Indigenous Sabi River – The Home of Totems, Taboos, Chieftaincies, Cults and Spirits in Southern Africa

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ABSTRACT

The Sabi River, known today as the Save, has customarily been misconceived through hydrological, agricultural and conservationist lenses; while its standing as a cultural and spiritual landscape has received comparatively scant scholarly attention. This article interrogates how the communities inhabiting the Save basin have conceived of the river as a home of totems, taboos, chieftaincies, cults and spirits. Adopting a qualitative documentary design, it draws upon ethnographic, historical, religious studies and oral literary sources concerning the Hera, Duma, Ndau and Hlengwe peoples. Traditional Ecological Knowledge furnishes the principal theoretical lens, augmented by the distinction between first-comer ritual owners and late-comer rulers. The findings reveal that the river's pools are venerated as the abodes of water spirits and ancestral guardians; that clan totems bind people to the river and its creatures; that taboos regulate how water is drawn, who may approach sacred pools and which resources may be harvested; that chieftaincies derive a substantial portion of their legitimacy from ritual authority over land, rain and water; and that rain cults articulate riverine communities with wider religious networks. Two cases receive sustained attention. The Mugurasave family clan carries the river in its very name, demonstrating that identity, territory and obligation are held at the level of the lineage rather than exclusively at that of the chiefdom. Dzivaguru, the Great Pool, simultaneously designates a local pool, a clan praise, a regional rain cult and the high God, thereby illustrating how a single idiom tethers the river to the wider cosmos. The article contends that these institutions constitute an integrated yet contested knowledge system that has historically governed the river, and that the river functions as a relational archive in which kinship, divinity and authority are deposited. It further demonstrates that colonial conservation, land alienation, Christian missions and resource extraction have attenuated this system without supplanting its ethical force. The article recommends that water governance institutions in the Save catchment recognise traditional leaders, clan custodians and indigenous knowledge holders as substantive partners in river management.

Keywords*:* Save River, indigenous knowledge, totems, taboos, chieftaincy, spirits, Dzivaguru, Mugurasave.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Rivers in Southern Africa have never been mere conduits of water. They demarcate the boundaries between polities, carry the sedimented memory of migrations and cradle the graves of ancestors; they are, moreover, the thresholds at which the living commune with the dead. The Save River, rendered as the Sabi in colonial records, is emblematic of such rivers. Rising on the central watershed south of Harare, it flows south-eastwards through the Mashonaland East, Manicaland and Masvingo provinces of Zimbabwe, before converging with the Runde River near the Mozambican border and traversing Mozambique to discharge into the Indian Ocean. In the course of this journey it passes through the territories of several peoples, among them the Hera of Buhera, the Duma of the Bikita and Gutu areas, the Ndau of Chipinge and the Hlengwe or Shangaan of the south-eastern lowveld (Mtetwa, 1976; Tavuyanago, 2017; Vijfhuizen, 1997). Each of these peoples has inscribed its own histories, loyalties and apprehensions upon the river, so that the Save is less a single landscape than a palimpsest of overlapping meanings. The article poses two interrelated questions. First, how have the communities of the Save basin understood the river as a sacred landscape? Second, how do totems, taboos, chieftaincies, cults and spirits operate together as a system of knowledge and governance over the river? In answering these questions, the article makes three contributions. Empirically, it assembles

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fragmentary evidence on the Save River into a single, coherent account and brings clan praise poetry into dialogue with ethnographic and historical scholarship. Theoretically, it reads that evidence through the lens of Traditional Ecological Knowledge, which treats belief, institution and ecological practice as constituents of a single complex. Conceptually, it proposes that the river be read as a relational archive: a landscape in which genealogies, ritual obligations and claims to authority are stored and from which they may be recalled.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Religion, Spirits and Territorial Cults

Ranger (1999), in *Voices from the Rocks*, examined the Matopos Hills and demonstrated how the Mwari cult, landscape and history were intricately bound together. He showed how colonial conservation collided with African understandings of sacred land. His account is significant because it treats landscape as a historical actor shaped by contested meanings rather than as an inert backdrop. It builds upon Daneel (1970), whose study of the Mwari shrines documented their reach across much of southern Zimbabwe, including delegations from distant chiefdoms. Both works, however, are centred upon a hill shrine rather than a river. Yet the Mwari cult is known to have received rain petitions from the south-east, implying that riverine communities were woven into its networks. The link between the Save communities and the wider Mwari network remains underexplored, and this study considers it.

A distinct strand of scholarship concerns Dzivaguru. Auret (1982) described Dzivaguru as a powerful *mhondoro* of the Korekore, renowned for rainmaking, who lived in Dande but was ultimately defeated by Nyanhehwe. Virgin girls were given to him as wives, and he was believed to pay the bridewealth in rain, an arrangement that tied human reproduction to the fertility of the land. Auret noted, however, that among other Shona peoples Dzivaguru is a praise name for Mwari, a duality that signals the elasticity of the idiom. Mudenge (1988) situated the figure within the founding history of the Mutapa state, recounting that Karuva, a rainmaking priest of Dzivaguru in Dande, was defeated by Matope. Later tradition held that Karuva vanished into the ground and created a great lake, the literal meaning of the name (Roufe, 2015). The figure thus unites conquest, rain and water.

Lan (1985) interpreted such narratives as political charters that distinguish conquering rulers from the autochthonous owners of the land and its rain. Machoko (2013), drawing on Schoffeleers (1979), described the Dzivaguru cult as centred upon the symbols of the sacred pool and the python and as sustaining an institution of spirit wives. Mukonyora (1999), following Daneel (1970), recorded that Dzivaguru is the most popular praise name for Mwari and that shrine pools were understood, in Aschwanden's phrase, as the fountain and origin of life, akin to a woman's womb.

Chieftaincy, Water and Landscape

Vijfhuizen (1997) provided the most detailed account of rainmaking and chieftaincy within the Save valley. Her study of the Mutema chieftaincy in Chipinge demonstrated that succession disputes among the four ruling houses were believed to cause drought, so that political discord was understood to manifest itself directly in the failure of the rains. She found that a female medium of the royal ancestor held the highest spiritual authority in the chiefdom and played a pivotal role in selecting chiefs. This finding challenges the entrenched assumption that political authority among the Shona is exclusively male, and it suggests that the intersection of gender and ritual deserves far greater attention than it has received. Her study thus reveals that the moral health of the polity and the ecological health of the land were conceived as inseparable, a conception of profound consequence for water governance.

According to Vijfhuizen's (1997), The Sabi River is principally the historical setting of the chieftaincy rather than as an object of ritual attention and regulation in its own right. Maganga and Pfukwa (2023) traced the Musikavanhu dynasty of the Ndau from its founder Nyakuimba to the present chief. Employing Afrocentric and onomastic approaches, they showed how names preserve history and how colonial interference continues to complicate succession. The study recovers the history of a marginalised community and places naming at

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the centre of historical memory, treating names as archives rather than labels. The name Musikavanhu itself, meaning the creator of people, links the dynasty to the rain and to God, and thereby fuses political lineage with cosmological authority. Mazarire (2008) examined water politics in Chishanga, in the Chivi area of southern Zimbabwe. He showed that local people regarded pools and springs as having owners, namely the lineages and the spirits associated with them. Development projects that disregarded these claims encountered sustained resistance, revealing that indigenous water tenure carries real political consequences. The study demonstrates that such tenure is not an anachronistic relic but an active and contemporary political claim, capable of shaping state interventions. It is situated in the Runde catchment, which feeds the Save. It is therefore proximate to the present inquiry. Its insight that water has owners provides a compelling point of departure for this study.

Taboos, Totems and Environmental Ethics

Chemhuru and Masaka (2010) argued that Shona taboos (*zviera*) constitute a significant source of environmental ethics. They showed that prohibitions against cutting certain trees, killing certain animals and polluting water embody an implicit concern for ecological balance. Their argument is persuasive and has been widely cited, not least because it relocates taboos from the category of superstition to that of moral philosophy and dignifies indigenous thought as ethics. The present study grounds this claim in the concrete setting of the Save River and its chieftaincies. Dube (2024) examined the place of water in Ndau religion. Writing from an emic perspective, he showed that the Ndau regard water sources as the dwelling places of protective spirits, including *njuzu*. He documented taboos on the use of metal containers and described rain rituals performed by chiefs, elders and postmenopausal women. The article is particularly valuable because it is recent, because it is written by a member of the community and because it concentrates upon the Save basin, supplying an insider's account that earlier ethnographies lacked. Its method, however, is a review of open access literature, and it consequently engages little of the older ethnographic and historical scholarship, such as Bourdillon (1987) or Vijfhuizen (1997). It confines itself to the Ndau. This study brings the Ndau evidence into conversation with the record on the Duma, Hera and Hlengwe.

Utete and Madzivanyika (2026) reviewed the role of spirituality in traditional water knowledge systems across Zimbabwe. They argued that such spirituality operates simultaneously as a driver of and a barrier to aquatic ecosystem conservation. They reported that *njuzu* are widely conceived as a feminine ecological force, that totemism links certain clans, including the Musikavanhu, to particular pools, and that intergenerational transmission of water knowledge has declined under the pressures of colonial education, modernisation and secrecy. The review refuses to romanticise indigenous belief, acknowledging that the same convictions which protect water sources may also impede conservation work. Machoko (2013) likewise linked water spirits to conservation in Zimbabwe.

Apart from that, Clan praise poetry (*nhetembo dzemadzinza*) and praise names (*zvidawo*) constitute a further, largely untapped source. Praise poems record a clan's origins, its totem, its migrations and the landscapes it claims, and they are recited at greetings, weddings and funerals. They are therefore among the most widely transmitted forms of historical knowledge in Shona society, circulating far beyond ritual specialists. Collections published by clan members list Dzivaguru, Musaigwa, Muyambo and Dziriro among the principal praise names of the Dziva (pool) totem (Nhaka yevaShona, 2007). A praise poem for the Shayamombe Dziva clan addresses its members as *hove irimudziva*, the fish that is in the pool, and hails them with the words *Maita Dziva, Save* (Totems.co.zw, n.d.). These texts reveal that the river's name is embedded in the self-description of at least some clans, so that the Save is spoken whenever kin greet.

Synthesis and Research Gap

Taken together, literature establishes that the Shona and related peoples have long regarded land and water as inhabited by spirits, that taboos and totems carry environmental ethics that chiefs and mediums have exercised ritual authority over land and rain; yet these insights remain dispersed across studies of different places, peoples and resources. Most studies address Shona culture in general, a single ethnic group, or forests, hills

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and dams. None takes the Save River as a single landscape shared by several peoples, and none examines how totems, taboos, chieftaincies, cults and spirits operate together to govern that landscape.

Three narrower gaps follow from this broader deficit. First, the family clan has been overshadowed by the chiefdom as a unit of analysis, with the consequence that the most durable and widely distributed form of attachment to the river has escaped scrutiny. Second, clan praise poetry has not been read as evidence of riverine attachment, despite its pervasive circulation and its explicit invocation of the pool and the river. Third, the idiom of Dzivaguru has been studied in the north and west of Zimbabwe but not in relation to the Save, where the deep pools that the name evokes are themselves objects of reverence. This article addresses these gaps by assembling the scattered evidence into a single account and interpreting it through the lens of Traditional Ecological Knowledge, a framework expressly designed to hold belief, practice and institution within one analytical frame. The following section sets out that framework.

Theoretical Framework: Traditional Ecological Knowledge

The study is framed by the theory of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) as elaborated by Berkes (2018). Berkes defines TEK as a cumulative body of knowledge, practice and belief concerning the relationships of living beings with one another and with their environment, evolving through adaptive processes and transmitted across generations through cultural means. The definition is consequential because it declines to separate knowledge from belief. In many scientific accounts, religious ideas about spirits are dismissed as extraneous to ecological understanding, if not as obstacles to it. Berkes contends, to the contrary, that belief is frequently the very medium through which ecological knowledge is held, legitimated and enforced. A framework of this kind is therefore well suited to a river whose management has historically been inseparable from its sacredness.

Berkes (2018) further describes TEK as operating on four interrelated levels. The first comprises local knowledge of species, landscapes and ecological processes. The second is a resource management system that applies this knowledge through particular practices and tools. The third is a social institution that sets rules, coordinates behaviour and enforces sanctions. The fourth is a worldview that shapes perception and confers meaning upon the other levels, encompassing religion, ethics and cosmology. These four levels furnish a serviceable architecture for the present study. Totems and taboos may be read as rules and ethical codes; chieftaincies and cults as institutions; spirits and the conception of a sacred river as constituents of the worldview; and local knowledge of pools, seasons and species as the empirical substratum upon which all the others rest. Crucially, the levels are nested rather than discrete, so that disturbance at one reverberates through the rest.

Berkes et al. (2000) argued that TEK functions as a form of adaptive management. Indigenous institutions monitor environmental change, respond to feedback and recalibrate practices over time, while rituals and taboos serve as mechanisms for encoding lessons learned from past ecological crises. Rain rituals performed during drought, for instance, may be read as collective responses to environmental stress that simultaneously restore social order. This perspective helps to explain why chieftaincy disputes along the Save were associated with drought: the health of the land and the order of society were understood to be indissolubly bound together; so that ecological signals were interpreted as commentaries on social and moral conduct.

The framework is extended by attending to the relational character of the worldview level. Berkes (2018) emphasises that many indigenous worldviews situate humans within a community of beings to whom obligations are owed. Along the Save this relationship finds expression in the idiom of kinship. A clan whose totem is the pool, or whose name contains the river, does not merely use the river; it stands in a relation of descent and reciprocity with it. Reading the evidence in this manner guards against a narrowly functionalist account in which beliefs are valued solely for their conservation effects, and it foregrounds instead the ethic of mutual obligation through which communities have understood their dwelling beside the water.

ISSN No. 2321-2705 | DOI: 10.51244/IJRSI |Volume XIII Issue IX September 2026

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Approach and Design

The study adopted a qualitative approach situated within an interpretivist paradigm, since its aim was to apprehend the meanings that communities attach to the Save River rather than to measure discrete variables. A documentary research design was employed. Bowen (2009) characterises document analysis as a systematic procedure for reviewing and evaluating printed and electronic material in order to elicit meaning, gain understanding and develop empirical knowledge. This design was appropriate for a substantial corpus of ethnographic, historical and religious studies scholarship already exists on the peoples of the Save basin, albeit dispersed across disciplines and decades. Bringing that scholarship together permits patterns to emerge that no single study, confined to its own discipline or locality, is able to reveal.

Sources and Selection

Sources were selected purposively. The inclusion criteria required that a source be published in a peer-reviewed journal, an academic monograph or a doctoral thesis, and that it address indigenous religion, chieftaincy, taboos, totems, water or landscape among the peoples of the Save basin or among closely related Shona communities in southern and eastern Zimbabwe. Searches were conducted through Google Scholar and publisher databases using terms such as Save River, Sabi, Ndau, Duma, Hlengwe, *njuzu*, rainmaking, chieftaincy and taboos, and the reference lists of key works were traced in order to identify further material. Sources dealing directly with the Save basin were accorded priority, while wider Shona scholarship was included where it supplied the conceptual background required to interpret local evidence.

For the two focal cases the documentary base was deliberately widened. Clan praise names and praise poems published by clan members and cultural organisations were consulted, because the scholarly record on the Mugurasave clan is almost entirely silent and because the idiom of Dzivaguru survives chiefly in oral and devotional speech. Following Vansina (1985), these texts were treated as oral traditions governed by their own conventions. Their value lies less in chronological precision than in what they disclose about how a group understands its origins and its place in the landscape. They were read alongside peer-reviewed scholarship and were not used as the sole evidence for any historical claim.

Data Analysis

The selected sources were analysed by means of thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis commenced with close reading and note-taking, after which passages addressing beliefs, practices and institutions connected to the river were coded. Codes were subsequently grouped into candidate themes, which were reviewed against the full body of sources and progressively refined. The final themes corresponded broadly to the five elements named in the title of the article, supplemented by the two focal cases and a theme concerning historical change. The levels of the TEK framework (Berkes, 2018) were applied at the interpretive stage in order to relate the themes to one another and to discern the systemic connections between them.

Trustworthiness

Evidence was triangulated across sources from different disciplines, periods and authors, and claims that appeared in only a single source were treated with caution and are identified as such where they are used. Following Bishi (2019), sources derived from colonial records were read critically, with attention to the categories and interests that shaped their production. Wherever possible, preference was accorded to accounts that recorded the voices of community members, including emic accounts such as Dube (2024).

Limitations

The documentary design entails evident limitations. The study is necessarily dependent upon what earlier scholars elected to record and upon how they interpreted it. Some communities along the river, notably the

ISSN No. 2321-2705 | DOI: 10.51244/IJRSI |Volume XIII Issue IX September 2026

Hera and the Duma, are considerably less well documented than the Ndau. The Mugurasave family clan is documented chiefly through its name, so that the analysis of that case is interpretive and its conclusions are advanced as propositions awaiting confirmation with clan elders. Moreover, some knowledge concerning sacred sites is deliberately withheld by its custodians and therefore does not appear in published sources.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The analysis yielded eight themes. The first five correspond to the elements named in the title, namely spirits, totems, taboos, chieftaincies and cults. The sixth and seventh examine two cases in which these elements are concentrated: the Mugurasave family clan and the Dzivaguru spirit in the river. The eighth concerns the erosion of this system under colonial and postcolonial change.

The River as a Home of Spirits

The pools of the Save River are portrayed as repositories of spirits. Their most prominent inhabitants are the water spirits known as *njuzu*. Among the Ndau, *njuzu* are understood as guardians of pools and wetlands, and local narratives describe them as leaving wet garments on riverbanks and as capable of drying up a water source when offended (Dube, 2024). Utete and Madzivanyika (2026) found comparable accounts across Manicaland and Masvingo, describing *njuzu* as a feminine ecological force that is repelled by red, shiny and black metallic objects. In wider Shona belief, a person taken into a pool by *njuzu* may return endowed with the power to heal (Bourdillon, 1987; Fontein, 2015). Thus,The pool, is not only a place of danger but also a source of therapeutic knowledge.

The river is equally a home to ancestral spirits. Along the lower Save, the Hlengwe of the Save and Runde confluence grounded their claim to the land in the graves of their forebears. They declared having been confronted with eviction from Gonarezhou, that their fathers and grandfathers had been born and buried there (Tavuyanago, 2017). Among the Ndau of Mutema, the spirit of the royal ancestor is believed to speak through a female medium who is regarded as the highest spiritual authority in the chiefdom (Vijfhuizen, 1997). The river thus emerges as a meeting place of two orders of spirit: water spirits dwell within its pools, while ancestral spirits are anchored in the lands and graves along its banks.

Totems and the Kinship of People and River

Totems (*mitupo*) link clans to particular animals, body parts or natural features, and each clan observes a prohibition against eating or harming its totem (Bourdillon, 1987). Several Shona totems are directly associated with water, including *Dziva*, the pool, *Ngwena*, the crocodile, and *Hove*, the fish. Dube (2024) found that among the Ndau, animal totems reinforce environmental stewardship through inherited prohibitions tied to clan identity. Utete and Madzivanyika (2026) reported that totemism links certain clans to particular pools as cultural symbols, and they named the Musikavanhu among these clans.

Totems operate at two distinct levels. At the level of the individual, they impose a personal duty of respect towards particular species. At the level of the community, they distribute that duty across many clans bearing different totems, with the consequence that a wide range of species along the river is protected by at least some members of the community. The evidence concerning specific river totems among the Hera, Duma and Hlengwe is, however, thin, and most documented examples derive from Ndau and general Shona sources.

Taboos Governing the River

The sources describe a dense web of taboos (*zviera*) regulating contact with the river and its pools. The most frequently reported concerns the use of metal containers: drawing water from sacred pools or springs with metal vessels is prohibited because it is believed to anger the spirits and cause the source to dry (Dube, 2024; Utete & Madzivanyika, 2026). Some pools may be approached only by postmenopausal women and young girls. Dube (2024) recorded the case of a woman whose well dried up after she removed a frog from it, an event interpreted locally as a sanction for the breach of a taboo. Other taboos regulate the wider riparian environment. Across Shona communities there are prohibitions against polluting water sources, cutting certain

ISSN No. 2321-2705 | DOI: 10.51244/IJRSI |Volume XIII Issue IX September 2026

trees near springs and killing certain animals (Chemhuru & Masaka, 2010). These taboos are articulated through warnings of supernatural punishment, such as illness, drought or misfortune (Chigidi, 2009). The sources indicate that the force of these warnings rests upon belief in the spirits described above. Taboos are therefore the practical rules through which the spirit world regulates human conduct along the river, translating cosmological conviction into everyday discipline.

Chieftaincies and Ritual Authority over Land and Water

Chieftaincy along the Save is inseparable from ritual authority. The Mutema chieftaincy of Chipinge traces its

settlement in the Save valley to around 1740. Its paramount chiefs are drawn in rotation from four ruling houses (Vijfhuizen, 1997). Vijfhuizen found that succession disputes among these houses were believed to cause drought: rival claimants declined to cooperate in rain rituals, and the land was believed to suffer in consequence. The female medium of the royal ancestor played a decisive role in selecting chiefs and in resolving conflicts.

The Musikavanhu dynasty of the Ndau traces its descent from its founder Nyakuimba, who established his polity in Chipinge and the middle Save (Maganga & Pfukwa, 2023). The dynasty's name links it to the creator of people and to rain, and colonial interference in succession continues to affect the chieftaincy today. Further south, the Hlengwe chiefs, including Chitsa, led resistance to eviction from Gonarezhou by appealing to ancestral attachment to the land (Tavuyanago, 2017). In the Runde catchment, Mazarire (2008) found that pools and springs were regarded as having owners, namely lineages and their spirits, whose claims had to be respected before water could be used or developed.

Rain Cults and Ritual Networks

The sources present rain rituals as the most important collective religious practice along the river. Among the Ndau, the *doro remakoto* ceremony is performed during drought, when traditional leaders, elders and postmenopausal women invoke ancestral spirits to petition Musikavanhu, understood as God, for rain (Dube, 2024). Vijfhuizen (1997) showed that such rituals in the Mutema chieftaincy depended upon harmony among the ruling houses and upon the participation of the royal medium.

These local rituals are articulated with wider religious networks. Schoffeleers (1979) described territorial cults across Central Africa that concerned the welfare of whole regions rather than single lineages, and the Mwari cult of the Matopos Hills received rain petitions from chiefdoms across much of southern Zimbabwe (Daneel, 1970; Ranger, 1999). The published sources do not establish with clarity how regularly communities of the Save dispatched envoys to Mwari shrines. The evidence does show, however, that rain rituals along the river operated within a religious order larger than any single chiefdom.

The Mugurasave Family Clan and the River

The Mugurasave family clan furnishes the clearest instance in which the river enters directly into the identity of a lineage. The clan name is a compound whose final element is the name of the river itself, Save. Its first element, *mugura*, may be read as deriving from the Shona verb stem *-gura*, to cut, sever or divide. Oral traditions have it that, the founding father of the Mugurasave clan was well known and highly celebrated for crossing the big Sabi river when it was overflowing fiercely. The river forms part of the clan's name and, by extension, of the identity of every person who bears it.

This naming practice has close parallels along the Save. Praise poetry of the Dziva clans hails members with the words *Maita Dziva, Save* and describes them as the fish that is in the pool (Totems.co.zw, n.d.). The Musikavanhu dynasty carries a name that ties its founder to creation and rain (Maganga & Pfukwa, 2023). The Hlengwe of the Save and Runde confluence expressed their attachment to the river through the graves and birthplaces of their fathers (Tavuyanago, 2017). In each case a group locates its origin at the river and makes that origin part of its public self-description. The Mugurasave name belongs to this wider pattern but compresses it into a single word.

ISSN No. 2321-2705 | DOI: 10.51244/IJRSI |Volume XIII Issue IX September 2026

Three dimensions of the clan's connection with the river may be distinguished. The first is genealogical. Because a clan name is inherited, every generation of the Mugurasave is born into a relationship with the Save, irrespective of whether its members reside on the river's banks. The name travels with the lineage when it moves and thereby preserves the memory of the river among descendants who may never have seen it. The second dimension is territorial. In Shona society, claims to land and water are advanced through ancestry, and Mazarire (2008) showed that pools and springs have owners, namely lineages and their spirits. A clan whose name incorporates the river carries a standing claim to be counted among those owners. The third dimension is ethical. To bear the river's name is to be bound to it by obligations of respect, so that the duties that totems impose towards particular species are here extended to the watercourse as a whole.

The case also demonstrates that river governance does not reside solely in chiefdoms. The Mugurasave are a family clan rather than a ruling house, and their relationship with the river is transmitted through naming, praise and domestic ritual rather than through the formal machinery of chieftaincy. This lineage level occupies the space between the individual duty imposed by a totem and the territorial authority exercised by a chief. It is the level at which ancestors are addressed at the homestead, at which children learn the family's praises and at which knowledge of particular pools, fords and graves is transmitted. The published sources say little about this level, yet the Mugurasave case suggests that it is precisely where attachment to the river proves most durable.

The Dzivaguru Spirit in the River

The name Dzivaguru joins *dziva*, pool, to the augmentative *-guru*, great, and therefore signifies the Great Pool. The sources show that the name operates at several levels simultaneously. At the most encompassing level it is a praise name for Mwari, the high God and giver of rain; Daneel (1970) reported, and Mukonyora (1999) confirmed, that Dzivaguru is the most popular praise name for Mwari. At the regional level, Dzivaguru is a powerful rain spirit of the Korekore, associated with a shrine in the Zambezi valley, with the symbols of the pool and the python and with an institution of spirit wives (Auret, 1982; Machoko, 2013). At the level of the clan, it is a praise name of the Dziva totem (Nhaka yevaShona, 2007). At the level of the landscape, it evokes the deep, perennial pool, which Shona thought associates with the origin of life (Mukonyora, 1999).

Along the Save river, these meanings converge upon the river's deep pools. The pools are the places where *njuzu* dwell, where offerings are made in times of drought and where water endures when the river's flow fails (Dube, 2024; Utete & Madzivanyika, 2026). The *doro remakoto* rain ritual of the Ndau is addressed through the ancestors to Musikavanhu, understood as God (Dube, 2024). Musikavanhu, the creator of people, and Dzivaguru, the Great Pool, are two praise names that describe the same high power from different vantage points, the one stressing creation and the other the waters from which life proceeds. The river is thus the place where the most abstract conception of the divine becomes locally present. Every great pool on the Save is, in this idiom, a local instance of the Great Pool.

The Dzivaguru traditions also carry a political charge. In the Mutapa narratives the conquering ruler defeats Dzivaguru or his priest Karuva, yet the defeated party retains power over rain; Karuva is said to have vanished into the ground and formed a great lake (Mudenge, 1988; Roufe, 2015). Lan (1985) showed that such narratives establish an enduring division between those who rule and those who hold the land's fertility. The Save evidence reveals a comparable division. In the Mutema chieftaincy the ruling houses compete for office, but the medium of the royal ancestor holds the highest spiritual authority and rain depends upon her participation (Vijfhuizen, 1997). The idiom of the Great Pool thus places the ultimate source of rain beyond the reach of any single ruler.

Two caveats apply. First, the published sources do not document a named Dzivaguru shrine on the Save itself. The connection established here rests upon the shared idiom of the pool, upon Dziva clan praise poetry and upon the rain theology of the Ndau, rather than upon a recorded cult centre. Second, the Dzivaguru traditions contain elements that are ethically ambivalent. The giving of virgin girls as spirit wives (Auret, 1982) placed the burden of securing rain upon young women who had little voice in the matter. Any account of the Great Pool as an ecological resource must therefore acknowledge these relations of power.

ISSN No. 2321-2705 | DOI: 10.51244/IJRSI |Volume XIII Issue IX September 2026

The Erosion of the Indigenous Sabi River

Colonial conservation displaced communities from large areas of the lowveld and denied their claims to ancestral land (Tavuyanago, 2017; Wolmer, 2007). Bureaucratic resource management supplanted the authority of chiefs and mediums over land and water (Mukamuri, 1995), while dams and development projects frequently ignored local claims to the ownership of water (Fontein, 2015; Mazarire, 2008). Utete and Madzivanyika (2026) found that intergenerational transmission of water knowledge has declined, attributing this to colonial education, modernisation and the secrecy that surrounds much of this knowledge. The result is an indigenous Sabi river whose indigenous meanings persist but whose governing institutions have forfeited much of their force.

DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that the Save River has been understood by its peoples as considerably more than a watercourse. It is at once a dwelling place of spirits, a kinsman of clans, a space governed by rules, a domain of chiefs and a site of collective ritual. This discussion interprets these findings through the lens of Traditional Ecological Knowledge and advances the argument that the five elements named in the title are not separate cultural curiosities. They are, rather, interlocking levels of a single knowledge system that has historically governed the river, distributing authority, regulating conduct and conferring meaning. The sections that follow examine each level in turn, consider the two focal cases as lenses through which the coherence of the system becomes visible, and then turn to the tensions and erosion that complicate any celebratory reading.

The Save as an Integrated Knowledge System

Berkes (2018) proposed that TEK operates on four levels: local knowledge, management practice, social institutions and worldview. The evidence from the Save maps closely onto this architecture. At the level of worldview, the river is a living landscape inhabited by *njuzu* and ancestral spirits. At the level of institutions, chiefs, mediums and elders hold authority over land, rain and water. At the level of management practice, taboos regulate how water is drawn, who may approach pools and which species may be taken. At the level of local knowledge, communities know which pools are permanent, which springs fail in drought and where particular species breed. The Mugurasave clan and the Dzivaguru idiom traverse all four levels, the former as a lineage-based custodianship of memory and obligation, the latter as a cosmological conception of the pool as the origin of life and the seat of rain.

Crucially, each level depends upon the others for its coherence and efficacy. A taboo against metal vessels makes sense only within a worldview that situates a spirit in the pool; deprived of that worldview, it appears as an arbitrary prohibition. The authority of the spirit, in turn, is rendered socially visible through a medium whose pronouncements shape the choice of a chief. The chief then leads the rituals that are believed to bring the rain that replenishes the pool, and the pool, finally, is known intimately through the local knowledge of those who draw from it. The system is thus circular rather than hierarchical, each element presupposing and reinforcing the others. This circularity is the source of its resilience, for each component is underwritten by several others, but it is also the source of its vulnerability, since injury to any single level propagates throughout the whole.

Chieftaincy as an Institution of Adaptive Management

Chieftaincies of the Save constitute the institutional core of the system. Berkes et al. (2000) argued that indigenous institutions function as forms of adaptive management that monitor environmental change and respond to it. The Mutema evidence corresponds closely to this argument. Drought was interpreted as a signal of disorder within the chiefdom, and the prescribed response was to resolve succession disputes and restore collective ritual (Vijfhuizen, 1997). Ecological crisis thus triggered social repair. The feedback loop between environment and society was mediated through ritual. The legitimacy of the chief depended upon his capacity to secure harmony with the ancestors and, through them, the rain. In this sense, chiefly office was less a

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possession than a trust, subject to the verdict of the land. Persistent droughts could be read as evidence that the polity had fallen into disorder.

The role of the female medium merits particular emphasis. Vijfhuizen (1997) showed that the medium of the royal ancestor held the highest spiritual authority and influenced the selection of chiefs, while Dube (2024) found that postmenopausal women were among those who performed rain rituals. These findings complicate the image of Shona chieftaincy as unambiguously patriarchal. They suggest that women held pivotal positions where political authority meets ecological ritual. Lan (1985) showed that mediums in the Zambezi valley could rival chiefs in authority, and the Save evidence suggests a comparable balance, albeit with a distinctive gendered dimension. The implication for contemporary governance is considerable: consultative processes that engage only male chiefs risk excluding precisely those women whose ritual standing has mediated between the polity and its waters.

The Musikavanhu case adds a further layer of complexity. The name of the dynasty links chiefly authority directly to creation and rain (Maganga & Pfukwa, 2023), and this fusion of political and cosmological authority means that disputes over chieftaincy are never solely political. When colonial and postcolonial states interfered in succession, they disturbed the ritual order through which the land was believed to be cared for, often without recognising that they were doing so. Bishi (2019) showed how colonial archives continue to shape chieftaincy claims, so that the categories devised by administrators persist in contemporary disputes. The implication is that the ritual governance of the river has, for over a century, been entangled with state processes that do not recognise its logic. Any attempt to enlist chiefs in river management must therefore reckon with this inheritance rather than presume an untouched tradition.

Cults and the Scale of River Governance

A river poses a distinctive problem of governance, for water that flows past one chiefdom will inevitably reach another, and actions taken upstream affect those living downstream. The concept of territorial cults (Schoffeleers, 1979) helps to address this problem, since such cults operate at a scale beyond the single lineage or chiefdom. The rain rituals of the Save chieftaincies can be read as local expressions of a wider religious order, of which the Mwari cult, receiving petitions from across southern Zimbabwe (Daneel, 1970; Ranger, 1999), represents the most elevated tier. Through such networks, numerous communities were bound to a shared set of ritual obligations concerning rain and land. In the language of contemporary water governance, these networks supplied a basin-wide coordination that transcended the fragmentation of the political landscape.

Kinship and Divinity in the River: Mugurasave and Dzivaguru Read Together

The two focal cases illuminate the system from opposite ends. The Mugurasave clan reveals the river at its most intimate, as part of a family's name, whereas Dzivaguru reveals it at its most encompassing, as a name of God. Read together, they disclose a feature of the Save's knowledge system that the separate themes do not fully capture: the same idiom of the pool runs through every scale of the system. A person belongs to a clan whose praises invoke the pool and the river. The clan addresses its ancestors, who stand in relation to territorial spirits and to the royal ancestor, and these in turn intercede with the high God, who is himself praised as the Great Pool. The idiom thus functions as a ladder of scale, allowing the relationship of a family with a particular stretch of water to be apprehended as part of a cosmic order, and conversely allowing the cosmos to be encountered at the water's edge.

The two cases lend support to the proposal that the river functions as a relational archive. The Mugurasave name stores a genealogy and possibly a migration; Dziva praise poetry stores the association between a clan and the pool; and the Dzivaguru narratives store a political settlement between rulers and ritual owners. None of this memory is preserved in writing. It is kept in names, praises and the landscape itself, and it is recalled whenever a clan is greeted, a chief is installed or rain is sought. The implication is that damage to the river, or the removal of people from it, also inflicts damage upon this archive. This deepens the explanation offered by

ISSN No. 2321-2705 | DOI: 10.51244/IJRSI |Volume XIII Issue IX September 2026

Fontein (2015) and Tavuyanago (2017) for why displacement from water is experienced as a spiritual as well as a material loss: what is lost is not only a place but the very means by which a people remembers itself.

Tensions and Limits of the Indigenous River

An account of an integrated knowledge system risks portraying that system as harmonious and benign, yet the evidence does not sustain such a picture, and the TEK framework itself warns against it (Agrawal, 1995; Nadasdy, 1999). Four tensions merit attention. The first is that the system constitutes a field of competition rather than consensus. Succession disputes in the Mutema chieftaincy were serious enough to be blamed for drought (Vijfhuizen, 1997), and the several peoples of the basin do not share a single history of settlement. Claims to be the first owners of a pool may accordingly be contested between lineages and chiefdoms, and the very idiom of first-comer ownership that confers ritual authority can also become a resource in struggles over land, water and recognition. Integration, in other words, does not imply unanimity or the absence of conflict.

The second tension is that the system distributes knowledge unequally. Much of it is held by elders and ritual specialists and is protected by secrecy, and Utete and Madzivanyika (2026) found that this secrecy is one reason for the decline in intergenerational transmission. What protects sacred knowledge from misuse thus simultaneously renders it vulnerable to loss. The third tension is that the system may constrain as well as protect. The same review found that beliefs about *njuzu* can obstruct conservation work, for example by discouraging entry into pools, and the Dzivaguru traditions of spirit wives show that ritual authority could be exercised at the expense of young women. These tensions caution against any uncritical celebration of indigenous institutions and demand that their ecological virtues be weighed alongside the inequalities they may reproduce.

The fourth tension is that chiefly authority is not purely indigenous. Colonial and postcolonial states have long shaped who becomes chief (Bishi, 2019; Maganga & Pfukwa, 2023), and the office is consequently entangled with administrative and political interests. Recognising chiefs as river custodians therefore also entails engaging with the interests that surround the office. These tensions do not weaken the argument that the Save has been governed by an indigenous knowledge system; rather, they refine it. The system is best understood not as a fixed tradition but as a living and contested field of claims, rules and meanings. Its ecological value and its social costs must be weighed together, and this is the condition under which any partnership with state water institutions would have to be negotiated, transparently and with the participation of those it most affects.

Erosion of the System and Its Consequences

The TEK framework explains why this erosion matters so profoundly. Since the levels of the system depend upon one another, damage to one spreads to the rest. When chiefs lose authority, taboos lose their enforcer; when the worldview loses its hold on the young, taboos lose their meaning; and when communities are removed from the river, local knowledge of its pools and seasons is lost. The protective force of taboos diminishes together with the institutions and beliefs that sustain them. Yet state institutions have not replaced this ethical force. Formal regulation governs permits and allocations, but it does not produce the reverence and sense of obligation that the older system cultivated, and an ethical vacuum has consequently opened where a moral economy of water once prevailed.

At the same time, the system has not disappeared. Belief in *njuzu* persists, and chiefs continue to hold office and to perform rituals. Section 282 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe assigns traditional leaders a role in protecting the environment within their areas, while the Water Act of 1998 created catchment councils, including one for the Save. These legal openings create space for recognising indigenous institutions in river governance, although their realisation in practice is a separate and more demanding question. Agrawal (1995) reminds us that indigenous knowledge is not frozen but adapts through contact and change. The challenge for the Save is therefore to create conditions in which indigenous and scientific knowledge can meet as genuine partners, without the former being reduced to data or folklore, and in which the plural custodians of the river are accorded a meaningful voice in its future.

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CONCLUSION

This article has examined the Save River, historically known as the Sabi, as a home of totems, taboos, chieftaincies, cults and spirits. Drawing on documentary sources, clan praise poetry and the framework of Traditional Ecological Knowledge, it has found that these elements form an integrated knowledge system. Spirits confer upon the river its sacred character; totems bind clans to its creatures; taboos regulate its use; chieftaincies and mediums hold ritual authority over its land and rain; and rain cults link riverine communities to a wider religious order. The Mugurasave family clan shows that the river is also held at the level of the lineage, where it is carried in names and praises and survives movement and displacement. The Dzivaguru idiom shows that the deep pools of the river connect this local attachment to the highest level of the cosmos, and that ultimate power over rain was placed beyond the reach of any single ruler. The article has found that colonial conservation, land alienation, bureaucratic management and the declining transmission of knowledge have weakened this system without replacing its ethical force.

The article contributes to scholarship in four respects. First, it takes a single river as the unit of analysis, thereby bringing together evidence hitherto scattered across studies of different peoples and resources. Second, it demonstrates that totems, taboos, chieftaincies, cults and spirits must be understood together rather than separately, and that the system they constitute is plural and contested rather than harmonious. Third, it brings the family clan and clan praise poetry into the study of river governance and proposes that the river be read as a relational archive. Fourth, it highlights the gendered and distributed character of ritual authority along the river, particularly the role of female mediums, older women and lineages whose claims run alongside those of chiefs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are directed at policy makers, water managers and researchers.

1. The Save Catchment Council and the Zimbabwe National Water Authority should formally recognise traditional leaders and spirit mediums as stakeholders in catchment planning, and their knowledge of sacred pools and seasonal patterns should inform decisions on abstraction, dam construction and riparian protection.

2. Sacred pools and riparian sites along the Save should be mapped with the free and informed consent of their custodians, and sites that custodians wish to keep confidential should be protected without public disclosure.

3. Environmental impact assessments for mining, irrigation and dam projects in the basin should incorporate consultation on sacred sites and indigenous water rights as a standard and mandatory component.

4. Schools and community organisations in the basin should integrate local knowledge of totems, taboos and river ethics into environmental education, thereby supporting the intergenerational transmission of knowledge that is currently in decline.

5. Researchers should undertake collaborative fieldwork with communities along the full length of the river in order to document living practice, test the ecological effects of spiritual protection and afford community members a voice in how their knowledge is represented.

6. Catchment planning and community consultation should recognise family clans, including the Mugurasave and other lineages whose names and praises bind them to the river, as custodians alongside chiefs and mediums, and their knowledge of fords, pools and graves should be documented with their consent.

7. Researchers and cultural institutions should record, with the consent of clan elders, the praise poetry and oral traditions that refer to the Save and to Dzivaguru. Such records should remain under community control and should be used to strengthen rather than supplant oral transmission.

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