Sacred Mountains, Sacred Rivers, and Taboos in Southern Africa – The Venda, Shangani, Shona, Bemba, Kalanga, Tonga, Sena, and the Suthu of South Africa, Zimbabwe, Zambia and Mozambique

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.51584/IJRIAS.2026.11100035

Received: 20 October 2026; Accepted: 25 October 2026; Published: 03 November 2026

ABSTRACT

Across Southern Africa, mountains, pools, rivers, waterfalls, forests and caves have long been regarded as sacred places inhabited by ancestral and territorial spirits. Access to them has been governed by taboos regulating who may enter, what may be taken and how people should behave. The article draws on secondary data analysis of classic ethnographies, historical studies and recent research on traditional ecological knowledge to examine such sacred landscapes and taboo systems among the Venda, Shangani (Tsonga), Shona, Bemba, Kalanga, Tonga, Sena, and Suthu (Sotho) of South Africa, Zimbabwe, Zambia and Mozambique. Indigenous knowledge systems theory provides the theoretical lens of the article. The analysis reveals four themes: mountains, forests and the ancestors; rivers, pools and water spirits; taboos as indigenous environmental governance; and the erosion, commodification and revival of sacred landscapes. Sociological and anthropological readings show that sacred sites and taboos are collective institutions that integrate religion, ecology, authority and memory. The article argues that these systems represent sophisticated forms of indigenous environmental governance that deserve recognition in conservation policy, while cautioning against romanticising them, since they are also embedded in relations of power, gender and authority. It concludes by recommending legal recognition of sacred natural sites, partnership with custodians, cultural impact assessment of dams, mines and tourism, gender-sensitive heritage policy and the integration of indigenous environmental knowledge into heritage-based education.

Keywords: sacred natural sites; taboos; indigenous knowledge systems; environmental ethics; African traditional religion; Southern Africa

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

In many parts of Southern Africa, certain places are approached with reverence and caution. A forested hilltop may be the burial ground of chiefs, where no tree may be cut. A deep pool may be the dwelling of water spirits, where women may not draw water with blackened pots. A mountain may be the seat of a high god whose voice speaks from a cave and to which pilgrims travel from distant countries to pray for rain. A lake may be so sacred that visitors must greet it in a prescribed way (Stayt 1931, Daneel 1970, Ranger 1999). Such places, and the taboos that govern them, form part of an enduring pattern of relationship between people, land, water and the spiritual world (Mbiti 1969, Schoffeleers 1979). The article examines that pattern among eight peoples: the Venda of northern South Africa; the Shangani also known as Tsonga of South Africa, Zimbabwe and Mozambique; the Shona of Zimbabwe and Mozambique; the Bemba of northern Zambia; the Kalanga of south-western Zimbabwe and north-eastern Botswana; the Tonga of the Zambezi Valley in Zambia and Zimbabwe; the Sena of the lower Zambezi in Mozambique; the Suthu or Sotho of South Africa, Lesotho and Zimbabwe. These peoples differ in language, social organisation and history, yet they share many beliefs and practices regarding sacred places and taboos (Junod 1927, Richards 1939, Colson 2006, Coplan 2003). The question is timely. Southern Africa faces deforestation, the degradation of wetlands, the pollution of rivers by mining and recurrent droughts associated with climate change, while conservation policy has historically excluded the communities whose institutions once protected these resources (Ranger 1999, Mawere 2014). At

ISSN No. 2454-6194 | DOI: 10.51584/IJRIAS |Volume XI Issue X October 2026

the same time, many young Africans regard taboos as outdated superstitions, and the custodians who hold sacred knowledge are ageing (Sinthumule and Mashau 2020). Understanding sacred landscapes is therefore important both for heritage and for environmental policy. The article first reviews the literature, sets out its theoretical framework and methodology, and presents four themes, followed by sociological and anthropological underpinnings, implications for African cultural values, a synthesis, conclusions and recommendations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sacred ecology and taboos

The relationship between religion and conservation has attracted growing attention. Berkes (1999) uses the term 'sacred ecology' to describe the knowledge, practices and beliefs that link indigenous peoples to their environments, arguing that traditional ecological knowledge is embedded in cosmologies attributing spiritual significance to land, water and living things. Colding and Folke (2001) analysed social taboos as 'invisible' systems of resource management, identifying habitat taboos, species taboos and taboos regulating the timing and methods of resource use, whose effects may include conservation even when their motivations are religious. Bhagwat and Rutte (2006) highlight sacred groves as reservoirs of biodiversity, Verschuuren *et al.* (2010) show the importance of sacred natural sites worldwide for cultural and biological diversity, and the International Union for Conservation of Nature has issued guidelines for protected area managers (Wild and McLeod 2008). In Zimbabwe, Byers *et al.* (2001) found that sacred forests in northern Zimbabwe persisted as relatively intact woodland within heavily used landscapes, and in South Africa Sinthumule and Mashau (2020) found that traditional knowledge and practices had helped conserve the Thathe Vondo sacred forest. Chemhuru and Masaka (2010) argue that Shona taboos function as sources of environmental ethics, prescribing behaviour that protects resources even though they are justified by spiritual sanctions. Murove (2009) and Ramose (1999) situate such ethics within a relational African philosophy in which human beings are connected to one another, to the ancestors and to nature, while Mawere (2014) argues that *ubuntu* offers resources for conservation. Critics caution that not all taboos have ecological effects and that the literature sometimes reads conservation intentions into practices whose purposes were religious or political (Fontein 2006).

Territorial cults, high gods and pilgrimage

A second body of work concerns religious institutions. Mbiti (1969) described African religious thought as permeating all of life, with nature inhabited by God, divinities, ancestors and spirits. Schoffeleers (1979) showed that territorial cults in Central Africa, centred on shrines of founding ancestors, regulated agriculture, rain rituals and resource use, while Schoffeleers (1992) traced the Mbona cult of the lower Shire Valley. Daneel (1970), Werbner (1989) and Nthoi (2006) studied the Mwali cult of the Matopo Hills, whose shrines attract Kalanga, Venda, Shona and Ndebele pilgrims. Ranger (1999) situated the Matopos within colonial land history, and Lan (1985) showed how Shona *mhondoro* mediums and their taboos shaped the liberation war. Coplan (2003) documented popular pilgrimages to sacred caves and mountains along the South Africa–Lesotho border. Werbner (1989) emphasised that regional cults integrate communities across political and ethnic boundaries through the circulation of pilgrims, gifts and messages, while Schoffeleers (1979) noted that the relationship between rulers and rain shrines was frequently tense, since control of rain conferred legitimacy. Daneel (2001) later showed how such institutions could be mobilised for ecological restoration. This literature demonstrates that sacred landscapes are embedded in regional religious and political systems rather than being isolated local beliefs.

Ethnographies of the eight peoples

A third strand comprises ethnographies. Stayt (1931) and Kirkaldy (2005) describe Venda religion and its encounter with missions; Junod (1927) the Tonga; Gelfand (1962) and Bourdillon (1987) Shona religion; Richards (1939, 1956) and Roberts (1973) the Bemba; Colson (1971, 1997, 2006), Scudder (1962) and Tremmel (1994) the Gwembe Tonga; and Isaacman and Isaacman (2013) the lower Zambezi communities affected by the Cahora Bassa Dam. Fontein (2006, 2015) examines contested sacred landscapes at Great

ISSN No. 2454-6194 | DOI: 10.51584/IJRIAS |Volume XI Issue X October 2026

Zimbabwe and Lake Mutirikwi. These works are invaluable but uneven, ranging from colonial-era ethnographies with evolutionist assumptions to recent studies that foreground community voices. Few compare the peoples concerned, and the Sena and Shangani in particular remain thinly documented compared with the

Shona and Tonga.

Gaps in the literature

The literature is fragmented by people, country and discipline (Schoffeleers 1979, Fontein 2006). Few studies compare sacred landscapes and taboos across Venda, Shangani, Shona, Bemba, Kalanga, Tonga, Sena and Suthu societies, and fewer interpret them explicitly through indigenous knowledge systems theory combined with sociological and anthropological perspectives. This article addresses these gaps through a secondary analysis of the existing literature.

Theoretical framework - indigenous knowledge systems

This article is anchored in indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) theory. Indigenous knowledge refers to the body of knowledge, practices and beliefs developed by communities over generations through interaction with their environments and transmitted orally, ritually and through practice (Berkes 1999, Odora Hoppers 2002). Hountondji (1997) uses the term 'endogenous knowledge' to stress that such knowledge is produced within African societies according to their own logics, rather than being imported. Berkes (1999) argues that indigenous ecological knowledge combines empirical observation, resource management practices, social institutions and worldview, so that it cannot be separated from the religious frameworks in which it is embedded.

IKS theory has a strongly decolonial dimension. Odora Hoppers (2002) argues that colonial science treated African knowledge as superstition and excluded it from education and policy. Mapara (2009) shows that indigenous knowledge in Zimbabwe was deliberately marginalised by colonial education and remains undervalued. Mawere (2014) explores how *ubuntu* and other African perspectives can inform environmental conservation, and Chilisa (2020) argues for research methodologies grounded in indigenous worldviews. Wa Thiong'o (1986) adds that colonialism worked by teaching Africans to despise their own culture, including their relationships with sacred places.

IKS theory is appropriate for this article for three reasons. First, it allows taboos and sacred sites to be understood as knowledge and governance rather than as irrational belief. Second, it foregrounds custodians, spirit mediums and communities as experts in the management of their environments. Third, its practical orientation towards integrating indigenous and scientific knowledge aligns with calls to recognise sacred natural sites in conservation (Wild and McLeod 2008, Verschuuren *et al.* 2010).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research design

The article adopted a qualitative approach based on secondary data analysis, which involves analysing data collected by others for different purposes (Johnston 2014). Heaton (2008) notes that secondary analysis allows researchers to address new questions, synthesise findings across settings and study phenomena that would be costly to investigate through fieldwork. The approach suited a comparative article covering eight peoples in four countries over more than a century, and it respected the sensitivity of sacred knowledge, which custodians may not wish to share with outside researchers (Chilisa 2020).

Data sources and selection

Data were drawn from classic ethnographies, peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, book chapters and international conservation guidelines identified through Taylor & Francis Online, JSTOR, African Journals Online and Google Scholar. Search terms included 'sacred forests', 'Lake Fundudzi', 'Mwali cult', 'Nyaminyami', 'taboos environment' and 'sacred natural sites Africa'. Sources were included if they addressed

sacred places, taboos or territorial cults among the eight peoples or offered theoretical tools for understanding them. Colonial-era ethnographies were retained where they remain foundational (Junod 1927, Stayt 1931) but read critically.

Data analysis

Documents were analysed using document analysis (Bowen 2009) and thematic analysis following the six phases of Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarisation, coding, searching for themes, reviewing, defining and naming, and writing up. Codes such as 'chiefs' graves', 'water spirits', 'rain shrines', 'prohibitions', 'dams' and 'revival' were generated inductively, grouped into candidate themes and reviewed against the data for each of the eight peoples. Comparison across peoples allowed common principles and variations to be identified, and the themes were then interpreted through IKS theory. Four themes emerged and are presented below.

Trustworthiness and limitations

Trustworthiness was enhanced by triangulating ethnographic, historical and ecological sources and by prioritising peer-reviewed material (Lincoln and Guba 1985, Bowen 2009). The literature is uneven: the Shona and Tonga are extensively documented, the Sena and Shangani less so. Colonial ethnographies reflect the assumptions of their authors. Disclosing unpublished ritual details was strictly avoided.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Four themes emerged, each interpreted below through IKS theory.

Mountains, forests and the ancestors

Among the Venda of the Soutpansberg, Stayt (1931) described sacred forests, pools and chiefs' burial places. The Thathe Vondo forest is regarded as the burial ground of chiefs and the dwelling of ancestral spirits, and restrictions on entry, tree-cutting and resource collection have helped conserve it, although younger people are less committed to taboos (Sinthumule and Mashau 2020). Among the Shangani, Junod (1927) described sacred woods where chiefs were buried and where cutting, hunting and other activities were forbidden, governed by a wider system of prohibitions denoted by *yila*. Such groves preserved forest patches within cultivated landscapes, illustrating Colding and Folke's (2001) habitat taboos. Because ancestral spirits were believed to reside near their graves, the vegetation around them was treated as spiritually charged and left undisturbed, so that religious belief and forest protection coincided. The Shangani landscape has been profoundly affected by labour migration, war and conservation: the creation of national parks now forming part of the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park involved the removal of communities from areas containing ancestral graves and sacred sites, raising questions about the rights of displaced people to visit and care for them (Berkes 1999, Wild and McLeod 2008). Among the Shona, hills associated with chiefs' graves are protected from cultivation, and Mount Nyangani and other Nyanga peaks are associated with ancestral presence and mysterious disappearances (Bourdillon 1987). The Shona recognise Mwari, ancestral spirits (*vadzimu*) and territorial *mhondoro*, whose mediums prescribe taboos, including prohibitions on killing certain animals in sacred areas (Gelfand 1962, Lan 1985).

Among the Kalanga, the Mwali cult centres on shrines such as Njelele in the Matopo Hills, from which the voice of the high god is believed to speak; delegations from Zimbabwe, Botswana and South Africa seek rain there, observing restrictions on dress, behaviour and the use of metal objects (Daneel 1970, Werbner 1989). Nthoi (2006) shows that control of the shrines has been contested, and Ranger (1999) that colonial creation of a national park displaced communities from the hills. Among the Bemba, Mwalule, the burial grove of the paramount chiefs, is protected by hereditary custodians and strict taboos, and agricultural rituals controlled the timing of tree-cutting for *citemene* gardens (Richards 1939, Roberts 1973). Among the Suthu, mountains such as Thaba Bosiu, where Moshoeshoe I is buried, and caves associated with the ancestors (*badimo*) and the prophetess Mantsopa are sites of pilgrimage, prayer and healing (Coplan 2003). Coplan (2003) shows that these pilgrimages combine African traditional religion with Christianity and express a sense of the land as an ancestral inheritance from which the Basotho were partly dispossessed by colonial boundary-making, so that

sacred sites are also sites of historical memory and political claims. Bemba royal ritual similarly linked the wellbeing of the paramount's ancestors to that of the whole kingdom, and Richards (1939) showed that *citemene* clearing, often criticised as destructive, was regulated by chiefly ritual that constrained its pace and allowed woodland to regenerate. Interpreted through IKS theory, these sacred mountains and groves show that communities identified, protected and managed significant ecological spaces through religious institutions long before formal conservation (Berkes 1999, Byers *et al.* 2001).

Rivers, pools and water spirits

Water is equally sacred. Lake Fundudzi in the Venda Soutpansberg is regarded as the dwelling of ancestral spirits and of a python spirit linked to rain and fertility; access is restricted, and visitors traditionally greet the lake by turning their backs to it and viewing it through their legs (Stayt 1931, Kirkaldy 2005). The Phiphidi waterfall became the focus of conflict in the 2010s when custodians objected to tourism development as desecration. Among the Shona, pools are inhabited by water spirits known as *njuzu*, who may abduct people and return them as healers, and rules forbid washing pots or drawing water with blackened containers near them; Chirorodziva at Chinhoyi is a well-known sacred pool (Bourdillon 1987, Chemhuru and Masaka 2010).

For the Gwembe Tonga, the Zambezi was the source of life and the home of Nyaminyami, a serpent-like river spirit. Neighbourhood shrines (*malende*), associated with founding ancestors, were sites of rain rituals (Colson 1997, 2006). The Kariba Dam, built in the late 1950s, flooded many shrines and graves and forced the resettlement of tens of thousands of Tonga, a displacement that was religious as well as economic (Scudder 1962, Colson 1971). Tremmel (1994) records Tonga accounts that interpreted the floods of 1957 and 1958, which damaged the works, as Nyaminyami's anger. The Sena of the lower Zambezi depended on seasonal floods for floodplain cultivation, coordinated through rituals to the spirits of river and land. Isaacman and Isaacman (2013) show that the Cahora Bassa Dam disrupted the flood regime, fisheries and livelihoods, and document residents' accounts in which these losses were expressed in terms of disrupted relationships with the river's spiritual forces. Schoffeleers (1992) shows that the neighbouring Mbona cult linked a martyred rain-maker to the river and the fertility of the land. Among the Suthu, the Lesotho Highlands Water Project has likewise flooded valleys containing graves and sacred places. Through IKS theory, this theme shows that sacred ecology governs time as well as space, attuning ritual calendars to rivers' rhythms (Berkes 1999).

The damming of the Zambezi illustrates the collision between two knowledge systems. Engineers and colonial planners regarded the river as a resource for hydroelectric power, while Tonga and Sena communities experienced it as a living being with whom they had relationships of obligation (Colson 1971, Isaacman and Isaacman 2013). Floodplain cultivation depended on reading the river's rise and fall, and the timing of planting, fishing and the movement of livestock was coordinated with rituals marking key moments in the seasonal cycle. When dams altered flows, they disrupted not only livelihoods but the knowledge and ritual calendars attuned to the river. The image of Nyaminyami, now widely sold to tourists, has become a symbol through which Tonga people articulate memories of displacement and claims for compensation and development, showing how sacred symbols can acquire new political meanings (Tremmel 1994, Colson 2006). The Venda Phiphidi dispute likewise became a focal point for national debates on the rights of custodial communities and the protection of sacred natural sites in South Africa, showing that sacred water remains a living political issue.

Taboos as indigenous environmental governance

Across the eight peoples, taboos regulate access to and conduct within sacred places: restrictions on who may enter, prohibitions on cutting trees, hunting, fishing, cultivating or polluting water, prescriptions for ritual behaviour, and periods during which work is forbidden (Junod 1927, Colding and Folke 2001). The Shona system of *zviera* prohibits cutting certain fruit trees whose produce is shared, killing animals associated with clan totems (*mitupo*) and polluting water sources (Chemhuru and Masaka 2010). Suthu prohibitions, denoted by *moila*, regulate conduct towards sacred places, the ancestors and ritual periods. Sacred places are frequently associated with rain and fertility, so that taboos are understood as conditions for rainfall; drought may be interpreted as the result of violations or of rulers losing ancestral favour (Schoffeleers 1979, Ranger 1999). Among the Shona, annual rain ceremonies held before planting bring communities together under chiefs and

ISSN No. 2454-6194 | DOI: 10.51584/IJRIAS |Volume XI Issue X October 2026

mediums to brew beer, offer prayers and observe taboos, and delegations to the Mwali shrines may receive oracular instructions criticising the conduct of rulers (Daneel 1970, Werbner 1989). Ranger (1999) shows that in the colonial period drought at the Matopos became an occasion for voicing grievances about land alienation, as the failure of rain was linked to disrupted relationships between people and land. Taboos thus operate as political as well as ecological institutions, providing a language through which communities evaluate leaders and the state (Lan 1985).

Taboos are integrated with political authority. Chiefs, spirit mediums and hereditary custodians control access and rituals. Their authority is reinforced by their role as guardians of the land (Lan 1985, Nthoi 2006). Women occupy ambiguous positions: many taboos restrict them, especially during menstruation and widowhood, yet women play central roles in rain and fertility rituals, and female ritual specialists are prominent among the Venda, where the *domba* initiation linked young women's fertility to the python associated with water (Stayt 1931, Richards 1956). Women's roles are bound up with water in particular: women typically draw water, and many taboos concerning sacred pools and springs regulate how they do so, recognising their intimate relationship with water sources and their responsibility for keeping them pure (Chemhuru and Masaka 2010). Richards (1956) showed how Bemba girls' initiation linked female sexuality and fertility to the wellbeing of the land. The erosion of sacred institutions may therefore diminish forms of authority that women have held, even as it relaxes restrictions that constrained them (Oyěwùmí 1997, Amadiume 1987). Interpreted through IKS theory, taboos are institutions of environmental governance that combine knowledge, rules, sanctions and authority, although their conservation effects are often incidental to religious purposes (Berkes 1999, Byers *et al.* 2001).

Erosion, commodification and revival

Sacred landscapes have been eroded by several forces. Christian missions often regarded traditional religion as heathen and discouraged the observance of taboos (Kirkaldy 2005). Colonial conservation removed communities from areas containing sacred sites, as in the Matopos, and was based on separating people from nature (Ranger 1999). Large dams at Kariba, Cahora Bassa and in the Lesotho highlands flooded graves and shrines (Colson 1971, Isaacman and Isaacman 2013). Mining, commercial agriculture, urban expansion and tourism have encroached further. Sacred symbols have also been commodified: Nyaminyami is a popular motif on souvenirs sold around Lake Kariba, detached from the community whose displacement it symbolises, and sacred sites are marketed for 'spiritual tourism' (Fontein 2006). Climate change intensifies pressure as drought raises demand for water from sacred pools; and declining yields push cultivation into sacred forests (Mawere, 2014).

Sacred landscapes have shown resilience. Daneel (2001) documented a movement in Zimbabwe in which chiefs, spirit mediums and leaders of African independent churches, through the Association of Zimbabwean Traditional Ecologists and the Association of African Earthkeeping Churches, promoted tree planting and the protection of sacred groves and water sources, an 'earthkeeping' that integrated traditional religion and Christianity. Custodians of Phiphidi challenged tourism development, and campaigns for recognition draw on IUCN guidelines (Wild and McLeod 2008). Recurrent droughts have renewed interest in rain rituals in some communities. Public debates have arisen over whether drought reflects neglect of ancestral obligations. Tourism, too, can be harnessed by custodians who set rules for visitors and share in revenues, although the authority to decide whether and how sacred places are opened must remain with custodial communities (Verschuuren *et al.* 2010). Sacred forests, wetlands and springs serve as refuges for biodiversity and as regulators of water flows under climate change, giving sacred ecology renewed relevance (Bhagwat and Rutte 2006, Mawere 2014). Interpreted through IKS theory, this theme shows that indigenous environmental knowledge is not a relic but a living resource that communities continue to adapt (Odora Hoppers 2002, Mapara 2009).

Sociological underpinnings

Sociologically, the findings show that sacred mountains, rivers and taboos are social facts that express and reproduce the collective life of communities. Durkheim (1995) defined religion as a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, set apart and forbidden, which unite adherents into a single moral

community. Njelele, Lake Fundudzi, Mwalule and the *malende* shrines are precisely such things set apart (Daneel 1970, Colson 2006). Durkheim described the collective effervescence generated in ritual gatherings, which rain ceremonies and pilgrimages to the Mwali shrines produce as communities gather, brew beer, dance and pray (Werbner 1989, Ranger 1999). Berger (1967) described religion as a 'sacred canopy' that legitimates the social order. Taboos give the rules of resource use a sacred legitimacy that secular regulation lacks (Chemhuru and Masaka 2010). Halbwachs (1992) argued that memory is sustained within social frameworks. Connerton (1989) that societies remember through bodily practices; pilgrimages, greetings at Lake Fundudzi and rituals at chiefs' graves are such practices of remembrance (Stayt 1931, Coplan 2003). Ostrom (1990) showed that communities govern common-pool resources sustainably through locally devised rules, monitoring and sanctions, challenging Hardin's (1968) prediction of a 'tragedy of the commons'; taboo systems are indigenous examples of Ostrom's institutions, with custodians as monitors and spiritual misfortune as sanction (Colding and Folke 2001, Byers *et al.* 2001).

A sociological reading directs attention to power, inequality and social change. Weber (1946) described modernity as the 'disenchantment of the world', in which rationalisation displaces magical and sacred understandings, and the declining observance of taboos among the young people under the influence of schooling, Christianity and urbanisation (Sinthumule and Mashau 2020). Bourdieu (1977) showed how symbolic power legitimates domination, and the control of sacred sites by chiefs, mediums and custodians converts religious authority into political power, as the contests over the Mwali shrines demonstrate (Nthoi 2006). Scott (1998) argued that states simplify complex local arrangements to make them legible, and colonial conservation and dam projects erased the sacred geography of the Matopos, Kariba and Cahora Bassa in favour of maps, boundaries and engineering plans (Ranger 1999, Isaacman and Isaacman 2013). Beck (1992) warned that modernisation produces new risks, among them the ecological damage now threatening rivers and forests. Gendered analysis inspired by Oyěwùmí (1997) and Amadiume (1987) shows that women's ritual authority over water and fertility may be undervalued by both colonial and nationalist accounts. Giddens (1984) reminds us that structures are reproduced through practice, so that each observance or violation of a taboo sustains or weakens the institution. Tönnies's (2001) distinction between community and society helps explain why taboos, which depend on dense face-to-face relationships and shared belief, lose force as people move into urban, contractual settings. Durkheim's (1984) argument that solidarity shifts from shared beliefs to specialised interdependence suggests that sacred ecology is renewable through new institutions, such as schools and conservation partnerships, if it is to survive. This sociological underpinning complements IKS theory by showing that sacred landscapes are socially produced and can be revived through deliberate collective action, as the earthkeeping movement shows (Daneel 2001).

Anthropological underpinnings

Anthropologically, the findings indicate that sacred landscapes and taboos are best understood as cultural systems of meaning. Geertz (1973) described religion as a system of symbols that establishes powerful moods and motivations. The python of Lake Fundudzi, the serpent Nyaminyami and the voice of Mwali are such symbols, condensing ideas about water, fertility, rain and ancestral power (Stayt 1931, Tremmel 1994). Eliade (1959) argued that sacred space is marked by a 'hierophany', a manifestation of the sacred that sets a place apart, and mountains and caves where spirits speak fit this pattern. Douglas (1966) showed that taboos protect boundaries between categories and that dirt is 'matter out of place', illuminating prohibitions on blackened pots at sacred pools and on menstruating women at shrines (Bourdillon 1987). Turner (1967) showed that ritual symbols are multivocal, and Turner (1969) that pilgrimage and ritual create *communitas* across social divisions, as the Mwali pilgrimages do across ethnic and national boundaries (Werbner 1989). Rappaport (1968) demonstrated among the Tsembaga Maring that ritual cycles regulate ecological relations, and Rappaport (1999) that ritual sanctifies social conventions. Lévi-Strauss (1963) argued that totemic classifications are ways of thinking with nature, a view that illuminates Shona *mitupo* (Chemhuru and Masaka 2010). Bird-David (1999), Descola (2013) and Ingold (2000) show that many indigenous peoples treat animals, rivers and mountains as objects with whom humans have relationships, which helps explain why violating a sacred pool is experienced as offending a being rather than damaging a resource. Basso (1996) shows that 'wisdom sits in places', and Venda, Tonga and Suthu landscapes similarly carry moral teachings (Colson 1997, Coplan 2003).

Anthropology must be examined critically for the discipline has been implicated in representing African religions as primitive. Colonial ethnographies, including those of Junod (1927) and Stayt (1931), contain valuable detail but also evolutionist assumptions that portrayed African beliefs as survivals awaiting replacem-

ent by Christianity and science. Horton (1971) instead argued that African religious thought is an explanatory system comparable to scientific theory, and Malinowski (1948) that magic and religion address uncertainties that empirical knowledge cannot master. Later scholarship has emphasised the dynamism of sacred landscapes: Ranger (1999) showed that the meanings of the Matopos changed through conquest and colonialism, Fontein (2006, 2015) that sacred sites carry contested meanings shaped by displacement and belonging, and Nthoi (2006) that sacred space is fought over. Evans-Pritchard (1937) showed that beliefs about misfortune are embedded in social relations, a point that applies to interpretations of drought. These debates encourage collaborative research in which custodians act as co-interpreters of their own traditions and control the disclosure of sacred knowledge, consistent with Chilisa (2020). Radcliffe-Brown (1952) argued that taboos express the social value attached to objects, so that prohibitions on sacred trees and animals affirm their importance to the group. Malinowski (1948) linked ritual to the management of uncertainty, an insight especially pertinent to rain in semi-arid environments. Ingold (2000) adds that knowledge of a landscape grows through dwelling in it, which is why sacred knowledge is transmitted through practice and pilgrimage rather than written instruction. In this respect, anthropological underpinnings combine appreciation of sacred landscapes as meaningful cultural systems with critical awareness of how knowledge about them has been produced and used.

Implications for African cultural values

The findings carry important implications for African cultural values. Sacred mountains, rivers and taboos embody the values of *unhu/ubuntu*, extending relational personhood to the ancestors and to the natural world (Samkange and Samkange 1980, Ramose 1999). Murove (2009) shows that African ethics emphasises interdependence and obligations to past and future generations, and taboos teach respect for elders, ancestors and the land. When sacred groves are cleared, pools polluted or shrines flooded, the loss is not only ecological; it weakens the values through which communities have defined responsible conduct (Mawere 2014).

A second implication concerns dignity and the transmission of values. Wa Thiong'o (1986) argued that a people taught to despise their culture lose the confidence to define themselves. The dismissal of taboos as superstition has contributed to such a loss. Reclaiming sacred landscapes as sources of knowledge affirms the dignity of custodians and rural communities and the principle that Africans should view their culture from their own location (Asante 2003). Heritage-based education, involving custodians and elders as teachers transmits these values to the young. A commitment to *ubuntu* requires honesty about exclusion, so that the revival of taboos does not reinforce gender discrimination.

A third implication concerns environmental stewardship in an era of climate change. The knowledge of seasons, rains, rivers and forests embedded in sacred ecology reflects a value of care for the earth that is urgently needed (Daneel 2001, Mawere 2014). Taboos that forbid cutting fruit trees or polluting springs express a recognition that resources belong to the community and to future generations as well as to the present (Chemhuru and Masaka 2010). Renewing these values, through families, churches, schools and traditional authorities, offers an African-centred foundation for environmental responsibility that does not depend on external models of conservation (Odora Hoppers 2002).

Synthesis

Taken together, the four themes show that sacred mountains, forests, rivers and pools among the Venda, Shangani, Shona, Bemba, Kalanga, Tonga, Sena and Suthu are governed by taboos that integrate religion, ecology, authority and memory. Eroded by missions, colonial conservation, dams and markets (Ranger 1999, Isaacman and Isaacman 2013), they remain resilient and capable of renewal (Daneel 2001). Interpreted through IKS theory and sociological and anthropological perspectives, they represent indigenous environmental governance relevant to present challenges. The comparison reveals some important variations. The Mwali cult of the Kalanga is a regional system that integrates communities across a wide area, whereas many sacred

groves belong to particular chiefdoms or lineages. The Tonga and Sena are riverine peoples whose sacred landscapes centre on rivers and floodplains, while the Suthu inhabit mountains and caves. These differences reflect environment, social organisation and distinct regional political histories.

CONCLUSION

This article examined sacred mountains, sacred rivers and taboos among eight peoples of South Africa, Zimbabwe, Zambia and Mozambique, drawing on secondary data. It showed that these peoples share an understanding of land and water as inhabited by spiritual beings, that taboos regulate resource use in ways that contribute to conservation, and that sacred authority is bound up with chiefs, mediums and custodians (Berkes 1999, Colding and Folke 2001). The article makes two contributions. First, it brings eight peoples into a single comparative frame. Second, by combining IKS theory with sociological and anthropological perspectives, it argues that sacred landscapes are institutions of environmental governance, not relics of superstition, while recognising their embeddedness in power and gender relations (Nthoi 2006, Fontein 2015). These systems have been eroded by missions, colonial conservation, dams, mining and markets, yet they have also shown resilience, as the earthkeeping movement and the defence of Phiphidi demonstrate (Daneel 2001). In an era of environmental crisis, they offer valuable resources for designing conservation that is rooted in local cultures and institutions. Because the article relies on secondary data, future research should include participatory fieldwork with custodians, mediums and communities, especially among the less documented Sena and Shangani.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing on the findings, the article makes the following recommendations.

1. **Recognise sacred natural sites in law.** Governments should recognise sacred sites as areas of cultural and biological significance and protect them from destructive development (Wild and McLeod 2008).

2. **Partner with custodians.** Conservation agencies should work with chiefs, mediums, custodians and religious leaders and support community-led initiatives (Daneel 2001, Byers *et al.* 2001).

3. **Assess cultural impacts.** Dams, mines and tourism projects should assess impacts on sacred sites and secure community consent (Isaacman and Isaacman 2013).

4. **Adopt gender-sensitive heritage policy.** Protection of sacred sites should recognise women's ritual roles and avoid reinforcing exclusion (Oyěwùmí 1997).

5. **Integrate indigenous environmental knowledge into education.** Heritage-based curricula should involve custodians and elders as teachers of sacred ecology (Mapara 2009, Mawere 2014).

6. **Promote further research.** Universities should undertake participatory research, especially among the Sena and Shangani, under the control of custodial communities (Chilisa 2020).

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ISSN No. 2454-6194 | DOI: 10.51584/IJRIAS |Volume XI Issue X October 2026

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