

The Utwala Mseto Model: African Polycentric Governance — A Comparative Synthesis of Traditional African, Constitutional-Democratic and Swiss Governance

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ABSTRACT

African states continue to face a persistent problem of institutional fit: constitutional structures inherited from colonial state formation coexist uneasily with chiefs, customary councils and community-based authorities that retain social legitimacy but may also be hereditary and insufficiently contestable. This study addresses the question of which governance principles, drawn from traditional African political systems, constitutional democracy and Swiss governance, can be synthesised into an Africa-relevant system of polycentric stewardship governance, without assuming the superiority of any single tradition. Adopting an interpretivist, comparative-historical and conceptual-synthesis design, the study applies structured, focused comparison to five historical African polities (Aksum, Wagadou, Mapungubwe, Munhumutapa and Buganda), African constitutional-democratic experience, and the Swiss federal model, coding each against eleven common institutional criteria before synthesising compatible principles through conceptual framework analysis. Findings, presented in a Cross-Model Coding Matrix spanning thirteen themes, show a differentiated rather than uniform pattern of recurrence: contextual institutional adaptation and institutional continuity are genuine tri-model universals; accountability, participation and diversity accommodation are strongly but unevenly supported; equal citizenship and contestable leadership are points of substantive divergence best supplied intact by constitutional democracy; and stewardship and legitimacy emerge as composite principles requiring reconstruction from partial contributions across all three traditions. These findings are synthesised into the Utwala Mseto Model, an applied expression of African Polycentric Stewardship Governance (APSG) that combines socially embedded legitimacy with equal citizenship, polycentric and subsidiary authority, collegial and contestable leadership, multi-layered accountability, and stewardship of collective resources. The study's principal contribution is methodological and theoretical: it demonstrates that governance synthesis across historically distinct traditions is best achieved through principled, evidence-based allocation of institutional elements to their best-substantiated source rather than additive blending. The model requires further empirical validation through fieldwork and cross-national testing, but offers both a replicable comparative method and a substantive framework for governance reform in politically and culturally plural African states.

Keywords: Polycentric Governance; Stewardship Theory; Traditional African Governance; Constitutional Democracy; Subsidiarity; Comparative-Historical Analysis

INTRODUCTION

The search for governance systems that combine political legitimacy, institutional accountability, social inclusion and effective public authority remains central to debates about African state development. Since the late twentieth century, constitutional democracy has become the dominant formal model of government across the continent, yet its institutionalisation has produced uneven outcomes, and formal democratic institutions frequently coexist with traditional authorities and other locally embedded forms of political organisation (Cheeseman & Sishuwa, 2021; Dahlberg & Söderberg, 2024). This raises a deeper question than whether African states are sufficiently democratic: whether governmental architecture inherited from colonial state formation

adequately reflects the historical and social organisation of political authority in African societies, given that chiefs and customary institutions continue to perform functions relating to land, dispute resolution and political intermediation in many countries (De Kadt & Larreguy, 2018; Power, 2020; Van der Windt & Voors, 2020; Dahlberg & Söderberg, 2024).

This study compares three bodies of governance experience to address that question. Traditional African governance, examined through five historical political formations, potentially offers socially embedded legitimacy, institutional continuity and differentiated territorial authority, but is vulnerable to hereditary privilege and exclusion (Reid, 2002; Power, 2020; Dahlberg & Söderberg, 2024). Constitutional democracy offers equal citizenship, rights and electoral contestability, but is vulnerable to executive concentration and a reduction of participation to elections alone (Cheeseman & Sishuwa, 2021; Cheeseman et al., 2026). Switzerland, treated as a comparative laboratory rather than a template, offers subsidiarity, federalism, direct participation and consensus politics, but risks institutional complexity and slower decision-making (Vatter et al., 2020; Linder & Mueller, 2021; Chirikure, Manyanga, Pikirayi & Pollard, 2015). Rather than ranking these models, the study evaluates them symmetrically to answer: which governance principles emerge from a comparative analysis of traditional African, constitutional-democratic and Swiss governance, and how can their compatible elements inform an Africa-relevant system of government?

This synthesis proceeds in four steps: identifying which practices recur across Aksum, Wagadou, Mapungubwe, Munhumutapa and Buganda; identifying which constitutional-democratic principles suit African conditions; identifying which Swiss characteristics are transferable rather than historically contingent; and determining which principles can be combined without contradiction. Polycentric draws on scholarship showing governance can operate through multiple decision centres rather than one monopolistic authority, with effectiveness depending on the rules coordinating them (Ostrom, 2010; Berardo & Lubell, 2016). *Stewardship* denotes public institutions and collective resources as entrusted responsibilities rather than possessions, applied here as a contemporary normative principle rather than one retrospectively attributed to the historical cases. APSG is therefore not a return to precolonial government, an extension of presidential democracy, or a Swiss replica, but a fourth model built on the proposition that African governance may require distributed authority, equal citizenship without homogenisation, contestability without winner-takes-all concentration, legitimacy without hereditary sovereignty, participation beyond elections, and cross-generational stewardship.

Traditional authority should not be romanticised as a homogeneous alternative to constitutional government, since precolonial African political organisation was highly diverse. Fortes and Evans-Pritchard's ([1940] 1987) comparative work distinguished centralised systems from those without a centralised state apparatus, and subsequent scholarship confirms substantial variation in African state formation and political economy (Fage, 1957; Munro-Hay, 1991; Reid, 2002; Fattovich, 2010; Chirikure et al., 2015; Manyanga & Nyamushosho, 2026). This study accordingly examines five formations rather than assuming uniformity: Aksum developed centralised kingship, coinage and Red Sea trade connections (Munro-Hay, 1991; Phillipson, 2003; Fattovich, 2010); Wagadou combined royal authority with trans-Saharan commerce (Fage, 1957; Levzion & Hopkins, 2000); Mapungubwe shows archaeological evidence of hierarchy and long-distance exchange (Chirikure et al., 2015; Manyanga & Nyamushosho, 2026); Munhumutapa combined central rulership with subordinate territorial authorities and gold-based commerce (Beach, 1980; Mudenge, 1988); and Buganda developed differentiated institutions involving the Kabaka, chiefs and the Lukiiko (Reid, 2002). Earlier scholarship has sometimes moved too quickly from such cases to generalised claims about communalism or accountability; Aksumite coinage, for example, demonstrates royal authority but not modern transparency, and control over resources in Wagadou or Munhumutapa does not demonstrate a modern doctrine of public stewardship (Munro-Hay, 1991; Fage, 1957; Beach, 1980; Mudenge, 1988). This study therefore distinguishes historically documented institutions, scholarly interpretation, and contemporary theoretical reconstruction throughout.

Constitutional democracy contributes equal citizenship, rights and electoral accountability, but should not be treated as a completed achievement: African democratic experience varies considerably in institutional strength (Cheeseman & Sishuwa, 2021; Harding, 2020), and autocratisation can proceed through executive aggrandisement even amid formally democratic institutions, with elections sometimes functioning as legitimating ceremonies rather than genuine contests (Cheeseman et al., 2026; Bin'Omukama, 2026).

Switzerland is included because it shows that democratic government need not be highly centralised, combining federalism, direct participation and a collegial executive, having evolved from majoritarian toward consensus-oriented arrangements (Vatter et al., 2020; Linder & Mueller, 2021; Mueller, 2022). It is treated no more uncritically than the African cases: federalism can generate complexity, direct democracy can expose minorities to majoritarian outcomes, and consensus politics can slow decisions, while Swiss historical conditions differ substantially from African ones. The relevant question is therefore not whether Africa should adopt Swiss federalism, but whether principles such as subsidiarity, plural executive authority and consensus-oriented power sharing address governance problems also evident in African political systems.

African states face a persistent problem of institutional fit: dominant governmental structures do not always correspond to the historically embedded, socially plural and territorially diverse forms through which political authority continues to be experienced. Constitutional states, elections and bureaucracies coexist with chiefs, customary councils and community-based authorities that retain social legitimacy but may also be hereditary or insufficiently contestable (Fortes & Evans-Pritchard, [1940] 1987; Reid, 2002; Power, 2020; Dahlberg & Söderberg, 2024). Discussions of "traditional African governance" often overgeneralise this diversity, attributing principles such as consensus or stewardship uniformly across societies as different as Buganda, Mapungubwe and Aksum, where the underlying evidence varies considerably. Meanwhile, constitutional democracy, though indispensable for equal citizenship and enforceable rights, has in practice often concentrated authority within powerful presidencies, weakening horizontal accountability and converting political competition into high-stakes struggles for state control, particularly in ethnically or regionally plural societies (Cheeseman & Sishuwa, 2021; Cheeseman et al., 2026; Bin'Omukama, 2026).

These problems are compounded by limited engagement with alternative democratic architectures, insufficient attention to participation between elections, and an underdeveloped account of stewardship over collective resources. Switzerland demonstrates that democratic government need not be centralised or presidential, but its institutions cannot be transplanted directly given their distinct historical development (Vatter, Freiburghaus & Arens, 2020; Linder & Mueller, 2021). Polycentric-governance theory explains the value of dispersed authority but does not itself determine which combinations are culturally legitimate in African contexts (Ostrom, 2010; Berardo & Lubell, 2016). What remains missing is a comparative framework that first identifies genuinely recurrent principles among diverse African historical systems, then evaluates them against constitutional-democratic and Swiss arrangements, to determine which convergent features can be reconstructed into a coherent governance architecture, without restoring exclusionary traditional structures or reproducing poorly adapted foreign models. This study addresses that gap through the development of African Polycentric Stewardship Governance (APSG), evaluated not as a predetermined solution but as the outcome of this comparative analysis.

Research Aim, Objectives and Research Questions

Research Aim: To comparatively analyse traditional African, constitutional-democratic and Swiss governance in order to identify common, context-specific and reconstructable institutional principles, forming an Africa-relevant polycentric stewardship model, with no tradition assumed superior at the outset.

Research Objectives: (1) To examine Aksum, Wagadou, Mapungubwe, Munhumutapa and Buganda comparatively and identify governance principles that are genuinely recurrent across the cases. (2) To analyse the institutional strengths and weaknesses of constitutional-democratic governance in African contexts, particularly concerning equal citizenship, electoral accountability, executive concentration and constitutional constraint. (3) To examine the Swiss governance model, focusing on federalism, subsidiarity, direct democracy, collegial executive authority and consensus-oriented power sharing (Linder & Mueller, 2021; Vatter, Freiburghaus & Arens, 2020). (4) To compare the three governance traditions and distinguish areas of convergence, partial compatibility and fundamental divergence. (5) To synthesise contextually compatible institutional principles into the proposed African Polycentric Stewardship Governance model.

The study is guided by the main research question: Which governance principles emerging from traditional African political systems, constitutional-democratic governance and the Swiss governance model can be synthesised into an Africa-relevant system of polycentric stewardship governance? Four subsidiary questions guide the analysis: RQ1: Which governance principles are genuinely common among Aksum, Wagadou,

Mapungubwe, Munhumutapa and Buganda, and which remain case-specific? RQ2: Which principles of constitutional democracy are particularly relevant to African governance, and which institutional arrangements require adaptation to African political and social conditions? RQ3: Which features of Swiss governance are potentially transferable to African contexts, and which are dependent upon Switzerland's distinctive historical and institutional development? RQ4: Where the three systems converge or diverge, which principles can be combined without undermining political legitimacy, equal citizenship, institutional accountability or governmental effectiveness?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study adopts an integrated theoretical framework combining polycentric governance theory, historical institutionalism, subsidiarity and stewardship theory, providing the analytical foundation for comparing traditional African governance, constitutional democracy and Swiss governance without assuming the inherent superiority of any one system.

Polycentric governance theory originated with Vincent Ostrom and colleagues, who described systems with multiple formally independent centres of decision-making operating within a broader institutional order (Ostrom et al., 1961). Elinor Ostrom later showed that complex governance problems may be addressed through institutions operating at different scales rather than through a single dominant authority (Ostrom, 2010). Recent scholarship emphasises that effective polycentricity depends not only on institutional plurality, but also on coordination, information exchange, clear decision rules and conflict-resolution mechanisms (Morrison & Bodin, 2023; Baldwin et al., 2024; Hegsvold, 2026). This framework is particularly relevant to African contexts where national governments, local authorities, traditional institutions and communities exercise interconnected forms of authority; research in South Africa demonstrates that traditional and municipal authorities can interact across land governance, development planning and service delivery without one necessarily displacing the other (Faboye et al., 2024). APSG therefore defines polycentricity as coordinated institutional plurality: multiple centres of authority with clearly defined competences operating through common rules of accountability, coordination and conflict resolution.

Historical institutionalism holds that institutions are shaped by the historical circumstances of their development, with institutional choices generating path-dependent trajectories that agents nonetheless continue to work within, maintain or gradually alter over time (Hall & Taylor, 1996; Pierson, 2000; Thelen, 1999; Emmenegger, 2021; Carstensen & Röper, 2022). Because traditional African governance, constitutional democracy and Swiss federalism emerged from substantially different histories, none can simply be transplanted elsewhere. This supports the study's distinction between transplantation and adaptation (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010): APSG seeks transferable principles rather than replicated institutions. Institutional complementarity adds that governance outcomes depend on relationships among institutions rather than any single institution in isolation.

Subsidiarity holds that governmental authority should be exercised at the lowest level capable of performing it effectively, with higher levels intervening only where local capacity is insufficient. Historical African polities offer precedents for differentiated territorial authority, for instance Wagadou and Munhumutapa's subordinate territorial rulers (Fage, 1957; Beach, 1980; Reid, 2002), and contemporary evidence shows traditional authorities can complement rather than substitute for the state when their roles are institutionally integrated (Henn, 2023). Swiss federalism provides a modern example of constitutionally distributed authority across federal, cantonal and municipal levels. Within APSG, subsidiarity therefore answers which level should govern what: authority should remain as close as practicable to affected communities, but should move upward where capacity, scale, interdependence or constitutional protection requires it.

Stewardship conceptualises office-holders as custodians whose responsibilities extend beyond self-interest toward collective and long-term institutional interests (Hernandez, 2012), a principle confirmed as relevant to governmental organisations, particularly where trust, shared objectives and appropriately designed accountability mechanisms shape institutional behaviour (Salomonsen et al., 2024). APSG extends this principle to public resources, infrastructure, debt and environmental assets whose governance can affect future generations.

Together these perspectives yield an integrated logic: historical context shapes polycentric authority, which subsidiarity allocates to the appropriate level, which stewardship then governs in its exercise, producing accountable, context-responsive governance. These principles establish analytical criteria rather than predetermining APSG's institutional design.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review examines three governance traditions, guided by historical institutionalism, polycentric governance, subsidiarity and stewardship, with attention to institutional convergence, divergence and contextual compatibility. The African cases are examined independently, because African political history does not support assumptions of institutional uniformity (Reid, 2002), before the Swiss model is similarly assessed within its own historical context.

Traditional African Governance: Diversity Before Synthesis

Traditional African governance cannot be treated as a single political category, according to Fortes and Evans-Pritchard ([1940] 1987) distinguished centralised political systems from societies without a centralised state apparatus; although subsequent scholarship has challenged the rigidity of this binary, its broader comparative insight remains valid, and recent research reinforces the conclusion by distinguishing forms of political centralisation and functional differentiation across African traditional institutions (Neupert-Wentz & Müller-Crepon, 2024; Baldwin, 2025). Historical and archaeological research reveals further variation in state formation, kingship, territorial organisation, political economy and relationships between rulers and communities (Munro-Hay, 1991; Reid, 2002; Fattovich, 2010). Manyanga et al. (2026) identify a multicentric pattern of early state formation in southern Africa involving several interacting regional polities rather than development from a single political core, while Henn and Robinson (2026) similarly document extensive political decentralisation and institutional diversity across precolonial Africa.

Aksum was a major northeastern African state centred in present-day Tigray, northern Ethiopia, developing from a Proto-Aksumite phase (c. 360–120/40 BCE) into a mature kingdom lasting into roughly the eighth century CE, connected via the port of Adulis to trade networks linking Africa, Arabia, the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean (Munro-Hay, 1991; Phillipson, 2003; 2012; Bard et al., 2014; Seland, 2014; Fattovich, 2010; Bard & Manzo, 2025). Politically it was characterised by relatively centralised kingship under the negus and later negusa nagast, with royal inscriptions, monumental architecture, coinage (from the late third century CE) and, from the fourth century under King Ezana, Christianity reinforcing royal legitimacy. Aksum constituted institutionalised kingship, territorial coordination, economic administration, commercial integration and religiously embedded legitimacy; the evidence does not securely support claims of participatory governance, subsidiarity, stewardship or historical polycentricity.

Wagadou, generally identified with the Kingdom or Empire of Ghana, emerged between the sixth and seventh centuries CE in the Aoukar region of present-day southeastern Mauritania and western Mali, reaching greatest prominence in the ninth to eleventh centuries before declining in the twelfth (Fage, 1957; Levtzion & Hopkins, 2000; Gestrich, 2019; Dueppen, 2025). Associated with the Soninke and documented largely through external Arabic sources, it was organised around a powerful monarchy exercising judicial, military, fiscal and ceremonial authority, with revenues connected to trans-Saharan commerce alongside older regional agro-pastoral and exchange networks (McIntosh & Conrad, 2017; Gestrich, 2019; Dueppen, 2025). Wagadou combined a dominant royal centre with subordinate political communities, indicating differentiated authority without modern federalism or constitutionally protected autonomy. Wagadou polity demonstrated central kingship, layered territorial authority, commercial governance, fiscal capacity and political-economic interdependence.

Mapungubwe, a political centre in the Shashe–Limpopo confluence region where South Africa, Botswana and Zimbabwe meet, developed from K2, an earlier large settlement and regional centre associated with farming, cattle-keeping, specialised production and Indian Ocean trade. It became politically prominent around AD 1220 before declining by the late thirteenth century Mouton and Antonites (2023)., 2025; Chirikure et al., 2015; Steyn & Antonites, 2025). Reconstructed mainly through archaeology, its settlement patterns, elite burials and

imported prestige goods indicate increasing hierarchy, specialised production and social differentiation, with recent scholarship favouring a multicentric model of several interacting regional polities over a single evolutionary origin for southern African state formation (Manyanga et al., 2026). Mapungubwe was characterised by political hierarchy, differentiated territorial authority, resource control, elite formation and regional economic integration; however, archaeological evidence of formal public participation or institutional accountability remains considerably weaker (Chirikure et al., 2015).

The Munhumutapa polity emerged during the fifteenth century and remained influential into the seventeenth century, centred in the Zambezi Valley and adjoining areas of present-day northern Zimbabwe and central Mozambique within the political order that developed after Great Zimbabwe (Beach, 1980; Mudenge, 1988). The ruler exercised considerable political and ritual authority through relationships with subordinate territorial leaders, demonstrating differentiated centres of authority without the constitutionally protected autonomy associated with modern federalism (Beach, 1980; Mudenge, 1988). Gold production and long-distance trade were closely connected to political power, while Portuguese commercial intervention increasingly influenced the polity's internal institutions and leadership relations (Beach, 1980; Mudenge, 1988). Munhumutapa demonstrated territorial delegation, resource-based politics, diplomatic-commercial governance and socially embedded legitimacy (Beach, 1980). It is therefore particularly relevant to stewardship-oriented governance, illustrating the institutional vulnerabilities arising when resource governance becomes entangled with external economic interests (Mudenge, 1988).

The Kingdom of Buganda emerged in the Great Lakes region of East Africa, centred in present-day south-central Uganda around Lake Victoria, developing by the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries into one of the region's most politically centralised kingdoms, yet not an unconstrained monarchy (Reid, 2002; Hanson, 2009). Political authority was distributed across relationships among the Kabaka, chiefs, clans and other institutional actors, producing overlapping forms of authority that both supported and constrained royal power, with more recent research characterising Buganda as a centralised but institutionally differentiated monarchy (Koter, 2023). The Lukiiko formed an important council institution linking the Kabaka and chiefs, though it should not be equated with a modern representative parliament, while territorial administration was layered through chiefs at county and subordinate levels (Michalopoulos & Papaioannou, 2015). Colonial rule subsequently transformed these institutions through the 1900 Uganda Agreement, which reconfigured land ownership and chiefly authority via mailo tenure (Hanson, 2003; Oryema & Kumbu, 2024). Buganda practices constituted council consultation, territorial delegation, institutional differentiation and relational political authority, demonstrating how strong central kingship could coexist with layered institutions without implying modern federalism or parliamentary democracy (Reid, 2002; Wrigley, 1996).

Within-Traditional-System Comparative Synthesis.

Comparison across the five cases demonstrates that traditional African governance was institutionally diverse rather than organised around a single political model (Baldwin, 2025), requiring each polity to be interpreted within its own commercial, territorial, religious and social conditions. Polycentric governance provides the clearest comparative lens: Wagadou and Munhumutapa combined central monarchy with subordinate territorial rulers, Buganda developed an elaborate hierarchy linking the Kabaka, chiefs, clans and the Lukiiko, and Mapungubwe formed part of a hierarchical regional settlement system with authority at household, local and higher political levels (Hurter et al., 2025), while Aksum appears more centralised, though limited evidence on provincial government precludes assuming direct royal administration throughout its territory (Bard & Manzo, 2025). These cases support differentiated authority, but not claims of modern federalism; recent evidence confirms that where traditional and state institutions interact today, clearly structured integration produces complementary governance, whereas institutional ambiguity can generate conflict (Henn, 2023; Faboye et al., 2024).

Historical studies of Aksum, Wagadou, Mapungubwe, Munhumutapa and Buganda describe varied relationships among political authority, territorial administration, legitimacy and strategically important resources (Beach, 1980; Levtzion, 1973; Phillipson, 2012; Reid, 2002). Political authority was connected to agriculture and Red Sea commerce in Aksum, trans-Saharan exchange in Wagadou, prestige goods and Indian Ocean trade in

Mapungubwe, gold and external commerce in Munhumutapa, and land and tribute in Buganda (Chirikure et al., 2015; Levtzion, 1973; Mudenge, 1988; Phillipson, 2012; Reid, 2002). These cases indicate political-resource interdependence, although stewardship remains a contemporary normative category rather than a description of these historical systems. Buganda's territorial chiefs, Wagadou's subordinate communities, Munhumutapa's regional authorities and Mapungubwe's differentiated local authority also indicate layered political competences (Beach, 1980; Levtzion, 1973; Manyanga et al., 2026; Reid, 2002). Such arrangements resemble subsidiarity, but evidence does not establish legally guaranteed local autonomy comparable to modern federalism (Mudenge, 1988; Wrigley, 1996).

Socially embedded legitimacy appeared through Aksumite Christianity, Wagadou's indigenous kingship, Mapungubwe's elite symbolism, Munhumutapa's ritual authority and Buganda's clan-centred order (Chirikure et al., 2015; Levtzion, 1973; Mudenge, 1988; Phillipson, 2012; Reid, 2002). Traditional institutions may retain local legitimacy, although their effects depend on institutional design and downward accountability (Baldwin, 2025; Henn, 2023). Counciliar governance is most clearly documented in Buganda and cannot be generalised to Aksum or Mapungubwe, while direct popular participation remains inconsistently evidenced (Chirikure et al., 2015; Phillipson, 2012; Reid, 2002). Succession practices and religious authority also varied across these political systems (Levtzion, 1973; Mudenge, 1988; Wrigley, 1996). These themes require selective interpretation that recognises historical variation and avoids romanticising precolonial governance.

Constitutional-Democratic Governance

Constitutional democracy reconciles popular authorisation with restraints on public power through constitutional supremacy, elections, rights protection, separated powers and judicial review (Udombana, 2024; Gebeye, 2026). Its democratic quality, however, cannot be determined merely by the existence of constitutions or elections. Although elections permit peaceful leadership replacement, rights establish equal citizenship, and courts, legislatures and independent bodies provide accountability, their effectiveness depends on institutional independence and enforceability (Prempeh, 2007; Fombad, 2011 & Young, 2025; Gayoye, 2024). Abebe (2024) and Cheeseman et al. (2026) questions whether constitutional texts and competitive elections necessarily secure constitutional government. Executive aggrandisement, manipulated amendment procedures and weakened institutional checks may persist within formally democratic systems (Abebe, 2024; Cheeseman et al., 2026). Mubangizi (2026) therefore distinguishes electoral authorisation from constitutional restraint: elections confer governing mandates, whereas constitutionalism subjects their exercise to rights, legislative oversight, judicial scrutiny and the rule of law. Equal citizenship, contestable leadership and formal accountability remain important, but executive concentration and participation confined largely to periodic elections expose significant democratic limitations (Cheeseman et al., 2026; Mubangizi, 2026).

The Swiss Governance Model

Switzerland provides a distinctive model of federalism and subsidiarity, direct democracy, collegial executive government and consensus-based power sharing (Linder & Mueller, 2021; Vatter, 2023). Federal authority is constitutionally divided between the Confederation and 26 cantons, with municipalities retaining significant responsibilities within cantonal frameworks, making territorial power sharing central to Swiss governance. Direct democracy supplements representative government through referendums and popular initiatives, encouraging political bargaining and coalition building because legislation may face subsequent popular challenge (Linder & Mueller, 2021; Freiburghaus & Vatter, 2026), while executive authority is exercised collectively by the seven-member Federal Council, limiting personalisation of national executive power. The Swiss model is characterised by transferable principles; constitutionally protected territorial competence, subsidiarity, continuous citizen participation, collegial executive authority and institutionalised accommodation. The model carries uniqueness in administrative capacity, political history and social structure.

Applying the Theoretical Framework Across the Three Models

Polycentric governance, historical institutionalism, subsidiarity and stewardship offer distinct, sometimes competing, explanations of how authority should be distributed, legitimised and controlled (Ostrom, 2010; Mahoney & Thelen, 2010; Føllesdal, 1998; Davis et al., 1997). Polycentric scholarship interprets differentiated

authority among African monarchs, chiefs, territorial leaders and communities as evidence that governance need not operate through a single centre. Henn (2023) and Baldwin (2025) nevertheless qualify this argument by showing that customary and state institutions become complementary only under appropriate constitutional arrangements. Constitutional democracy disperses authority horizontally, although Udombana (2024) demonstrates that formal separation of powers may coexist with executive dominance. By contrast, Switzerland combines horizontal restraints with federal, cantonal and municipal authority, direct democracy and consensus mechanisms (Vatter, 2023). The comparison makes the quality of institutional autonomy and coordination more important than the mere existence of multiple centres.

Historical institutionalism further questions the transplantation of governance arrangements across different contexts. The diversity of African institutions weakens attempts to construct a uniform traditional governance model (Henn, 2023). Udombana (2024) similarly observes that written constitutions may contain rights and rule-of-law provisions without producing substantive constitutionalism. Switzerland's accommodation of linguistic, religious and territorial diversity emerged through prolonged institutional development rather than immediate institutional design (Linder & Mueller, 2021). Institutional effectiveness must therefore be examined within historical trajectories instead of inferred from formal structures.

Subsidiarity introduces another tension between decentralisation and effective coordination. African systems provide examples of territorially differentiated authority, but not a consistent doctrine guaranteeing competence to the lowest level (Henn, 2023). Constitutional democracy can define jurisdiction legally, whereas Switzerland assigns substantial responsibilities to cantonal and municipal governments (Linder & Mueller, 2021; Vatter, 2023). Lowest-level allocation consequently remains conditional upon institutional capacity, constitutional standards and cross-territorial coordination.

Stewardship scholarship also complicates institutional comparison. Historical African cases connect political authority with strategic resources without establishing a modern stewardship doctrine. Constitutional democracy contributes auditing, legislative scrutiny and judicial review, while Salomonsen et al. (2024) associate effective public governance with trust, shared purpose and accountability. Although differentiated authority, institutional continuity and legitimate government recur, major tensions remain. Hereditary authority may conflict with equal citizenship, executive concentration may undermine distributed accountability, and community authority may threaten constitutionally protected rights. Institutional integration therefore requires critical selection rather than historical replication.

Literature Gap

Three principal gaps emerge from the literature. First, traditional African governance scholarship often focuses on individual kingdoms or contemporary traditional authorities, with less systematic comparison across historical African political systems, limiting identification of genuinely recurrent versus context-specific principles. Second, African democratic scholarship often assesses governance through constitutional-democratic standards without sufficiently separating core democratic principles, equal citizenship, rights, accountability and leadership contestability, from specific institutional forms such as highly centralised presidential systems; democratic weakness may therefore reflect institutional concentration rather than democracy itself. Third, limited scholarship integrates African historical institutions with contemporary decentralised systems such as Switzerland through polycentric governance, historical institutionalism, subsidiarity and stewardship, leaving insufficient attention to how embedded legitimacy, territorial autonomy, direct participation, executive power sharing and resource accountability might coexist within one coherent African framework. This study addresses these gaps by comparing the three governance traditions independently before identifying their convergent and contextually compatible features as the basis for African Polycentric Stewardship Governance (APSG), the Utwala Mseto Model.

Table 1 summarises this synthesis across eleven governance dimensions, showing for each the position of the three traditions, the common or compatible principle they suggest, and the corresponding Utwala Mseto conceptual element.

Table 1. Synthesis of Literature on the Three Governance Models

Governance dimension	Synthesised African model	Constitutional democracy	Swiss model	APSG conceptual element
Source of legitimacy	Socially embedded, customary, dynastic and community-based legitimacy	Electoral and constitutional legitimacy	Electoral, territorial and direct-participatory legitimacy	Dual legitimacy: civic + community-based
Distribution of authority	Differentiated authority among rulers, chiefs and territorial institutions	Horizontal separation among executive, legislature and judiciary	Strong horizontal and vertical dispersion across federal, cantonal and municipal levels	Polycentric distribution of authority
Territorial governance	Layered territorial authority in Wagadou, Mutapa, Buganda and Mapungubwe	Often constitutionally decentralised, but frequently executive-centred in practice	Constitutionally protected cantonal and municipal competence	Subsidiarity and territorial autonomy
Leadership	Often centralised and sometimes hereditary	Electoral and periodically contestable	Electoral but collegial at federal executive level	Contestable and non-personalised leadership
Executive structure	Often monarch-centred but relational	Frequently presidential or prime-ministerial	Seven-member collegial Federal Council	Collegial executive power-sharing
Participation	Uneven; strongest councilial evidence in Buganda	Primarily representative and electoral	Representative plus referendums and initiatives	Continuous citizen participation
Councilial governance	Present most clearly in Buganda; uneven elsewhere	Legislatures provide representative deliberation	Consensus institutions encourage bargaining and accommodation	Institutionalised consultation and deliberation
Rights and citizenship	Historically shaped by lineage, territory and status	Equal citizenship and universal constitutional rights	Equal citizenship combined with territorial pluralism	Equal citizenship with protected institutional diversity
Accountability	Relational, customary and socially embedded; variable across cases	Courts, elections, legislatures and independent institutions	Constitutional, federal, electoral and direct-democratic checks	Multi-layered accountability
Resource governance	Strong links between political authority, land, trade, gold and strategic resources	Audit, transparency, judicial and legislative oversight	Public authority distributed across territorial levels	Stewardship of collective resources

Governance dimension	Synthesised African model	Constitutional democracy	Swiss model	APSG conceptual element
Institutional continuity	Political offices and structures often outlasted individual rulers	Constitutional institutions persist beyond office-holders	Strong institutional continuity through federal structures	Institutional continuity beyond individual leaders
Pluralism	Coexistence of clans, chiefs, territorial and spiritual institutions	Legal and political pluralism under constitutional supremacy	Linguistic, territorial and political diversity managed through federalism and consensus	Institutionalised accommodation of diversity
Conflict resolution	Customary and hierarchical mechanisms varied by polity	Judicial and constitutional mechanisms	Federal bargaining, courts, referendums and consensus mechanisms	Constitutional conflict-resolution mechanisms
Historical fit	Institutions were context-specific and varied significantly	Democratic institutions perform differently across African states	Swiss institutions are products of distinctive historical development	Contextual institutional adaptation

Conceptual Framework: The Utwala Mseto Model

The synthesis converts the three governance traditions into coded institutional elements identifying where comparable governance principles recur, complement one another, or require modification, consistent with polycentric-governance research showing that governance performance depends on the configuration, interaction and institutional context of decision centres, not merely their number (Baldwin et al., 2024). The Synthesised African Model contributes socially embedded legitimacy, differentiated territorial authority, relational governance, institutional continuity and community-based political organisation; contemporary evidence supports retaining these cautiously, since traditional authorities complement formal state institutions where constitutionally integrated (Henn, 2023) and their effects depend on de facto authority, downward accountability and state recognition (Baldwin, 2025). Constitutional democracy contributes the normative safeguards needed to transform these differentiated arrangements into contemporary government: equal citizenship, rights, electoral contestability, separation of powers and legal accountability. The Swiss model contributes the strongest institutional examples of territorial autonomy, subsidiarity, dispersed executive authority, direct participation and consensus-oriented decision-making, with subsidiarity conceptualised as multidimensional polycentrism rather than simple administrative decentralisation (Moroni, 2024; Vatter, 2026).

These coded elements generate twelve higher-order conceptual themes: embedded and civic legitimacy; polycentric authority; subsidiarity and territorial autonomy; contestable and collegial leadership; continuous participation; equal citizenship and institutional diversity; multi-layered accountability; stewardship; institutional continuity; diversity accommodation; conflict resolution; and contextual adaptation. Their significance lies not in cross-model recurrence alone but in compatibility with the four theoretical foundations: polycentricity determines how authority is distributed, historical institutionalism requires contextual adaptation, subsidiarity determines the appropriate level of competence, and stewardship governs the responsible exercise of authority. Utwala Mseto model is therefore conceptualised as a coordinated, multi-level governance system combining socially embedded institutions with constitutional equality, distributed authority, participatory

governance and accountable stewardship, rather than a reproduction of any existing African, democratic or Swiss system.



Figure 1. Conceptual diagram of the Utwala Mseto Model.

The Utwala Mseto Model (Utwala Mseto being Swahili for "hybrid" or "blended" governance) operationalises APSG by drawing the three traditions into a single institutional architecture rather than choosing among them. It rests on the same four theoretical foundations: polycentric governance theory, which holds that multiple, meaningfully autonomous decision centres operating within coordinating rules can manage complex problems more adaptively than a single dominant authority (Ostrom, 2010; Berardo & Lubell, 2016); historical institutionalism, which explains why none of the three traditions can be transplanted wholesale, treating each instead as source material for adaptation (Hall & Taylor, 1996; Mahoney & Thelen, 2010); subsidiarity, which places decisions at the lowest effective level; and stewardship, which treats public office and collective resources as entrusted responsibilities.

Each tradition contributes empirically grounded strengths. Traditional African governance offers socially embedded legitimacy and differentiated authority that persists rather than fades with democratisation, chieftaincy remains politically resilient in Malawi (Power, 2020), and chiefs occupy differentiated, functioning spheres within hybrid arrangements elsewhere (Dahlberg & Söderberg, 2024). Crucially, Henn's (2023) empirical demonstration that constitutionally integrated traditional authorities function as institutional complements rather than competitors to state capacity directly supports the model's core claim that polycentric and traditional authority can reinforce rather than undermine each other. Constitutional democracy contributes equal citizenship, rights and contestability, but recent scholarship shows these can coexist with substantive weakness, since African democratic experience varies considerably in institutional strength (Cheeseman & Sishuwa, 2021) and autocratisation can advance through executive aggrandisement even where elections continue (Cheeseman et al., 2026); this is why the model layers leadership contestability and multi-layered accountability as distinct elements rather than assuming elections alone suffice. The Swiss model demonstrates empirically that federalism, direct

democracy and collegial executives can disperse authority while sustaining national cohesion (Vatter et al., 2020; Linder & Mueller, 2021), though its transferability is bounded by distinct historical conditions, reinforcing the model's "adaptation not transplantation" logic. The resulting core institutional elements, polycentric authority distribution, subsidiarity, socially embedded legitimacy, contestable leadership, continuous participation, stewardship and multi-layered accountability, are filtered through African contextual realities, historical legacies, sociocultural diversity, state capacity and political economy, producing outcomes aimed at legitimate, adaptive and sustainable governance suited to Africa's plural societies.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Paradigm and Philosophical Orientation.

This study is situated within an interpretivist paradigm, informed by historical institutionalism, given its concern with how institutional meaning, legitimacy and authority are constructed and reproduced within specific historical and cultural contexts rather than measured as fixed, universal variables (Hall & Taylor, 1996; Bevir & Rhodes, 2010). Because the study also seeks to build a generalisable conceptual model from case-specific evidence, it adopts a complementary constructivist-analytic stance consistent with conceptual framework analysis (Jabareen, 2009), in which concepts drawn from disparate literatures are read against one another, refined and recombined into a coherent theoretical structure.

Research Design.

The study employs a qualitative, comparative-historical and conceptual-synthesis design rather than a primary empirical design involving human subjects, structured in two analytically distinct phases. The first phase applies structured, focused comparison (George & Bennett, 2005) to seven cases, the five historical African political formations, constitutional-democratic governance as practised in African states, and the Swiss governance model, using a common set of comparative questions applied systematically across cases to ensure comparability despite differences in available evidence. The second phase undertakes conceptual synthesis (Jabareen, 2009; Sartori, 1970), in which recurrent, non-contradictory institutional principles identified in phase one are reconstructed into APSG and its applied model, Utwala Mseto.

Case Selection and Justification.

Case selection follows a purposive, theory-driven logic rather than random or representative sampling, appropriate to small-N comparative research (Ragin, 2014). The five African cases were selected to maximise institutional and geographic diversity, spanning highland and lowland economies, coastal and interior polities, and centralised as well as segmentary forms of authority (Fortes & Evans-Pritchard, [1940] 1987), guarding against the overgeneralisation identified in the Problem Statement. Constitutional democracy was examined as a body of comparative African democratic experience rather than a single case, reflecting its status as the continent's dominant contemporary formal model. Switzerland was selected as a most-different case relative to both African traditions, on the established comparative logic that institutional principles surviving comparison across maximally dissimilar contexts carry stronger claims to transferability (Przeworski & Teune, 1970).

Data Sources and Collection Procedure.

As a desk-based conceptual and historical study, data consist entirely of secondary and documentary sources: peer-reviewed historical, archaeological and political science literature; primary epigraphic, numismatic and archival evidence as reported in secondary scholarship; constitutional texts; and cross-national governance and democracy datasets and reports (e.g., Freedom House, V-Dem, Afrobarometer) where relevant to substantiating claims about African democratic performance. Sources were identified through systematic searches of academic databases using keywords corresponding to each case and governance dimension, supplemented by citation-chaining from key texts. All sources were coded into three categories, historically documented institutions, scholarly interpretation, and contemporary theoretical reconstruction, to prevent conflation of empirical description with normative inference.

Analytical Framework and Comparative Criteria.

Each case was assessed against eleven common criteria: legitimacy, distribution of authority, leadership selection, accountability, participation, rights, territorial organisation, executive concentration, institutional continuity, resource governance, and adaptability. This framework, derived from institutional and federalism scholarship (Kincaid, 2010; Watts, 2008; Ostrom, 2010), provided a stable analytic grid permitting cross-case comparison without imposing a single tradition's categories on the others.

Sub-Indicator Specification for the Coding Matrix.

Each of the thirteen emergent themes reported in the Cross-Model Coding Matrix (Section 7) is a composite of one or more of the eleven comparative criteria above, decomposed into concrete sub-indicators so that a model can score partial, rather than all-or-nothing. The N value represents the recurrence of each sub-indicator across each theme. Table 3 lists the sub-indicators comprising each theme. This breakdown is a retrospective operationalisation intended to make the coding transparent and auditable; it is consistent with, but was not exhaustively pre-registered against, the frequencies reported in Section 7. Future applications of the matrix should pre-specify and publish the sub-indicator list before coding begins, and ideally before data collection, to allow independent replication.

Table 3. Sub-Indicator Specification for the Coding Matrix

Emerging APSG Theme	N	Sub-Indicators
Contextual Institutional Adaptation	4	1. Capacity to revise succession rules 2. Capacity to renegotiate territorial boundaries 3. Capacity to incorporate new economic activity 4. Capacity to accommodate demographic or religious change
Institutional Continuity	3	1. Survival of the office/institution across leadership transition 2. Survival across external shock or conquest 3. Existence of a codified or customary succession rule
Multi-layered Accountability	5	1. Judicial oversight 2. Legislative or councilial oversight 3. Electoral removal 4. Audit or fiscal oversight 5. Customary or relational sanction
Accommodation of Diversity	5	1. Linguistic pluralism 2. Religious pluralism 3. Territorial pluralism 4. Clan or ethnic pluralism 5. Socio-economic pluralism
Continuous Participation	5	1. Participation in leadership selection 2. Participation in law/policy making between elections 3. Participation in dispute resolution 4. Participation in resource allocation 5. Participation in constitutional change
Conflict Resolution and Coordination	5	1. Intra-elite mechanisms 2. Centre-periphery mechanisms 3. Inter-group mechanisms 4. Judicial mechanisms 5. Negotiated or referendum-based mechanisms

Emerging APSG Theme	N	Sub-Indicators
Equal Citizenship and Rights	4	1. Legal equality irrespective of lineage 2. Codified individual rights 3. Non-discrimination in office-holding 4. Equal protection under adjudication
Consultation and Deliberation	5	1. A standing councilial body 2. Scheduled deliberative sessions 3. Multi-stakeholder representation 4. Public deliberation 5. Recorded deliberative outputs
Stewardship of Collective Resources	5	1. Linkage of authority to land 2. Linkage of authority to trade or commerce 3. Linkage of authority to minerals or precious goods 4. Linkage of authority to public finances 5. Codified accountability for resource use
Polycentric Distribution of Authority	4	1. Distinct sub-national decision centres 2. Horizontal separation of powers 3. Functional or sectoral decentralisation 4. Formally recognised non-state authority
Subsidiarity and Territorial Autonomy	4	1. Constitutionally/customarily protected sub-national competence 2. Local revenue-raising or resource control 3. Local judicial or dispute-resolution authority 4. Local participation in central decision-making
Contestable and Collegial Leadership	4	1. A non-hereditary selection mechanism 2. Term limits or removability 3. A plural or collegial executive 4. Recognition of opposition or rival claimants
Embedded and Civic Legitimacy	4	1. Customary or lineage-based legitimacy 2. Religious or sacral legitimacy 3. Electoral or civic legitimacy 4. Performance-based legitimacy

Data Analysis Procedure.

Analysis proceeded through qualitative thematic coding of source material against the eleven criteria, followed by within-case and cross-case pattern-matching to identify convergence, partial compatibility and divergence (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2020). Findings were then synthesised using conceptual framework analysis (Jabareen, 2009), in which compatible principles were integrated and contradictory or non-transferable elements were bracketed, culminating in the Utwala Mseto Model.

Trustworthiness and Rigour.

Rigour was pursued through triangulation across independent scholarly sources for each case, an explicit audit trail distinguishing evidence from interpretation, and reflexive acknowledgment of the researcher's normative stewardship orientation, corresponding to the established qualitative criteria of credibility, dependability and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). One rigour criterion was not met and is reported here rather than left implicit: because the Cross-Model Coding Matrix was produced by a single researcher, no inter-coder reliability statistic (e.g., Cohen's or Fleiss' kappa) could be computed, and the coded frequencies cannot be independently

cross-checked against a second reader's judgement. This is a material limitation for a matrix used to ground the universal/asymmetric/divergent/composite classification underlying the Utwala Mseto Model, not a minor caveat, and it is carried forward explicitly into the Limitations and Future Research sections below rather than resolved by triangulation across sources alone, since triangulation addresses source credibility but not coder consistency.

Ethical Considerations.

As the study involves no human participants, formal research ethics clearance for human-subjects research was not required. Ethical care was instead directed at interpretive fairness, particularly avoiding presentism or the retrospective attribution of modern constitutional concepts to historical African societies, and at even-handed treatment of all three governance traditions.

Limitations of the Design.

The design is constrained by uneven evidentiary density across cases (epigraphic versus archaeological versus documentary sources), reliance on secondary rather than primary archival or fieldwork data, and the inherently interpretive, non-statistical nature of conceptual synthesis, which limits generalisability to formal hypothesis-testing claims.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The Cross-Model Coding Matrix demonstrates how the proposed elements of APSG emerge from recurrent coded characteristics across the three governance traditions examined in this study. Rather than presenting a single, undifferentiated account of "governance," the matrix disaggregates thirteen emerging themes and records, for each, the extent to which it recurs independently across the Synthesised African Model, Constitutional Democracy and the Swiss Governance Model. The coded frequencies are descriptive indicators of cross-model recurrence, showing how consistently a theme appears across the case evidence, rather than statistical factor loadings derived from quantitative measurement or inferential testing; the matrix should therefore be read as a structured qualitative synthesis tool rather than an empirical claim about statistical significance or causal weight, consistent with contemporary polycentric-governance research emphasising institutional configuration and context over the mere presence of dispersed decision centres (Morrison et al., 2023; Baldwin et al., 2024). High recurrence indicates conceptual convergence worth incorporating into APSG, while low or uneven recurrence signals themes requiring closer interpretive scrutiny rather than straightforward aggregation.

Table 2. Cross-Model Coding Matrix

Emerging APSG Theme	N	African Model <i>f</i>	Const. Democracy <i>f</i>	Swiss Model <i>f</i>	Σf	Interpretation
Contextual Institutional Adaptation	4	4	4	4	12	Complete recurrence
Institutional Continuity	3	3	3	3	9	Complete recurrence
Multi-layered Accountability	5	2	5	5	12	Very strong recurrence
Accommodation of Diversity	5	3	3	5	11	Strong recurrence
Continuous Participation	5	2	3	5	10	Strong but uneven
Conflict Resolution and Coordination	5	2	3	5	10	Strong recurrence
Equal Citizenship and Rights	4	1	4	4	9	Strong constitutional support

Emerging APSG Theme	N	African Model <i>f</i>	Const. Democracy <i>f</i>	Swiss Model <i>f</i>	Σf	Interpretation
Consultation and Deliberation	5	2	2	5	9	Moderate-to-strong
Stewardship of Collective Resources	5	2	4	3	9	Complementary support
Polycentric Distribution of Authority	4	2	2	4	8	Substantial recurrence
Subsidiarity and Territorial Autonomy	4	2	2	4	8	Substantial recurrence
Contestable and Collegial Leadership	4	1	3	4	8	Selective but significant
Embedded and Civic Legitimacy	4	2	2	3	7	Complementary recurrence

Each theme was coded as present within a given model wherever the qualitative case analysis reported at least one substantiated instance of the corresponding practice for that model; N denotes the maximum possible recurrence across the sub-indicators comprising each theme, and Σf the summed frequency across the three models. Because coding was applied to qualitative, unevenly documented historical and institutional material rather than a standardised instrument administered uniformly across cases, the resulting frequencies should be read as an ordinal indication of the breadth of cross-model support for a theme, not as an estimate of its underlying strength, causal importance or statistical reliability. This caveat is particularly salient for the Synthesised African Model, whose lower frequencies in several rows may reflect the comparative sparsity of surviving epigraphic, archaeological and documentary evidence rather than the substantive absence of the corresponding institutional practice.

Contextual Institutional Adaptation ($\Sigma f = 12/12$) and Institutional Continuity ($\Sigma f = 9/9$) achieved complete tri-model recurrence, the only two themes to do so. Every governance tradition displayed explicit mechanisms for adjusting institutional form to changing circumstances and for preserving institutional identity across leadership transitions, dynastic succession norms in Aksum and Buganda, constitutional entrenchment in democratic systems, and cantonal continuity in Switzerland. Together, these findings substantiate the study's historical-institutionalist premise that durable governance systems require both stability and adaptive capacity simultaneously (Hall & Taylor, 1996; Pierson, 2000; Mahoney & Thelen, 2010), and provide the strongest warrant in the matrix for treating both as non-negotiable APSG foundations.

Multi-layered Accountability ($\Sigma f = 12/15$) and Accommodation of Diversity ($\Sigma f = 11/15$) showed very strong but asymmetric recurrence: constitutional democracy and Switzerland scored at or near maximum on both, while the African model scored comparatively low. This does not necessarily indicate that historical African polities lacked accountability or diversity-management mechanisms; oral testimony, councilial consultation and lineage-based checks documented for Buganda's Lukiiko (Reid, 2002) plausibly performed such functions, but are harder to evidence through the surviving historical record than codified constitutional review, referendum mechanisms or Swiss power-sharing arrangements.

Continuous Participation ($\Sigma f = 10/15$) and Conflict Resolution and Coordination ($\Sigma f = 10/15$) both registered strong but uneven recurrence, led by the Swiss model. The comparatively low African score for continuous participation is notable given that councilial consultation is often cited as a hallmark of traditional governance; the low frequency likely reflects the coding framework's emphasis on institutionalised, recurring participation mechanisms between formal decision points, a standard difficult to substantiate from fragmentary historical sources even where the underlying practice is plausible.

Equal Citizenship and Rights ($\Sigma f = 9/12$) showed the clearest genuine divergence in the matrix rather than a coding artefact: constitutional democracy and Switzerland both scored near-maximum while the African model scored lowest of any theme, since hereditary and lineage-based authority structures across the five cases were not organised around a doctrine of equal citizenship in the modern sense. This theme is therefore one that constitutional democracy must contribute largely intact to the synthesis. Consultation and Deliberation ($\Sigma f = 9/15$), again led by Switzerland, showed that representative electoral systems do not intrinsically guarantee deliberative mechanisms between elections.

Stewardship of Collective Resources ($\Sigma f = 9/14$) presented complementary rather than convergent support, with constitutional democracy scoring highest, consistent with the study's caution against retrospectively attributing a formal stewardship doctrine to historical African polities that demonstrably linked authority to resource control without codifying public accountability for it (Munro-Hay, 1991; Beach, 1980; Mudenge, 1988). Polycentric Distribution of Authority and Subsidiarity and Territorial Autonomy (both $\Sigma f = 8/12$) scored identically, reflecting Switzerland's constitutionally entrenched federalism against comparatively low and equal African and constitutional-democratic scores, the former lacking constitutional entrenchment of differentiated territorial authority, the latter frequently characterised by executive centralisation rather than meaningful subnational autonomy (Cheeseman & Sishuwa, 2021; Cheeseman et al., 2026).

Contestable and Collegial Leadership ($\Sigma f = 8/12$) showed the African model scoring lowest of all models, confirming that leadership contestability is a principle constitutional democracy must contribute substantially, with only limited support available from the historical record (largely confined to Buganda). Embedded and Civic Legitimacy ($\Sigma f = 7/12$), the lowest overall recurrence in the matrix, showed complementary support across all three models, suggesting that "legitimacy" is not a unitary construct read consistently across traditions, reinforcing the need for APSG to treat legitimacy as a composite property.

Read collectively, the matrix indicates that APSG's institutional elements derive not from uniform, symmetrical convergence, but from a differentiated pattern in which some principles are genuine tri-model universals, others are strongly but unevenly supported, a smaller subset represents points of substantive divergence where constitutional democracy must contribute the principle largely intact, and a further subset shows complementary support requiring composite reconstruction from partial contributions across all three traditions. This substantiates the argument that a credible Africa-relevant governance model cannot assume uniform recurrence across traditions, but must specify, theme by theme, where genuine convergence, partial compatibility or fundamental divergence obtains (Objective 4). It also cautions against reading consistently lower African-model frequencies as evidence of institutional deficiency, since these more plausibly reflect the asymmetric survival of historical evidence than the substantive absence of the corresponding practices.

Data Analysis

Applying the comparative and coding evidence to the four subsidiary research questions, and thereby the central research question, reveals a differentiated rather than uniform pattern of institutional recurrence, substantiated both by the coded frequencies recorded in the Cross-Model Coding Matrix and by emergent themes drawn from the case analysis and from contemporary empirical democracy studies.

RQ1 (recurrence among the African cases).

Six emergent themes account for the genuine recurrence identified in the matrix across Aksum, Wagadou, Mapungubwe, Munhumutapa and Buganda. Socially embedded legitimacy describes authority derived from lineage, custom and communal recognition rather than electoral mandate ($f = 2/4$ on Embedded and Civic Legitimacy). Differentiated authority captures the coexistence of central rulers with subordinate chiefs, councils or territorial administrators, most fully documented in Buganda's Lukiiko (Reid, 2002), corresponding to the African model's score on Polycentric Distribution of Authority ($f = 2/4$). Territorial embeddedness, evident in Wagadou's tributary arrangements (Fage, 1957) and Mapungubwe's settlement-based hierarchy (Chirikure et al., 2015), aligns with Subsidiarity and Territorial Autonomy ($f = 2/4$). Institutional continuity is the strongest-scoring African theme ($f = 3/3$). Relational governance helps explain the comparatively low but non-zero scores on Consultation and Deliberation and Continuous Participation ($f = 2/5$ each), since such mechanisms are harder

to evidence than formal deliberative institutions. Finally, resource-authority responsibility, the documented linkage between political authority and control over gold, trade or land (Munro-Hay, 1991; Mudenge, 1988), corresponds to the mid-range score on Stewardship of Collective Resources ($f = 2/5$). Together these themes show African recurrence is real but partial, concentrated in continuity, authority differentiation and resource linkage, and weaker in codified accountability or equal citizenship ($f = 1/4$).

RQ2 (relevant and adaptable constitutional-democratic principles).

The constitutional-democratic case scored strongest on Equal Citizenship and Rights ($f = 4/4$) and Multi-layered Accountability ($f = 5/5$), corroborated by recurring themes in recent empirical democracy studies: constitutional constraint on executive authority confirms that elections without effective institutional checks remain vulnerable to erosion (Bareebe, 2024; Cheeseman et al., 2026); institutional trust and performance legitimacy shows democratic legitimacy depends partly on institutional delivery, not solely electoral mandates (Dzordzormenyoh, 2024); participation beyond elections is limited by weak youth engagement, local participation and party outreach (Davis & Turnbull, 2024; Crawford, 2009); Tambe & Ngubu, 2026); meaningful decentralisation requires genuine subnational authority rather than administrative delegation alone (Crawford, 2009)); institutional pluralisation of power shows democratic resilience improves when courts, legislatures, subnational institutions and civil society jointly constrain the executive (Cheeseman et al., 2026); and equal and protected political participation affirms that competitive elections alone are insufficient without conditions allowing free participation (Bareebe, 2024; Davis & Turnbull, 2024).

RQ3 (transferable versus context-bound Swiss features).

The Swiss model recorded the matrix's highest overall recurrence, scoring at or near maximum on eleven of thirteen themes. Subsidiarity and Territorial Autonomy ($f = 4/4$) demonstrates empirically that subnational units holding genuine authority, rather than merely delegated administration, produce more resilient governance (Vatter et al., 2020; Crawford, 2009), a structurally transferable principle rather than an artefact of Swiss history alone. Contestable and Collegial Leadership ($f = 4/4$) demonstrates institutional pluralisation of power in practice, directly addressing the vulnerability to executive aggrandisement identified by Cheeseman et al. (2026) and Bareebe (2024). Accommodation of Diversity ($f = 5/5$) corresponds to equal and protected political participation, since Swiss power-sharing was developed specifically to ensure linguistic, religious and cantonal minorities participate without systematic exclusion (Linder & Mueller, 2021). Two qualifications apply: Switzerland's comparatively lower score on Stewardship of Collective Resources ($f = 3/5$) indicates that dispersed, pluralised authority does not automatically generate strong resource-authority linkages of the kind documented in the African cases, suggesting these are independent design problems (Mueller, 2022); and direct democracy's effectiveness depends on organisational and administrative capacities specific to Swiss historical development, making this component context-bound and only cautiously exportable (Hall & Taylor, 1996; Mahoney & Thelen, 2010).

RQ4 (combinable principles without contradiction).

Four distinct patterns emerge. Universal principles, Contextual Institutional Adaptation and Institutional Continuity ($\Sigma f = 12/12$ and $9/9$), can be combined directly without qualification, since all three traditions independently support them. Asymmetric principles, Multi-layered Accountability, Accommodation of Diversity, Continuous Participation and Conflict Resolution and Coordination ($\Sigma f \geq 10$, African $f \leq 3$ throughout), require a layered rather than substitutive architecture, in which constitutional and Swiss mechanisms supply the formal, codified apparatus of accountability and participation, while African relational governance and socially embedded legitimacy supply the informal legitimacy and local applicability that formal mechanisms alone do not guarantee (Dzordzormenyoh, 2024). Divergent principles, Equal Citizenship and Rights and Contestable and Collegial Leadership (African $f = 1$ on both), cannot be synthesised additively, since hereditary succession is structurally incompatible with equal citizenship as a governing norm (Fage, 1957); constitutional democracy must contribute these largely intact. Composite principles, Stewardship of Collective Resources and Embedded and Civic Legitimacy ($\Sigma f = 9/14$ and $7/12$), show complementary rather than convergent support, requiring a genuinely new synthesis: African resource-authority responsibility establishes

that authority and resource control are legitimately linked, constitutional democracy contributes accountability mechanisms to govern that linkage transparently (Crawford, 2009), and the Swiss case contributes the pluralised institutional context within which accountability can operate without executive capture (Cheeseman et al., 2026).

Collectively, these analyses demonstrate that an Africa-relevant polycentric stewardship system is empirically constructible, but only through selective, theme-differentiated integration rather than uniform blending: universal principles form the non-negotiable foundation of the Utwala Mseto Model; asymmetric principles are integrated through the layered architecture described above; divergent principles are imported from constitutional democracy without modification; and composite principles are reconstructed from partial contributions across all three traditions. This differentiated evidentiary base substantiates the Utwala Mseto Model not as an averaging of three traditions, but as a principled allocation of institutional elements to their best-evidenced source.

DISCUSSION

This study set out to determine which governance principles, drawn from a comparative analysis of five historical African political systems, constitutional-democratic governance and the Swiss governance model, could be synthesised into an Africa-relevant system of polycentric stewardship governance. The Findings and Data Analysis established that no single tradition offers a complete or self-sufficient governance architecture, but that each contributes empirically substantiated principles combinable selectively rather than uniformly, directly answering the central research question in the differentiated terms summarised above: institutional continuity and contextual adaptation as universal foundations; accountability, participation and diversity accommodation as asymmetric principles requiring layered integration; equal citizenship and contestable leadership as divergent principles imported from constitutional democracy without modification; and stewardship and legitimacy as composite principles reconstructed from partial contributions across all three traditions. This differentiated answer also speaks directly to the conceptual overgeneralisation identified in the Problem Statement: it confirms that a coherent notion of "traditional African governance" can be defended, but only for a narrower set of principles than earlier, less disaggregated treatments have assumed, and that African democratic deficiency reflects a specific presidential-centralist institutional architecture rather than constitutionalism as a governing philosophy (Udombana, 2024; Dzordzormenyoh, 2024).

Conceptualising the Utwala Mseto Model.

The Utwala Mseto Model translates these findings into an applied governance architecture. Its core institutional elements, polycentric distribution of authority, subsidiarity and territorial autonomy, socially embedded legitimacy combined with equal citizenship, collegial and contestable leadership, continuous participation, institutionalised consultation, stewardship of collective resources, and multi-layered accountability, correspond directly to the four convergence patterns identified under RQ4. Polycentric distribution of authority and subsidiarity draw on substantiated support from both the African and Swiss traditions (Ostrom, 2010; Vatter et al., 2020); socially embedded legitimacy is retained from the African cases but deliberately paired with equal citizenship rather than left to operate alone, resolving the divergence identified under RQ2; collegial and contestable leadership is imported substantially from constitutional-democratic and Swiss practice, since the historical African evidence offered only limited independent support (Fage, 1957); and stewardship of collective resources is reconstructed as a composite principle, drawing on the historically documented linkage between authority and resource control in Aksum, Wagadou and Munhumutapa (Munro-Hay, 1991; Mudenge, 1988), while adding the accountability mechanisms constitutional democracy contributes and the pluralised institutional context Swiss governance demonstrates (Cheeseman et al., 2026). The model situates these elements within contextual factors, historical legacies, sociocultural diversity, state capacity, political economy and the regional and global environment, reflecting the study's consistent insistence that principles must be adapted to context rather than transplanted wholesale.

Main Theoretical Contribution.

The principal theoretical contribution of this study is the demonstration that polycentric governance, historical institutionalism, subsidiarity and stewardship theory can be integrated into a single analytical framework capable

of adjudicating, rather than merely juxtaposing, institutional principles drawn from historically and culturally distinct governance traditions. Prior scholarship has tended either to romanticise traditional African governance as an undifferentiated alternative to constitutional democracy, a tendency this study explicitly rejects, following Reid, 2002; Power, 2020), or to treat African democratisation as a matter of institutional transplantation from Western or comparative models without adequate historical grounding. By contrast, this study's coding-based, theme-differentiated method of synthesis offers a replicable methodological contribution: it demonstrates that governance principles can be classified as universal, asymmetric, divergent or composite according to their pattern of cross-model recurrence, and that this classification, rather than an assumed hierarchy of institutional sophistication, should determine how principles are combined into a new model. This reframes the long-standing debate between "modernisation" and "hybridity" perspectives on African governance (Mamdani, 1996, as cited in comparative literature; Henn, 2023) by showing, with coded evidence, that traditional and constitutional institutions need not be treated as competing alternatives but can function as institutional complements when appropriately structured, a finding consistent with Henn's (2023) empirical demonstration that constitutionally integrated traditional authorities function as complements rather than substitutes to state capacity.

Practical Application.

The Utwala Mseto Model has several practical implications for African governance reform. Constitutional reform processes seeking to formalise the role of traditional authorities should draw on the principle of institutional integration demonstrated by Henn (2023): traditional authorities linked constitutionally to the state are more likely to function as complements that strengthen local governance and development outcomes, whereas unintegrated traditional authorities risk functioning as competing, potentially destabilising, sources of authority. Decentralisation reforms should move beyond administrative deconcentration toward the genuine subsidiarity documented in the Swiss case, meaningful authority and accountability held at subnational levels, addressing the specific limitation identified by Crawford (2009) that decentralisation without political autonomy fails to deliver the participatory and accountability benefits normally associated with it. Executive reform should prioritise institutional pluralisation, strengthening courts, legislatures, subnational institutions and civil society as constraints on executive authority, rather than relying on electoral competition alone to discipline incumbents (Cheeseman et al., 2026; Bareebe, 2024). Resource governance frameworks, particularly for land, minerals and public finances, should be designed around the stewardship principle articulated in this study, treating public office and collective resources as entrusted responsibilities subject to transparent, multi-layered accountability, rather than as assets available for discretionary control by officeholders.

Limitations Of The Study

This study is subject to several limitations. It relies entirely on secondary historical, archaeological and documentary sources rather than primary fieldwork, so the Utwala Mseto Model's practical legitimacy and workability among contemporary traditional authorities, constitutional actors and communities remain empirically untested. The evidentiary base across the five African cases is also uneven, Aksum documented through epigraphy and numismatics, Mapungubwe through archaeology, and Buganda through richer historical records (Munro-Hay, 1991; Chirikure et al., 2015; Reid, 2002), meaning lower coded frequencies for the African model may reflect gaps in the surviving record rather than the genuine absence of a practice. The Cross-Model Coding Matrix further rests on qualitative judgement applied by a single researcher without independent multi-coder verification, so its frequencies should be read as indicative rather than definitive. The comparative scope, five African polities and one European federation, cannot represent the full diversity of African political history or consensus-democratic systems, and comparing historical polities with contemporary institutions carries an inherent, if methodologically mitigated, risk of anachronism. Finally, the stewardship principle central to the model reflects a specific normative orientation that may require further cross-cultural justification before wider adoption.

Future Research

Several avenues for future research follow from the limitations and findings of this study. First, because this study relied on secondary historical, archaeological and documentary sources, future research should pursue primary fieldwork, including interviews with contemporary traditional authorities, constitutional drafters and

civil society actors, to test whether the Utwala Mseto Model's proposed principles are perceived as legitimate and workable by the communities and institutions they would govern. Second, quantitative cross-national research could test whether the specific combinations of principles proposed here, particularly the pairing of socially embedded legitimacy with equal citizenship, and the pairing of subsidiarity with multi-layered accountability, are empirically associated with governance outcomes such as political stability, service delivery or conflict reduction, extending Henn's (2023) regression-discontinuity approach to a wider set of African cases and institutional configurations. Third, comparative case studies of African states that have already undertaken partial constitutional integration of traditional authorities (e.g., Ghana, Botswana, South Africa) could test the model's practical viability directly, rather than through historical reconstruction alone. Fourth, further historical and archaeological research on underrepresented African polities, beyond the five cases examined here, could test whether the recurrence patterns identified in this study's coding matrix hold across a larger and more geographically diverse sample. Fifth, and directly addressing the single-coder limitation acknowledged in the Methodology, the Cross-Model Coding Matrix should be re-coded by at least one additional, independently briefed coder against the published sub-indicator specification, with inter-coder reliability reported (e.g., Cohen's kappa), before the matrix is relied upon for policy application; disagreements should be adjudicated and reported rather than averaged away, since the pattern of disagreement is itself informative about which themes are conceptually ambiguous.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated, through structured comparison, coded thematic analysis and theoretical synthesis, that an Africa-relevant governance model can be constructed from historically and empirically substantiated principles drawn from traditional African political systems, constitutional democracy and Swiss governance, without assuming the superiority of any single tradition or resorting to uncritical transplantation. The resulting Utwala Mseto Model, African Polycentric Stewardship Governance applied, offers a differentiated architecture in which universal principles are adopted directly, asymmetric principles are integrated through layered formal and relational mechanisms, divergent principles are imported intact from constitutional democracy, and composite principles are reconstructed from partial contributions across all three traditions. Its central theoretical contribution lies in demonstrating that governance synthesis across historically distinct traditions is best achieved not through additive blending but through principled, evidence-based allocation of institutional elements to their best-substantiated source. While the model requires further empirical testing beyond the historical and comparative evidence assembled here, it offers both a methodological template for comparative institutional synthesis and a substantive framework capable of informing governance reform in politically, culturally and territorially diverse African states pursuing legitimate, accountable and sustainable governance.

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