioritize family honour over

the best interests of the child. Similarly, Mwapaura et al. (2024) observed that cultural norms

around caregiving roles may reinforce patriarchal structures or suppress individual agency. These

tensions place social workers in difficult positions, where upholding cultural sensitivity could

entail compromising legal or ethical standards. The challenge, therefore, lies in finding a balance

between respecting Indigenous values and ensuring compliance with national laws and

international human rights obligations. This requires critical engagement with IKS not

romanticization, and careful adaptation to contemporary social justice goals.

Lack of Documentation, Theory, and Academic Integration of IKS

A major structural obstacle to IKS integration is the limited formal documentation and

theorisation of Indigenous knowledge. Unlike Western social work theories, which are

extensively codified in books, journals, and academic curricula, IKS often exists in oral

traditions, cultural rituals, and everyday practices. As noted by Mupedziswa & Mushunje (2021)

and Mavuka et al. (2025), this poses difficulties for academics and educators who are expected to

rely on peer-reviewed literature and written sources. The limited accessible, academically

recognized material on Ubuntu and ancestral wisdom means that IKS is often excluded from

syllabi, reading lists, and research training. Furthermore, many educators may lack the

methodological tools or disciplinary background to interpret and teach IKS within academic

settings. This gap reinforces the marginalisation of Indigenous knowledge and perpetuates its

invisibility in formal education systems. Without deliberate efforts to document, theorize, and publish IKS in scholarly formats, its integration will remain aspirational rather than operational.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study established that IKS, particularly Ubuntu and ancestral wisdom are not simply cultural artefacts but essential epistemological resources for indigenizing Zimbabwean social work. The findings point to a critical deduction: unless IKS is structurally embedded into social work education and practice, Zimbabwe risks continuing to produce professionals who are theoretically competent yet culturally disconnected. Ubuntu offers a profound alternative to the Western individualism that currently dominates social work curricula. Ubuntu provides a language of care, solidarity, and restorative justice that resonates with community realities across Zimbabwe. Furthermore, Indigenous caregiving systems, sustained through kinship networks and ancestral traditions, remain vital where state support is fragmented or absent. However, the review also reveals that these contributions are persistently undermined by structural and epistemic barriers, chief among them the enduring hegemony of Western knowledge. In sum, the marginalization of IKS is not merely an academic oversight, rather, it is a social justice issue that perpetuates knowledge inequality, weakens professional relevance, and limits the responsiveness of social work to the lived experiences of Zimbabwean communities. The future of social work in Zimbabwe depends on its ability to reclaim and re-centre Indigenous knowledge in both pedagogy and practice.

In light of these conclusions, the following recommendations are proposed to support the systematic integration of IKS into Zimbabwean social work:

- Universities, in partnership with Indigenous leaders, social work councils, and curriculum experts, should co-develop core modules on Ubuntu and ancestral wisdom within national social work curricula. This will ensure the production of culturally competent graduates who are capable of contextualizing theory with local knowledge systems and ethical frameworks.

- The Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, Innovation, Science and Technology Development, working with academic institutions and cultural preservation bodies, should fund national projects to document and publish Indigenous Knowledge in peer-reviewed and teaching-friendly formats. This will enrich the scholarly literature base and provide educators with credible resources for curriculum integration.

- Fieldwork placements should be restructured to include community-based learning partnerships with Indigenous healers, elders, and Indigenous courts, coordinated through joint oversight by universities and local social development offices. This approach will foster experiential learning and expose students to Indigenous models of care in real-world settings.

- National social work associations should collaborate with Ministry of Home Affairs and Cultural Heritage and the Ministry of Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare to advocate for accreditation frameworks that recognize Indigenous pedagogies as academically valid and professionally relevant. This will institutionalize IKS within the regulatory and policy architecture of Zimbabwean social work.

- Interdisciplinary research centres should be established within universities to critically theorize IKS, particularly Ubuntu, and to explore its application across

domains such as child welfare, restorative justice, and mental health among other key fields of social work practice. This will generate a robust, African-centred evidence base that strengthens the intellectual autonomy of Zimbabwean social work.

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