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Exploring the Importance of Traditional Schools in Maintaining the Heritage Language: A Study of Tshivenda from Tshimbupfhe, South Africa

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore the critical role of traditional schools—specifically *murundu* and *vhusha*—in preserving the Tshivenda language and cultural heritage in Tshimbupfhe, in the Limpopo Province, South Africa. Traditional schools play a significant role in preserving languages and cultural traditions that might otherwise be at risk of erosion due to globalisation, modernisation, or cultural assimilation. A deeper comprehension of their role allows individuals to appreciate more fully how these schools contribute to the preservation of cultural diversity and heritage. The study sampled 31 participants. This study adopted a qualitative approach and relied on face-to-face semi-structured interviews to collect and analyse data. The theoretical framework used to underpin the study was the Afrocentricity theory. The findings of the study illustrated that traditional schools serve as pivotal institutions for the transmission of linguistic and cultural knowledge, integrating indigenous values, practices, and language into their curricula. The study provides insights into how traditional schools facilitate the transmission of cultural values, practices, and languages to younger generations. By exploring the methods and content of traditional education, the research highlights how these institutions contribute to cultural continuity and identity. Secondly, the study contributes to the documentation and preservation of indigenous educational practices and pedagogies. It offers a comprehensive account of how traditional schools operate, including their teaching methods and cultural rituals, thereby preserving valuable knowledge for future generations. Furthermore, this study enhances the understanding of traditional schools' significance and supports the preservation of language and cultural heritage.

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1. Introduction

Traditional schools, often rooted in indigenous or local pedagogical practices, play a crucial role in the preservation and transmission of language and culture. These traditional educational institutions, which may differ significantly from mainstream or modern schools, serve as a vital link between past and present, ensuring the continuity of cultural and linguistic heritage^[1]. The current study sought to explore the importance of traditional schools, namely *murundu* (male traditional circumcision school) and *vhukomba/vhusha* (female initiation schools), in maintaining the heritage Tshivenda language and culture at Tshimbupfhe, Limpopo Province in South Africa. The Tshimbupfhe community falls under the leadership of the Senior Chief Vho Tshedza Ntshimbupfhe. This community continues to practice their tradition of taking their children to traditional schools such as *murundu* and *vhukomba/vhusha*^[2]. Tshimbupfhe is a small village in the Limpopo Province surrounded by people who are still practising cultural customs, such as taking their children to participate in cultural dances, such as *malende*, *tshigombela* and *tshifasi* for socialisation and entertainment^[3].

According to^[4], the integration of indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) into traditional educational settings represents a crucial strategy for the preservation and revitalisation of indigenous languages and cultures. Indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) are deeply intertwined with the languages, traditions, and worldviews of indigenous peoples, offering a rich repository of cultural heritage that is often at risk of erosion in contemporary educational environments^[4]. The inclusion of indigenous knowledge systems provides an essential counterbalance, facilitating the maintenance and transmission of indigenous languages and cultural practices^[5].

Examining traditional schools is vital for multiple reasons, especially regarding the preservation of heritage languages and tackling pressing social issues like gender-based violence (GBV) and moral degradation. These institutions, as stewards of cultural heritage and indigenous knowledge, are crucial for passing on heritage languages to younger generations, thus sustaining cultural identity and fostering a

cohesive community. The emphasis on heritage languages within traditional schools not only reinforces cultural values but also underpins ethical behavior. Additionally, these schools have the capacity to address moral decay and GBV by integrating cultural teachings that advocate respect, integrity, and social responsibility. In regions like Tshimbupfhe, where traditional institutions are integral to the social fabric, such schools can significantly influence youth attitudes and behaviors. Analysing these schools reveals how their educational methods, deeply rooted in heritage language and cultural practices, can be adapted to confront contemporary issues. This research is crucial for developing strategies that enhance the role of traditional schools in promoting ethical conduct and preserving cultural heritage, thereby contributing to the overall well-being of the Tshimbupfhe community and similar settings.

While there is a growing body of literature addressing the role of traditional educational institutions in language preservation, there is a notable scarcity of empirical studies focused specifically on the role of traditional schools in maintaining heritage languages within the South African context. Specifically, the existing research often overlooks the unique cultural and linguistic dynamics present in rural communities such as Tshimbupfhe. Additionally, many studies on heritage language maintenance concentrate on urban settings or formal education systems, thereby neglecting the contributions of informal or traditional educational settings^[6-9]. The case of Tshivenda, an indigenous language spoken in the Limpopo Province, has not been examined sufficiently in relation to its preservation through traditional schooling. This gap underscores a need for targeted research that explores how traditional schools contribute to the maintenance and revitalisation of Tshivenda, especially in rural areas where such institutions play a pivotal role. Therefore, the objective of the current study is to explore the role of traditional schools critically—specifically *murundu* and *vhusha*—in preserving the Tshivenda language and cultural heritage in Tshimbupfhe, Limpopo Province, South Africa.

2. Literature Review

In an era of rapid globalisation and cultural assimilation, the preservation of heritage languages has become a critical issue for many communities around the world. This literature review explores the significance of traditional schools in safeguarding the Tshivenda language, particularly within the context of Tshimbufhe, South Africa. Traditional schools, deeply rooted in local customs and practices, offer a unique educational environment that fosters the use and preservation of indigenous languages.

2.1. Tshivenda Traditional Schools

Integrating traditional schools into the Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (CoGTA) offers a strategic method for preserving and institutionalising cultural practices, especially concerning male education. Traditional schools, such as those for the initiation of boys (e.g., *muḽa and vhukomba*), are essential for imparting cultural values, social responsibilities, and communal norms, extending their role beyond academic learning to include the transmission of vital traditional knowledge and practices^[10]. This integration would formalise support for these schools, enabling the creation of structured policies and resources to sustain and adapt traditional practices in modern contexts. It would also help standardise educational practices, protect cultural traditions, and address contemporary challenges faced by these institutions^[11]. Recognising the role of traditional schools in preparing boys for societal roles—such as leadership, fatherhood, and community participation—within the framework of the Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (CoGTA) could enhance curriculum development, ensure quality control, and reinforce their importance in national heritage and cultural preservation^[12].

Maine (a male traditional surgeon who is the head of the traditional school for males) and *Nyamatei* (a female person who is the head of the traditional school for females) are found within the very same village, Tshimbufhe, which makes it easier for the community members to take their children to participate in those traditional schools. Initiation schools teach respect for elders, adherence to community norms, and self-discipline. The absence of children from traditional schools in rural South African communities, such as Tshimbufhe, raises significant concerns regarding moral

and social development. Traditional educational institutions play a crucial role in instilling respect for elders and ethical behaviour, which are integral components of community life and social cohesion. This analysis explores the potential moral and social consequences of not attending these traditional schools, with a particular focus on respect for women and elders and the broader implications for gender-based violence^[10]. Without this education, children may struggle with understanding and practising these values. As a result, they seem to shift from acceptable customs of Tshivenda and adopt other ways of doing things that do not align with Tshivenda as a language, culture and tradition; for example, young females no longer apply curtsying (*u khottha*) when they greet or come across elders or their seniors, or when they give their seniors food, as this is the Tshivenda practice. The youth who do not attend initiation schools often exhibit a lack of discipline, as these institutions are critical for imparting essential lessons on respect for elders and women. Initiation schools play a significant role in preparing boys to become responsible husbands, fathers, and citizens. At the same time, girls are educated in domestic skills and the attributes of supportive wives and mothers. The Tshivenda language and cultural practices are central to this process. They serve as foundational elements in conveying and reinforcing these social and familial roles, given their integral role in communication and cultural transmission^[13].

On the other hand, young males no longer take off their hats when they greet or come across the elders as a symbol of showing respect to the elders, and all manners and good behaviours are being taught at the initiation schools^[14]. If the researcher's observations hold true, the Tshivenda language may die, which could cause Tshivenda customs, traditions, and culture to change. Furthermore, the death of these practices may also affect the social identity of the Vhenda speech community. If the youth and elderly within Tshimbufhe communities take these initiation schools seriously and see value in them, perhaps the youth may fully discover the importance of maintaining this phenomenon among the Vhenda at Tshimbufhe and be conscientised of the danger of failing to maintain them. This could encourage the maintenance of customs. In turn, this would enable future generations to know and use the Tshivenda language properly without adopting foreign ways of communication in this regard. Vhenda within Tshimbufhe village are among

the tribes that participate in initiation school ceremonies and uphold the ceremony in high esteem. They consider it an integral social structure that moulds young people into individuals that best fit society. Initiation schools, deeply rooted in the cultural fabric of African societies, have been a subject of scholarly interest and debate. While academic attention has often centred on challenges and recommendations about the traditional initiation schools, a notable gap exists regarding a comprehensive exploration of the importance of traditional schools in maintaining language and cultural heritage^[15].

2.2. Perspectives on the Importance of Traditional Schools in Maintaining Language and Culture

Traditional schools, often rooted in the cultural and linguistic practices of specific communities, play a vital role in the preservation and transmission of language and cultural heritage^[16]. These schools, which operate outside or alongside mainstream educational systems, offer a unique approach to education that emphasises the integration of language and culture into the curriculum and daily practices^[16]. This literature review explores the significance of traditional schools in maintaining language and culture, providing a comprehensive overview of how these institutions contribute to the preservation of linguistic diversity and cultural identity.

Traditional schools are instrumental in preserving endangered languages. According to^[17], these schools provide an immersive environment where language is not only taught but used as the medium of instruction, which is crucial for the survival of minority languages. This is supported by the work of^[18], who argues that traditional schools often incorporate native languages into daily routines, rituals, and storytelling, which reinforces language use and ensures its transmission to younger generations.

Traditional schools play a significant role in maintaining cultural practices and values. According to^[6], these schools often emphasise traditional ways of knowing and being, which are crucial for the preservation of cultural identity. They include practices such as storytelling, ceremonies, and traditional arts, which are essential components of cultural education and identity formation^[19, 20].

The involvement of community members in traditional schools helps reinforce cultural values and practices. Stud-

ies by^[21] and^[22] show that these schools often have strong ties to the community, with elders and cultural practitioners playing active roles in the educational process. This community involvement not only enhances the authenticity of cultural transmission but also strengthens the bonds between education and community life.

One of the main challenges facing traditional schools is the pressure of modernisation and globalisation. According to^[23], there is often a tension between maintaining traditional practices and adapting to contemporary educational demands. This challenge can lead to a dilution of traditional practices if not managed carefully. However, traditional schools that integrate modern technology and pedagogical approaches while preserving core cultural elements can successfully navigate these pressures^[24].

Policy support is crucial for the sustainability of traditional schools. As noted by^[25], government policies and funding can either support or hinder the effectiveness of these schools. Successful examples of supportive policies include bilingual education programs and grants for cultural preservation initiatives, which help traditional schools thrive despite external pressures^[26].

Traditional schools frequently offer immersive environments where the community's language is the primary medium of instruction.^[27] emphasises that such immersion is crucial for the survival of endangered languages, as it promotes daily usage and reinforces linguistic skills among students. A study by^[18] supports this view, showing that when children are educated in their native language, it enhances their fluency and contributes to the language's vitality.

Curricula in traditional schools are often designed to integrate language instruction with cultural content. This approach not only teaches the language but also contextualises it within cultural practices and values. According to^[28], integrating traditional knowledge and practices into the curriculum helps students understand the relevance of their language and culture, thereby fostering a deeper connection and commitment.

Traditional schools play a critical role in transmitting cultural practices and values.^[6] and^[21] highlight that these schools often include cultural rituals, traditional storytelling, and community activities as part of their educational approach. This inclusion helps students connect with their heritage and reinforces the cultural identity of the commu-

nity.

Community involvement is a hallmark of traditional schools. Research by^[22] and^[20] indicates that elders and community members are actively involved in teaching and cultural transmission. This collaboration not only enriches the educational experience but also ensures that cultural practices are preserved through authentic and authoritative sources.

Reference^[29] explores the role of traditional education in Ghanaian society, noting that traditional schools are integral to instilling social values and ethical behaviour in children. He emphasises that these institutions often focus on developing respect, responsibility, and maturity by embedding these principles into their educational practices. The traditional methods used in these schools are designed to mould children into well-behaved and responsible members of society.

Reference^[9] provides a critical perspective on how traditional educational systems approach the development of indigenous knowledge. In *The War of Positions*, he argues that, while crucial, traditional schools are sometimes limited in their ability to develop and support indigenous knowledge systems fully due to their static nature and resistance to change. Lander emphasises that true decolonisation and the advancement of indigenous knowledge require more dynamic and innovative approaches that go beyond traditional educational methods.

Reference^[8] challenges the notion that traditional schools are fundamental for the preservation of African languages and cultures. In *Re-thinking African education*,^[8] explores that while traditional schools contribute to cultural education, they face significant limitations in adapting to modern educational needs and contexts.^[8] contends that the static nature of traditional schools might not fully address the dynamic changes in cultural practices and societal needs. This critique suggests that while traditional schools are valuable, their role in preserving Tshivenda and other African cultures is complemented by other educational and cultural practices that respond more flexibly to contemporary challenges.

Reference^[30] provides a critical review of Indigenous knowledge systems and their role in cultural preservation. Wane argues that traditional schools are vital for sustaining cultural heritage by integrating traditional knowledge into

their curricula. This integration supports the preservation of cultural practices and ensures that students remain connected to their heritage through educational practices that reflect their cultural context^[30].

Reference^[31] discuss intercultural communication and the role of traditional education in cultural preservation. This resource highlights how traditional schools contribute to the maintenance of cultural heritage by promoting intercultural understanding and preserving traditional practices through education. It provides a broader perspective on how traditional schools function within multicultural contexts to sustain cultural identity^[31].

Reference^[32] investigate the role of traditional schools in fostering cultural continuity. They emphasise that these schools are integral to preserving cultural heritage by embedding traditional practices and values into the educational experience. This perspective highlights the educational and cultural functions of traditional schools in maintaining heritage^[32].

Reference^[33] discusses indigenous research methodologies and explores the impact of traditional educational practices on cultural preservation. Her work underscores the importance of traditional schools in sustaining indigenous knowledge systems and cultural practices, affirming their role in preserving cultural identity through education^[33].

2.3. Theoretical Foundation

The Afrocentricity theory emphasises the centrality of African values and perspectives in analysing and interpreting history and culture.^[34] posits that this theoretical framework involves recognising and valuing African contributions while challenging the predominant Eurocentric narratives that often overshadow African experiences. Afrocentricity advocates for the inclusion of African viewpoints in educational contexts to provide a more comprehensive and equitable understanding of history and culture. A fundamental aspect of Afrocentricity is the reclamation and celebration of African heritage.^[35] argues that Afrocentric education should prioritise African histories, languages, and cultural practices to counteract historical erasure and promote cultural pride. This theoretical perspective is especially pertinent to traditional schools, which often align with Afrocentric principles by integrating African languages and cultural practices into their curricula.^[36] supports this, noting that Afrocentric ed-

education's emphasis on indigenous languages not only aids in their preservation but also strengthens cultural identity. By centering African perspectives in education, Afrocentricity provides a valuable framework for understanding the role of traditional schools in maintaining language and culture. By embracing Afrocentric values, these traditional schools contribute significantly to the preservation and revitalisation of linguistic and cultural heritage. This theory addresses challenges posed by modernisation, fosters community involvement, and underscores the importance of sustaining cultural and linguistic diversity in a globalised world. Afrocentricity emphasises the importance of incorporating African and African Diaspora perspectives into education, countering Eurocentric biases. Traditional schools often follow a standardised curriculum that may not reflect diverse cultural backgrounds, potentially alienating students from different heritages. Integrating Afrocentric principles can make education more inclusive and representative. Afrocentric educational methodologies might include storytelling, communal learning, and holistic approaches that reflect African pedagogical traditions. Traditional schools often focus on individual achievement and standardised testing. Adopting Afrocentric methods can offer alternative ways to engage students and address different learning styles. Therefore, this theory is relevant to this study.

3. Materials and Methods

This section outlines the research methods and analytical approaches employed to investigate the critical role of traditional schools—specifically *murundu* and *vhusha*—in preserving the Tshivenda language and cultural heritage in Tshimbufhe, in the Limpopo Province, South Africa. By specifying the materials used and the methodology followed, the researcher provides a comprehensive understanding of how the study was conducted and how the findings were derived.

3.1. Methods

This study utilised a qualitative case study design to explore its research questions. In his guide on research methodology,^[37] outlines qualitative approaches that can be used to study the role of traditional schools in preserving heritage.^[37]'s work is valuable for understanding how tradi-

tional educational practices can be researched systematically to reveal their contributions to cultural preservation. This methodological perspective supports the broader literature on the significance of traditional schools in maintaining cultural heritage^[37]. A qualitative approach involves gathering information through direct observation or open-ended interviews, as described by^[38], who defines it as a method used to gather information in the form of interviews. This method aligns with^[39] characterisation of qualitative research as interpretive, emphasising the examination of complex scenarios and ensuring that conclusions account for both unique and general factors. In this study, a qualitative approach and an interpretive paradigm were employed to facilitate a pragmatic interpretation of participants' experiences, prioritising their perspectives over those of the researcher^[38]. This approach provides an in-depth understanding of a limited number of individuals and caters to the narrative nature of human experience. The study is framed within a case study design, focusing specifically on participants from the Tshimbufhe communities, thereby concentrating on a single locale.

3.2. Participants

The study sampled 31 participants, comprising four *Maine*, three *Nyamatei*, eight males from the community, six females from the community, six male youths, and four female youths. The sample revealed a greater willingness among elders to participate than among the youths. The elderly participants provided perspectives reflective of senior citizens, while the youth represented the viewpoints of younger community members. Both genders were included because the study focused on *vhusha*, which is for females and *murundu*, which is for males. In a nutshell, each group brings unique insights and experiences that reflect different aspects of cultural and linguistic preservation. By incorporating viewpoints from a broad range of stakeholders, the study can capture the multifaceted ways more effectively in which traditional schools contribute to cultural continuity and language retention. This inclusive approach ensures a holistic understanding of how these educational institutions operate within their communities and how they address the needs and values of different generations and genders, ultimately enriching the analysis of their role in sustaining cultural heritage. Data collection involved face-to-face semi-structured interviews conducted in Tshimbufhe, Limpopo,

South Africa. Semi-structured interviews were selected for their ability to offer flexibility and clarity, allowing participants to seek explanations if needed^[40]. The use of open-ended questions facilitated the gathering of detailed data and aimed to create a comfortable environment that encouraged comprehensive responses. This approach was chosen to ensure a nuanced qualitative understanding of the phenomenon under investigation^[40].

3.3. Sampling Method

A sample refers to a subset of the population selected by the researcher for data collection in a study.^[41–44] Similarly define a sample as a group chosen from the broader population for the purpose of data gathering. This study employed a convenience sampling technique whereby participants were selected based on their availability and willingness to participate. This approach aligns with^[42] view that data collection involves a systematic process of acquiring and evaluating information on variables of interest to address specific research questions and assess outcomes.

3.4. Data Collection Methods

The researcher utilised an audio recorder to ensure the accuracy of participant responses and subsequently transcribed the interviews as outlined by^[45]. Given that the interviews were conducted in Tshivenda, the researchers, who are proficient in this language, translated the transcribed data into English for analysis. Following transcription, the researcher engaged in a thorough review of the data to become well acquainted with the information collected. The data were collected from *Maine*, *Nyamatei*, elders within the community as well as youths who attended these schools. Formal authorisation was required for data collection, as consent was obtained directly from the participants. For those who were illiterate, primarily the elderly participants, verbal consent was secured prior to the commencement of the interviews. Due to the limited number of participants, the findings of this study are specific to the Tshimbufhe community in Limpopo Province and cannot be generalised beyond this particular context

3.5. Data Analysis

Concerning data analysis,^[45] asserts that collected data must be interpreted and translated into research findings. The data analysis process involves evaluating the information to draw conclusions that address the research questions^[45]. Qualitative research begins with defining and organising the aims of data analysis, constructing themes through the condensation of codes, and presenting the data in a narrative form^[42]. According to^[46], data analysis involves recording participant responses, creating transcriptions for better interpretation, coding and classifying the data, and developing themes to provide a coherent analysis. To ensure the participants' anonymity, the following codes were used: MN1, (Maine1), MN2 (Maine2), MN3 (Maine3), MN4 (Maine4), NI1 (Nyamatei1), NI2 (Nyamatei2), NI3 (Nyamatei3), MC1 (Man in the community1), MC2 (Man in the community2), MC3 (Man in the community3), MC4 (Man in the community4), MC5 (Man in the community5), MC6 (Man in the community6), MC7 (Man in the community7), MC8 (Men in the community8), WC1 (Woman in the community1), WC2 (Woman in the community2), WC3 (Woman in the community3), WC4 (Woman in the community4), WC5 (Woman in the community5), WC6 (Woman in the community6), MY1 (Maleyouth1), MY2 (Maleyouth2), MY3 (Malyouth3), MY4 (Maleyouth4), MY5 (Maleyouth5), MY6 (Maleyouth6), FY1 (Femaleyouth1), FY2 (Femaleyouth2), FY3 (Femaleyouth3), and FY4 (Femaleyouth4).

3.6. Ethics

Firstly, ethical approval was obtained from both the University Research Ethics Committee and the Tshivenda-speaking community to safeguard participants against harm. Informed consent was acquired meticulously by providing comprehensive information regarding the research objectives and procedures, participants subsequently signed consent forms. For individuals unable to read or write, verbal consent was obtained. Additionally, measures were implemented to ensure anonymity and confidentiality, thereby preventing the linkage of personal identifiers to individual responses. Participants were also made aware that their involvement in the study was entirely voluntary and devoid of financial compensation. The data were encoded rigorously and stored securely, with access limited exclusively to the research team.

The following section presents the study's results and discussion.

4. Results and Discussion

The subsequent sections offer critiques and analyses of the data provided by participants regarding the investigation of the importance of traditional schools, namely *murundu* and *vhusha*, in maintaining the Tshivenda language at Tshimbupfhe, in the Limpopo Province in South Africa. The analysis is organised around five key themes derived from the semi-structured interviews.

4.1. Theme 1: Traditional Schools as Mechanisms for the Preservation of Their Cultural Heritage

The findings of this study affirmed that *muḽa* and *vhusha* are an integral part of Tshivenda as a language, culture, and tradition of Vhenda as a whole. Therefore, parents must continue taking their children to those traditional schools as a form of maintaining the Tshivenda language and culture. To support this view, another participant, MN2, avowed that "traditional schools are very important, and people must continue taking their children there to see the importance of having such schools as part of Tshivenda culture and tradition. For the reason that they speak proper Tshivenda when they are there, they sing Tshivenda songs, as well as being taught how to be a man amongst men." Similarly, another participant, NI3, stated, "we taught our young girls how to be strong as a woman, take good care of a man, and respect and be a good woman to your man as Muvenda. We teach them the importance of having traditional schools to maintain language and culture and make our culture unique amongst other tribes; in that way, our language and culture remain preserved." MC5 affirmed that "for as long as parents and community members keep making sure that they take their children to traditional schools, our language and culture will remain maintained and preserved even for the future generations."

In the very same vein, MY3 stated that "for as long as our seniors such as traditional leadership, pastors, elders, and educators can always show us the importance of these traditional schools, we grow with the complete understanding, and we can easily apply the same thing to our children.

One day, we will be elders, and our grandchildren will seek clarification and more information regarding the Tshivenda culture, including the traditional schools. Therefore, we can easily provide good and encouraging answers. In so doing, our culture and heritage can remain preserved for future generations." Interestingly, FY3 asserted, "Our parents should normalise always reminding us about these traditional schools to maintain the Tshivenda culture and heritage rather than telling us to go there whenever the season arrives. It can also work as mental preparation for the fact that there is *vhukomba*, and whenever it is time, one must go there and be with others." The present study aligns with the conclusions drawn by^[17], who argues that traditional schools play a crucial role in preserving endangered languages. Liddicoat's research underscores the importance of these educational institutions in maintaining linguistic heritage by providing a structured environment where traditional languages are actively taught and used. This study supports Liddicoat's assertion by demonstrating that similar mechanisms within traditional educational settings contribute significantly to the conservation and continued use of endangered languages, thus reinforcing the broader discourse on the value of traditional education systems in linguistic preservation.

4.2. Theme 2: Traditional Schools as Sites for Africanisation

The findings of this study emphasised that traditional schools are pivotal in transmitting cultural values, customs, and practices to younger generations. These institutions provide a structured environment where cultural knowledge and traditions are taught and reinforced, ensuring their heritage is preserved and passed down. One of the participants, namely, WC3, avowed that "Muḽa and *vhukomba* were identified as essential for the preservation of indigenous languages. Always remember that these schools use native languages as the primary medium of instruction, which helps maintain and revitalise endangered languages by providing daily usage and formal education." The study further revealed that traditional schools foster a strong sense of community and identity among students. MY2 stated that "These schools integrate community elders and local cultural practices into the curriculum, thereby strengthening students' connections to their heritage and reinforcing communal bonds." NI2 stated that traditional schools play a significant role in educating

students about important rituals and ceremonies. Students gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of their cultural heritage by participating in and learning about traditional rites. In the same vein, MN1 noted that students are taught traditional crafts, music, and dance, which helps sustain these community practices. Similarly, MY5 stated that “These schools incorporate community elders and indigenous cultural practices into the curriculum, thereby enhancing students’ ties to their cultural heritage and reinforcing communal relationships.” FY2 declared that “traditional schools are pivotal in imparting knowledge about significant rituals and ceremonies. Engaging in and studying these traditional rites allows students to develop a profound understanding and appreciation of their cultural heritage”.

These findings collectively underscore the critical role of traditional schools in preserving and promoting cultural heritage through educational practices and integrating cultural elements into the learning process. The findings of the current study agree with those of^[30], who argues that traditional schools are crucial for preserving cultural heritage by incorporating indigenous knowledge into their curricula. This integration helps maintain cultural practices and ensures that students stay connected to their heritage, providing a sense of reassurance and confidence in the continuity of their culture. Such educational practices are essential for sustaining cultural continuity.

4.3. Theme 3: Traditional Schools as a Foundation of Tshivenda Language and Culture

Participants consistently identified traditional schools as central to the education and preservation of Tshivenda culture. These institutions are seen as crucial in teaching cultural values, customs, and practices specific to the Tshivenda people, thus ensuring that traditional knowledge is passed down systematically through generations. One of the participants, WC2 noted that traditional schools provide a deep cultural immersion experience. By engaging students in traditional ceremonies, rituals, and practices, these schools play a key role in shaping and reinforcing students’ cultural identity, fostering a sense of empathy and connection to the Tshivenda community. The study revealed that traditional schools are instrumental in maintaining and revitalizing the Tshivenda language. MC2 highlighted that these schools use Tshivenda as the medium of instruction, which helps

students achieve fluency and promotes the everyday use of the language, contributing to its preservation. According to the findings, traditional schools often involve community elders in the educational process. The study found that traditional schools support and sustain various traditional practices, such as local crafts, music, and dance. MC8 noted that these schools often incorporate these elements into their curricula, helping to preserve and perpetuate Tshivenda cultural expressions. MY1 illustrated that “Traditional schools play a crucial role in preserving and promoting the Tshivenda language. By using Tshivenda as the medium of instruction and incorporating it into daily activities, these schools help sustain the language and ensure its continued use among younger generations.” While FY3 averred that “These educational settings facilitate the transmission of Tshivenda cultural practices, values, and traditions. Students learn about traditional customs, folklore, and societal norms through curriculum content and cultural activities, reinforcing their cultural identity.” These findings collectively underscore the vital role of traditional schools in maintaining and advancing Tshivenda cultural heritage, highlighting their impact on language preservation, cultural identity, and community cohesion.

The findings of the current study contrast with those of^[8], who critiques the view that traditional schools are central to preserving African languages and cultures. In Rethinking African education, he argues that although these schools contribute to cultural education, they struggle to adapt to modern educational demands and evolving societal contexts.^[8] suggests that the static nature of traditional schools may not adequately address the dynamic changes in cultural practices and societal needs, implying that more adaptable educational and cultural practices should complement their role in preserving Tshivenda and other African cultures. Nonetheless, the findings of this study reveal that traditional schools have an important role to play in preserving and maintaining language and cultural practices in the main.

4.4. Theme 4: Traditional Schools as a Way of Maintaining Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS)

The study revealed that traditional schools employ unique educational methods that reflect indigenous ways

of knowing. MY3 stated that “experiential learning, oral traditions, and community-based teaching are central to the education process, allowing students to engage deeply with indigenous knowledge systems.” Analogously, FY2 highlighted that “traditional schools are essential for integrating indigenous knowledge into the educational curriculum. These schools incorporate local wisdom, practices, and traditional ecological knowledge, contributing to the development and preservation of indigenous knowledge systems.” Another participant, NI1, emphasised the significant role of elders and knowledge-keepers in traditional schools. She stated that “these individuals are seen as custodians of indigenous knowledge, and their involvement in teaching and mentoring students is crucial for the accurate transmission and development of traditional knowledge systems. The findings of the study revealed that traditional schools are perceived as effective in providing culturally relevant education that has practical applications in daily life.” As MN4 stated, “knowledge imparted at these schools is directly applicable to the community’s traditional practices, such as agriculture, medicine, and craftsmanship, thus reinforcing the relevance of indigenous knowledge systems.” MY2 commented that “Traditional schools are instrumental in safeguarding indigenous knowledge systems by incorporating traditional knowledge into the curriculum. This includes teaching about local ecological practices, traditional medicine, and indigenous technologies, ensuring that these valuable knowledge systems are passed down through generations.” This view was supported by FY3, who stated that “the involvement of community elders and local knowledge holders in traditional schools plays a crucial role in maintaining indigenous knowledge systems. Elders contribute their expertise and experiences, offering authentic and context-rich learning opportunities that enhance students’ understanding of traditional knowledge.” In addition, FY2 noted that “Traditional schools often integrate cultural practices and rituals into their educational framework. This approach not only helps students learn about and participate in these practices but also reinforces the significance of these rituals in maintaining the continuity of Indigenous knowledge and cultural identity”. These findings illustrate the vital role of traditional schools in fostering and evolving indigenous knowledge systems, highlighting their contribution to the preservation, practical application, and innovation of traditional knowledge within

the community.

The findings of the present study do not agree with those of^[9], who analyses traditional educational systems’ approach to developing indigenous knowledge. Despite their importance, he argues that these schools are often limited by their static nature and resistance to change. In *The War of Positions*, he contends that genuine decolonisation and the advancement of indigenous knowledge necessitate dynamic and innovative educational methods that transcend conventional practices.

4.5. Theme 5: Traditional Schools as Sites for Addressing Moral Degeneration and Delinquency

The participants reported that traditional schools play a crucial role in instilling respect for elders among students. Through structured interactions with community elders and participation in traditional rituals, students learn to value and honour the wisdom and authority of older generations. This view is supported by MN3, who explained that “students are given duties and roles within the school setting and community activities, which foster a sense of responsibility and encourage them to take ownership of their actions and tasks.” Likewise, MC3 said that “traditional schools contribute to the emotional and social maturity of students. Students develop a greater sense of self-discipline and maturity by engaging in traditional practices and ceremonies that require adherence to cultural norms and values.” The study found that traditional schools emphasise personal responsibility and accountability. WC4 asserted that “traditional schools contribute to the emotional and social maturity of students. Students develop a greater sense of self-discipline and maturity by engaging in traditional practices and ceremonies that require adherence to cultural norms and values.” The study further revealed that traditional schools teach students about proper social behaviour and etiquette. As NI2 noted, “lessons on politeness, respectful communication, and appropriate conduct are integral parts of the curriculum, which helps students interact courteously with others.” MY4 said that “Traditional schools often emphasise teaching moral values and ethical behaviour as a fundamental aspect of their curriculum. These schools aim to counteract moral degeneration and foster positive character development among students by instilling principles such as respect, integrity, and responsibility.” Addition-

ally, FY1 stated that “Traditional schools frequently involve community and family members in the educational process, creating a supportive network that reinforces moral teachings and addresses behavioural issues. This community-based approach helps to create a more cohesive environment where moral and ethical standards are upheld.” These findings underscore the significant role of traditional schools in fostering key aspects of personal development, including respect, responsibility, maturity, and politeness, through a culturally grounded approach to education. The findings of this study concur with those of^[29], who examines the significance of traditional education within Ghanaian society and highlights that traditional schools play a crucial role in imparting social values and ethical conduct to children. He underscores that these institutions are dedicated to fostering respect, responsibility, and maturity by integrating these values into their educational practices. The pedagogical methods employed in these schools are specifically aimed at shaping children into disciplined and accountable members of society.

The views expressed in the data of this study are congruent with the Afrocentricity theory. Afrocentricity posits that African cultures and knowledge systems should be understood from the standpoint of African people themselves. Traditional schools, such as *murundu* and *vhusha* in Tshimbupfhe, embody this principle by centring the Tshivenda language and culture within their educational frameworks. These traditional schools teach and reinforce cultural values, practices, and linguistic skills in a manner that reflects the community’s own worldview and experiences. By prioritising local knowledge and practices, traditional schools align with the Afrocentric emphasis on centering African perspectives in education.

5. Conclusions

In light of the empirical findings, the current study accomplished its objective regarding the critical role of traditional schools—specifically *murundu* and *vhusha*—in exploring the importance of traditional schools in maintaining the heritage language in Tshimbupfhe, Limpopo Province, South Africa. The study’s findings underscore the critical role of traditional schools in imparting cultural values, customs, and practices to younger generations. Furthermore, the study discovered that these institutions offer a systematic

framework for teaching and reinforcing cultural knowledge and traditions, thereby ensuring the preservation and continuity of heritage. Data participants within the community concur that traditional schools play a pivotal role in maintaining the Tshivenda language and cultural heritage. The findings of the study illustrated that traditional schools serve as pivotal institutions for the transmission of linguistic and cultural knowledge, integrating indigenous values, practices, and language into their curricula. Additionally, the findings of this study revealed that these traditional schools not only sustain the Tshivenda language through daily instruction and community involvement but also reinforce cultural identity and continuity by teaching traditional customs, rituals, and social norms. Based on the findings and discussion, it is recommended that traditional schools enhance their curricula to include a more comprehensive range of Tshivenda cultural practices and linguistic elements. Investing in educational resources, such as textbooks and multimedia tools in Tshivenda, can support effective teaching and learning. In addition, further research and documentation of traditional educational practices and their impact on language and culture should be encouraged. This research can help in understanding the effectiveness of traditional schools and in developing strategies for their enhancement and sustainability. Lastly, future studies can look into the perspectives of all Tshimbupfhe residents toward traditional schools.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement

Participants in the study titled “Exploring the Importance of Traditional Schools in Maintaining the Heritage Language: A Study of Tshivenda from Tshimbupfhe, South Africa” are invited to share their insights and experiences regarding the role of traditional schools in preserving the Tshivenda language. Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time without any consequences. The data collected will be used solely for research purposes

and will remain confidential. Personal identifiers will be removed to ensure anonymity in any published findings. By participating in this study, you acknowledge that you understand the purpose of the research, the nature of your involvement, and the measures taken to protect your privacy and confidentiality. Your input is invaluable in understanding the significance of heritage language maintenance within traditional educational contexts. “Consent has been obtained from the patient(s) to publish this paper” if applicable.

Data Availability Statement

The data are available upon request.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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