

The Double-Edged Drum: Digital Technologies and The Transformation of Traditional Cultural Practices in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Digitalization has profoundly influenced cultural practices, transformation and authenticity. This paper addressed the dual impact of digital technologies on the preservation, transmission and transformation of traditional cultural practices in Zimbabwe. Historically, cultural practices relied on physical artefacts and oral traditions. For generations, Zimbabwean cultural heritage encompassing chinyakare (traditional way of life), indigenous languages, oral folklore and ritual practices have relied on intergenerational oral transmission from elders to youth. However, rapid globalisation of mobile technologies, social media platforms such as TikTok, WhatsApp and YouTube, alongside digital archives, has disrupted this ecosystem. Digitalization presents challenges of cultural coherence and the potential loss of authenticity. Using qualitative research and document analysis, the study investigated digitalization's impact on traditional cultural practices. In Zimbabwe, digital media presents an existential threat of cultural homogenization where Western-centric digital consumption displaces localised traditions, resulting in the erosion of indigenous linguistic nuances and customary norms among tech-savvy youth. Observational data gathered through visits to virtual museums and digital archives and observation of individual interactions with social media platforms were analysed through a thematic approach. This paper concluded that while digital technology alters the traditional physical context of cultural practice, it simultaneously democratises access and expands cultural transmission to the global diaspora. To ensure stability, the study recommended a collaborative framework bridging traditional community elders with digital practitioners to foster culturally secure youth-led digital preservation.

Keywords: Digitalization, Cultural Homogenization, Digital Archives, Zimbabwean Cultural Heritage

1. Introduction

Zimbabwe stands at a cultural crossroads. The rapid proliferation of digital technologies mobile phones, social media platforms and digital archives has fundamentally altered how cultural knowledge is produced, transmitted and consumed. Historically, Zimbabwean cultural heritage, encompassing *chinyakare* (traditional way of life), indigenous languages, oral folklore, and ritual practices, relied on intergenerational oral transmission from elders to youth. This ecosystem of knowledge transfer, sustained through community ceremonies, family gatherings and formal customary instruction, is now being reshaped by the digital revolution.

This paper explored the dual-natured impact of digital technologies on traditional cultural practices in Zimbabwe. On one hand, digitalisation presents an existential threat through cultural homogenization and the erosion of authenticity; on the other, it offers unprecedented opportunities for preservation, democratisation and diaspora engagement. As Sipeyiye observes in the context of Ndaou indigenous religion, digital communication technologies are "a major agent of globalization" that has challenged traditional communication systems, yet African indigenous religions have demonstrated a "penchant for innovation and creativity" in adapting to new circumstances. This tension between threat and opportunity frames the central inquiry of this study.

The research draws on qualitative document analysis and observational data from virtual museums, digital archives, and social media interactions.

It sought to answer:

How are digital technologies transforming traditional cultural practices in Zimbabwe?

What are the implications for cultural authenticity and transmission?

What frameworks can ensure culturally secure digital preservation?

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Oral Tradition as Cultural Foundation

Zimbabwean cultural heritage is deeply rooted in oral traditions. Indigenous knowledge systems encompassing medicinal practices, religious rituals, agricultural wisdom and communal governance have historically been transmitted through face-to-face instruction from elders to youth. This reliance on oral and memory transmission has made such knowledge vulnerable to loss through globalization, climate change and the passing of elderly people. As Tsekea and Mapolisa note, "the threats of extinction of this knowledge particularly medicinal IKS such as herbal medicine and indigenous healing have been facilitated by lack of recordings since most of it relies on oral and memory transmission".

The cultural significance of oral transmission extends beyond information transfer to encompass relational and spiritual dimensions. The Mbira Hut project, documenting the intangible cultural heritage of Shona mbira music, exemplifies how oral traditions carry spiritual and social meaning that resist simple digitization. Yet it is precisely this ephemeral quality that makes such heritage vulnerable in an age of rapid technological change.

2.2 Digitalization as Disruption and Opportunity

The digital era has introduced what Mutize described as "cultural homogenization, where Western media and consumer habits often overshadow local traditions". This concern is echoed by Masunda, who laments that Zimbabwean youth "are growing up knowing more about Hollywood than about their own history" and that "our schools, our entertainment and even our social media feeds are increasingly Westernised". The linguistic dimension is particularly acute, as indigenous languages face erosion when English becomes dominant in digital communication.

However, technology also offers powerful tools for cultural preservation and revitalization. Zimbabwe has digitized over 8,000 archaeological site records, converting paper-based records, maps, and photographs into electronic databases for secure storage and improved access. The National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe (NMMZ) has launched a web-based collections management platform and is implementing 3D imaging of museum objects. These initiatives demonstrate the potential of digital technologies to preserve and promote cultural heritage.

The democratization of cultural production through social media is another significant development. Platforms like YouTube and Instagram now showcase Zimbabwean traditional music, dances, language, cuisine, and clothing to global audiences. Mutize argues that "instead of waiting for physical access to a museum or community elder, any Zimbabwean with a smartphone can now access and contribute to a growing digital archive of who we are and where we come from".

2.3 Cultural Homogenization and Authenticity Concerns

The tension between cultural preservation and digital innovation raises fundamental questions about authenticity. Some critics argue that technology dilutes the essence of traditional practices. As Langa notes, "purists argue that tradition should remain untouched by modern tools, fearing that the intrinsic value of these practices may be compromised".

This concern is vividly illustrated in debates over contemporary Zimbabwean weddings. Shambare observed that weddings, once carefully choreographed social rituals embodying "dignity, continuity and communal values," have increasingly become "spectacles where shock value increasingly outweighs meaning". Traditional leaders argue that "the erosion of traditional structures has stripped marriage of its moral guardrails".

Yet others view digital adaptation as cultural evolution rather than erosion. The Ndau people of Zimbabwe, as Sipeyiye demonstrates, have long demonstrated "a penchant for innovation and creativity in ways of thinking and doing things in order to survive in new circumstances". From this perspective, "digitalization is neither new nor opposed to African indigenous religions. Rather, it is the amplification of the old as it fuses with the new".

2.4 Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Digital Governance

Emerging scholarship on indigenous data sovereignty raises important questions about who controls digital representations of cultural heritage. As Bhebhe argues in the context of borderland communities, community archives in Zimbabwe often emerge as "a counter move by the marginalized to tell their stories

which are side-lined by those in power". The lack of digital presence among many culture houses in Masvingo Province underscores the digital divide that perpetuates exclusion .

Rukara and Chiripanhura explored the potential of Artificial Intelligence to enhance access to museum collections, while emphasising "the importance of inclusive practices that acknowledge local cultures and traditions". This points to the need for culturally sensitive digital governance frameworks that respect local knowledge systems while leveraging technological opportunities.

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research approach, combining document analysis with observational data. The document analysis examined academic literature, policy documents, and media reports on digitalization and cultural heritage in Zimbabwe. Observational data was gathered through visits to virtual museums and digital archives, documenting how individuals interact with social media platforms and digital cultural content.

The research design drew on the "theological ethnography" approach described by Sipeyiye, which sought to "access the meaning embedded in the indigenous Ndaus interaction with the digital communication services". Data were analysed through thematic analysis, identifying patterns related to cultural preservation, transformation, and authenticity.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 The Transformation of Cultural Transmission

The findings reveal a fundamental shift in how cultural knowledge is transmitted. Traditional oral transmission from elders to youth, once the primary mechanism for cultural continuity, is increasingly supplemented and sometimes supplanted by digital platforms. Artists like Awakhiwe (the "Ndebele Rap Queen") and Winky D demonstrate how indigenous languages and cultural references can thrive in modern musical genres, reaching audiences far beyond traditional community settings .

This transformation is not without tension. As Ndlovu observed, "elders often frame their critiques as protection, but policing youth creativity while ignoring algorithms only accelerates the loss of control". The speed of digital cultural production, amplified by algorithms, threatens to flatten complex cultural traditions into consumable patterns. Yet Ndlovu also argues that "culture survives when it is adapted and celebrated, not when it is feared" .

4.2 Democratization and Diaspora Engagement

Digital technologies have significantly expanded access to cultural heritage. The digitization of archaeological records and museum collections enables researchers, students, and the diaspora to engage with Zimbabwean heritage remotely. Social media platforms allow Zimbabwean creatives to showcase traditional arts to global audiences, creating what Mutize calls "cultural battlegrounds spaces where identity can be documented, shared, and celebrated".

The Mbira Hut project exemplified how digital archives can preserve and transmit intangible cultural heritage. By creating "a multimedia ethnographic archive of songs, video recordings, narrative text and lyrics of mbira music for cultural preservation and exploration," the project bridges the gap between

traditional practice and contemporary accessibility . This model suggests that digitalization need not be antithetical to authenticity but can instead serve as a tool for cultural continuity.

4.3 Challenges to Cultural Coherence

Despite these opportunities, significant challenges remain. The digital divide persists, with rural communities "which often preserve the most authentic traditions" being "least equipped to engage with the digital tools that could help protect those traditions" . Infrastructure limitations, including inadequate server capacity, limited equipment, and shortages of digital preservation specialists, constrain digitisation efforts .

More fundamentally, the influence of global digital culture raises concerns about cultural coherence. Masunda's critique of radio stations adopting foreign accents and programming content reflects broader anxieties about cultural displacement . The rising divorce rates in Zimbabwe 3,214 filings in 2024, up from 2,149 in 2023 are attributed in part to the erosion of traditional marriage structures and values. While not solely attributable to digitalization, these trends underscore the broader cultural transformation underway.

4.4 The Authenticity Question

The question of authenticity permeates debates about digital cultural preservation. Does digitization preserve or distort traditional practices? The evidence suggests a nuanced answer. While technology can indeed dilute context and meaning as when AI generates beats that "sound convincingly African without ever knowing what it means to belong to this soil" it can also enhance preservation and transmission when guided by cultural custodians.

The collaborative approach recommended by this study bridging traditional community elders with digital practitioners offers a pathway toward culturally secure digital preservation. Such a framework would ensure that digitisation efforts respect indigenous knowledge governance principles while leveraging technological capabilities. As Ndlovu argues, "Imagine AI trained on Zimbabwean languages, rhythms, and proverbs, guided by cultural custodians and technologists. Imagine machines that help preserve nuance rather than erase it" .

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper has examined the dual-natured impact of digital technologies on traditional cultural practices in Zimbabwe. The findings demonstrated that digitalization simultaneously threatens and enables cultural preservation and transmission. While Western-centric digital platforms risk cultural homogenization and the erosion of indigenous linguistic nuances, digital technologies also democratize access to cultural heritage and enable new forms of creative expression.

The research concludes that digital technology alters the traditional physical context of cultural practice but does not necessarily negate its cultural significance. Rather, it expands the possibilities for cultural transmission to the global diaspora and younger generations. The key challenge lies not in resisting digitalization but in ensuring that it serves culturally secure purposes.

To address these challenges, the study recommended:

1. **A collaborative framework** that brings together traditional community elders, cultural practitioners, digital technologists and policymakers to guide digitization efforts in culturally appropriate ways.
2. **Investment in digital infrastructure** in rural areas to ensure that the communities most rich in traditional knowledge can participate in digital preservation initiatives .
3. **Youth-led digital preservation programmes** that train young Zimbabweans in digital content creation while grounding them in cultural knowledge and values .
4. **Integration of indigenous data governance principles** into digitization projects to ensure that communities retain sovereignty over their cultural heritage .
5. **Balanced media and educational policies** that promote indigenous languages and cultural content alongside digital literacy .
6. **Research and development** of culturally sensitive AI applications that can assist in preserving and transmitting Zimbabwean cultural heritage without flattening its complexity .

Ultimately, the survival of Zimbabwean culture in the digital age depends on intentional effort. As Mutize concludes, "it will not happen by accident. But if we act boldly, invest wisely and embrace innovation, our cultural heritage will not only survive, it will thrive" .

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