



Theme: Innovations for Sustainable Development in a Changing World

***Title: Exploring the Social System and Indigenous Philosophy of the Bakonzo People in
Rwenzori region Western Uganda East Africa***

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Abstract

This article examines the relationship between indigenous social institutions, gender relations, and local governance among the Bakonzo people of the Rwenzori region of western Uganda. It addresses a gap in scholarship that has tended to examine the Bakonzo primarily through ethnicity, political mobilisation, conflict, and traditional authority, with less attention to how indigenous moral philosophies interact with gendered power and contemporary governance. The study employed a qualitative interpretive design involving 30 purposively selected key informants, four focus group discussions, and six months of participant observation. Data were analysed thematically through an analytical framework combining African feminist theory and neopatrimonialism, while treating indigenous philosophy as a locally grounded normative system rather than as an uncritical cultural ideal. The findings demonstrate that Bakonzo social organisation simultaneously enables collective solidarity and reproduces gendered hierarchies. Clan, kinship, age, traditional authority, and community reciprocity provide important mechanisms of social support, cultural continuity, and collective action, yet access to formal authority remains strongly gendered. Informal relationships and patronage can facilitate access to resources but may also weaken accountability and reinforce male-dominated networks. The study further demonstrates that indigenous philosophy can function as both a resource for inclusive development and a mechanism through which inherited hierarchies are legitimised. The article contributes to African gender and governance scholarship by showing that indigenous philosophy should neither be romanticised nor treated simply as an obstacle to modernisation. Instead, it should be analysed as a contested field through which gender, authority, belonging, and development are continuously negotiated.

Keywords: Bakonzo; Rwenzori; indigenous philosophy; gender relations; African feminism; neopatrimonialism; traditional authority; local governance; Uganda.



1. Introduction

The relationship between indigenous institutions, gender relations, and governance remains an important but insufficiently examined question in African studies. Across many African societies, formal institutions coexist with customary authorities, kinship systems, clan structures, religious institutions, informal networks, and locally embedded moral philosophies. These institutions do not simply reproduce inherited social arrangements; they also provide spaces through which communities negotiate authority, belonging, welfare, identity, and development. The challenge for scholarship is therefore to understand how indigenous institutions operate within changing political and socioeconomic environments without either romanticising tradition or assuming that modernisation necessarily displaces customary forms of social organisation.

The Bakonzo of the Rwenzori region provide a particularly significant case through which to investigate these questions. Historically concentrated in the Rwenzori Mountains and surrounding areas of western Uganda, the Bakonzo have developed a distinctive political and cultural identity shaped by clan organisation, kinship, language, customary practices, traditional authority, Christianity, Islam, agriculture, and a long history of political mobilisation. Scholarship on the Rwenzori region has demonstrated that Bakonzo identity cannot be separated from historical struggles over political recognition, territorial administration, ethnicity, and authority. Recent historical scholarship, for example, has traced the emergence of Rwenzururu mobilisation to earlier experiences of political marginalisation and demands for recognition and representation (Sseremba, 2019; Walker, 2026). The Bakonzo case is consequently not merely a study of an isolated ethnic community but a window into broader questions concerning identity, state formation, customary authority, and political belonging in Africa.

Yet political history alone does not adequately explain the everyday organisation of Bakonzo society. The social system is also reproduced through families, clans, elders, gendered divisions of labour, cultural ceremonies, customary expectations, economic practices, religious beliefs, and systems of reciprocity. These institutions influence who is heard, who exercises authority, who controls resources, and who is expected to perform particular social responsibilities. Such questions are particularly important for understanding women's empowerment.

The problem addressed in this article is that discussions of indigenous institutions frequently produce two opposing interpretations. One interpretation presents indigenous institutions as repositories of solidarity, communal responsibility, identity, and social resilience. Another emphasises their potential to reproduce hierarchy, exclusion, patriarchy, and unequal access to authority. Both perspectives capture part of the empirical reality, but neither is sufficient when considered independently. The Bakonzo case demonstrates that the same social institutions can generate solidarity while simultaneously producing unequal distributions of power.



The issue is especially visible in the relationship between customary authority and women's political participation. Uganda has established formal mechanisms intended to increase women's representation in local government. Nevertheless, numerical representation does not automatically translate into substantive influence. Recent research from western Uganda indicates that women may enter local government institutions while deliberative processes remain insufficiently responsive to gendered concerns (Mugumya et al., 2024). National evidence similarly shows that women remain substantially underrepresented in the most powerful local leadership positions despite their considerable presence among elected local representatives (United Nations Women, 2024). These patterns raise an important question: what happens when formal gender reforms encounter customary systems of authority and informal networks of social obligation?

The article approaches this question through the concept of indigenous philosophy as a lived moral orientation rather than a fixed philosophical doctrine. The Bakonzo social worldview emphasises relationality, community responsibility, reciprocity, respect for elders, interdependence, and collective welfare. These principles have affinities with wider African philosophies of relational personhood, including Ubuntu, although such concepts should not be assumed to be identical across different African societies. Recent scholarship cautions against universalising Ubuntu while recognising its usefulness for thinking about relationality, collective responsibility, and alternative understandings of development (Keahey, 2024; van Norren, 2022). The present study therefore uses indigenous philosophy analytically to examine how relational values operate in actual institutions and everyday practices.

The study also engages with neopatrimonialism. Neopatrimonialism is useful for analysing situations in which formal institutions coexist with personalised networks of authority, loyalty, obligation, and resource distribution. Research in Africa has demonstrated that informal relationships can weaken formal accountability when personal networks become more influential than institutional rules (Kimani et al., 2021). However, the concept must be applied carefully. Not every interpersonal relationship is evidence of neopatrimonialism, and community reciprocity should not automatically be interpreted as patronage. The analytical challenge is to distinguish between reciprocal social support that enhances collective welfare and personalised networks that distribute public resources according to loyalty or proximity to power.

The article makes three contributions. First, it contributes empirical analysis of the intersection between indigenous social organisation, gender, and governance in a Bakonzo context. Second, it places African feminist theory and neopatrimonialism in conversation with indigenous philosophy, demonstrating that gender inequality is produced through the interaction of cultural expectations, institutional structures, and informal networks rather than through patriarchy alone. Third, it contributes to wider international debates by proposing that indigenous philosophies should be analysed as contested political and ethical resources. They can support solidarity and development, but they can also legitimise exclusion when their principles are selectively interpreted by powerful actors.



2. Research Objectives

The general objective of the study was to examine how the social system and indigenous philosophy of the Bakonzo shape gender relations, community development, and local governance in the Rwenzori region of western Uganda.

The specific objectives were:

1. To examine how Bakonzo cultural practices, kinship structures, clan organisation, and traditional leadership shape gender relations and women's opportunities for social, economic, and political empowerment.
2. To analyse how personalised relationships, patronage, and informal networks interact with formal governance institutions and influence local development and women's participation in decision-making.
3. To examine how indigenous philosophical principles concerning community, reciprocity, interconnectedness, responsibility, and cultural identity influence social cohesion and inclusive development.
4. To identify culturally grounded strategies for strengthening women's empowerment, accountable governance, and inclusive community development within Bakonzo society.

3. Research Questions

The study was guided by three questions:

1. How do Bakonzo cultural practices, kinship structures, and traditional leadership shape gender relations and women's empowerment?
2. How do formal institutions and personalised social networks interact in local governance and influence women's participation and access to resources?
3. How does indigenous philosophy shape social cohesion, cultural identity, community development, and possibilities for more inclusive governance?

4. Background and Social Context of the Bakonzo

The Bakonzo are a Bantu-speaking population associated historically with the Rwenzori Mountains and western Uganda. Their history is closely connected to cross-border relations with communities in present-day eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, particularly through linguistic, cultural, musical, and historical connections. Facci (2009), for example, documents the cultural and musical connections between Bakonzo and Banande communities across the colonial boundary.



The political history of the Bakonzo is equally significant. The Rwenzururu movement emerged from longstanding grievances concerning political representation and relations with the Toro political order. Historical research demonstrates that the movement was rooted in demands for recognition and political equality rather than being reducible to a simple episode of ethnic conflict (Sseremba, 2019). More recent scholarship has situated Rwenzururu mobilisation within broader histories of decolonisation, self-determination, and minority political claims (Walker, 2026).

This history matters for understanding contemporary Bakonzo social organisation because political identity and cultural identity remain closely related. Cultural institutions provide spaces for the reproduction of language, customs, history, and collective identity. At the same time, traditional institutions operate alongside Uganda's constitutional and local-government structures. The resulting institutional environment is therefore plural rather than uniform.

Within Bakonzo communities, clan and kinship structures historically provide important mechanisms for organising social responsibilities. Extended families facilitate childcare, economic cooperation, cultural education, conflict mediation, and support during periods of crisis. Elders possess social authority because age is associated with experience and knowledge. Cultural practices, ceremonies, and oral traditions contribute to the reproduction of collective memory.

Economic life is strongly connected to agriculture and rural livelihoods. Farming, livestock keeping, petty trade, craft production, and other informal activities constitute important elements of household survival and community exchange. Women are deeply involved in agricultural production, household provisioning, marketing, and care work. Their contribution to community welfare is therefore substantial even when their control over resources and formal decision-making is comparatively limited.

The distinction between contribution and authority is central to the gender question. A society may value women's labour while simultaneously restricting women's control over land, household decisions, community leadership, or public resources. Consequently, statements that women are "valued" cannot be treated as sufficient evidence of empowerment. Empowerment requires attention to voice, bargaining power, resource control, institutional participation, and the ability to challenge decisions.

5. Literature Review

5.1 Indigenous Institutions, Identity, and African Political Life

African societies have long combined formal and informal institutions. Colonialism did not simply replace indigenous political structures; rather, it transformed and reconfigured them. Customary authority was incorporated into colonial governance in ways that frequently produced new



hierarchies and political identities. The legacy of these arrangements continues to shape contemporary governance.

Research on Uganda illustrates this institutional complexity. Traditional institutions coexist with formal political institutions, creating overlapping spaces of authority and legitimacy. Sseremba (2024) argues that Uganda's customary domain constitutes a distinct public sphere in which gender and authority operate differently from the civil political sphere. This insight is important for understanding why constitutional commitments to equality may coexist with male-dominated customary structures.

The Bakonzo experience also demonstrates the political importance of cultural identity. Historical studies of Rwenzururu show how language, history, cultural memory, and political mobilisation became intertwined in the construction of collective identity. The Bakonzo Life History Research Society, for example, played a role in documenting Bakonzo history and cultural practices as part of broader efforts to establish political recognition (Walker, 2026).

Indigenous institutions therefore cannot be treated merely as remnants of the past. They continue to participate in contemporary political processes, although their meanings and functions are changing.

5.2 African Feminism and Gendered Power

African feminist scholarship challenges the assumption that gender relations in Africa can be understood through universal categories developed primarily from Western historical experiences. African feminist approaches emphasise the importance of colonialism, class, kinship, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, household structures, and political economy in shaping women's experiences.

Recent scholarship has increasingly emphasised African-centred epistemologies and the need to examine women's agency within rather than outside their cultural and political contexts (Graness & Kopf, 2024). African feminist analysis is particularly valuable for the present study because it avoids portraying Bakonzo women simply as passive victims of patriarchy.

Women negotiate patriarchal structures through multiple forms of agency. They may participate in women's associations, agricultural groups, informal economic networks, religious organisations, political activities, family negotiations, and community development initiatives. Agency can therefore occur without necessarily involving open confrontation with male authority.

The challenge is to recognise agency while also identifying structural constraints. Women's ability to negotiate within a patriarchal system does not necessarily mean that the system itself is egalitarian.



5.3 Neopatrimonialism, Informal Networks, and Governance

Neopatrimonialism describes political environments in which formal bureaucratic institutions coexist with personalised relationships of loyalty, patronage, and obligation. The concept remains influential in African governance scholarship but has also been criticised when used too broadly.

Its analytical value in this study lies in identifying situations where access to public resources or opportunities is mediated through personal relationships rather than transparent institutional procedures. Kimani et al. (2021), for instance, demonstrate how informal networks and patronage can interfere with formal accountability mechanisms.

However, the concept must be distinguished from ordinary social reciprocity. In many African communities, reciprocal support is essential to social survival. Helping relatives, neighbours, and community members is not inherently corrupt. The problem arises when access to public authority, employment, development resources, or political opportunities becomes dependent on personal loyalty.

This distinction is particularly important in the Bakonzo context because community solidarity is simultaneously an important social resource and a potential mechanism of exclusion.

5.4 Indigenous Philosophy and Development

Recent scholarship on African indigenous philosophies has challenged development approaches that assume that modernisation requires the displacement of indigenous knowledge systems. Ubuntu scholarship, for example, emphasises relational personhood, collective responsibility, care, dignity, and interconnectedness (Bhuda & Marumo, 2022). Other work argues that indigenous philosophies can contribute to alternative understandings of development that are more locally grounded and socially embedded (van Norren, 2022).

Nevertheless, indigenous philosophy should not be romanticised. A philosophy centred on community may strengthen solidarity but may also privilege those recognised as legitimate members of the community. Similarly, respect for elders can preserve knowledge while potentially reinforcing age-based hierarchies.

The key analytical issue is therefore not whether indigenous philosophy is "good" or "bad." It is how philosophical principles are interpreted, institutionalised, and contested in everyday life.



6. Theoretical Framework

6.1 African Feminist Theory

African feminist theory provides the primary framework for analysing gender relations. It directs attention to the ways in which gender is embedded in broader structures of power, including family, kinship, culture, economic organisation, religion, ethnicity, and political institutions.

In this study, African feminist theory informed coding around four dimensions: gendered authority, control of resources, participation in decision-making, and women's strategies of negotiation and resistance.

The approach also required attention to women's agency. Rather than asking only how Bakonzo culture oppresses women, the analysis examined how women interpret cultural expectations, negotiate family responsibilities, enter public spaces, use social networks, and challenge restrictions.

6.2 Neopatrimonialism

Neopatrimonialism provided the second analytical lens. It was used to examine the relationship between formal institutions and informal networks. Coding focused on personal loyalty, patronage, kinship-based access, informal decision-making, resource distribution, and accountability.

The two theoretical perspectives are complementary but not identical. African feminist theory asks who has power and how gendered structures distribute it. Neopatrimonialism asks how personalised relationships affect institutions and resource distribution. Their combination makes it possible to analyse how women experience governance not only as women but also as members of families, clans, religious communities, economic networks, and political constituencies.

6.3 Indigenous Philosophy as an Interpretive Lens

Indigenous philosophy was not treated as a third universal theory imposed on the community. Instead, it was approached as an indigenous normative framework through which participants' descriptions of community, responsibility, reciprocity, respect, identity, and social obligation could be interpreted.

This distinction is important because the analytical framework does not assume that Bakonzo philosophy is simply equivalent to Ubuntu. Ubuntu provides a comparative African philosophical vocabulary, but the study remains attentive to the particular meanings and practices found among the Bakonzo.



7. Methodology

7.1 Research Design

The study adopted a qualitative interpretive research design. Interpretivism was appropriate because the research sought to understand how community members make sense of gender, authority, culture, governance, and development rather than measuring these phenomena exclusively through numerical indicators.

The study combined in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation. This methodological triangulation enabled the researcher to compare individual accounts with collective discussions and observed social practices.

7.2 Study Population and Sampling

The study focused on community members and institutional actors with direct knowledge of Bakonzo social organisation, traditional authority, gender relations, and local governance.

Purposive sampling was used because the research required participants with specialised knowledge. Thirty key informants were selected from categories including traditional leaders, elders, women's group leaders, and local government officials. Four focus group discussions were conducted with women, youth, and community members.

The sample was intentionally diverse in institutional position rather than statistically representative. This distinction is important. Qualitative research does not seek statistical representativeness in the same sense as survey research; instead, it seeks analytical depth, variation of experience, and saturation. The inclusion of traditional leaders alongside women leaders, youth, community members, and local government officials enabled the study to examine the same institutional environment from different positions of power.

7.3 Data Collection

In-depth interviews explored cultural practices, leadership, gender roles, women's participation, access to resources, informal networks, and local governance. Open-ended questioning allowed participants to explain institutional practices in their own terms.

Focus group discussions generated collective accounts concerning gender norms, cultural identity, community responsibilities, and development. They were particularly useful for identifying areas of consensus and disagreement.



Participant observation was conducted over six months. The researcher observed community meetings, everyday interactions, cultural activities, economic practices, and social events. Observation was particularly important because formal descriptions of social institutions do not always correspond to how those institutions operate in practice.

7.4 Data Analysis

The data were analysed thematically. The process involved familiarisation with the data, initial coding, development of thematic categories, comparison across participant groups, and interpretation in relation to the theoretical framework.

Coding proceeded at two levels. The first was descriptive, identifying references to clan, family, leadership, agriculture, women's roles, cultural practices, community cooperation, and governance. The second was analytical, examining power, gender, agency, patronage, accountability, exclusion, and social cohesion.

African feminist concepts guided interpretation of gendered authority, resource control, participation, and agency. Neopatrimonial concepts guided analysis of personalised networks, loyalty, patronage, and institutional accountability. Indigenous philosophical concepts were used to interpret accounts concerning reciprocity, community responsibility, relationality, dignity, and collective welfare.

The use of these perspectives together prevented the analysis from reducing cultural practices to either oppression or solidarity. Instead, the analysis examined their contradictory consequences.

7.5 Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

Research on culture, gender, and traditional authority requires explicit reflexivity because researchers are never neutral observers. The researcher enters the field with social identities, educational assumptions, political understandings, and expectations that may shape relationships with participants and interpretation of data.

This was particularly important because the study dealt with sensitive issues including patriarchy, women's empowerment, customary authority, political loyalty, and informal resource distribution. Participants occupying positions of traditional authority could have incentives to present cultural institutions positively, while women and other less powerful participants could have reasons to moderate criticism.

The study therefore treated participants' accounts as situated interpretations rather than transparent representations of an objective cultural reality. The researcher also compared accounts across



participant categories and used participant observation to identify differences between institutional narratives and everyday practices.

Reflexivity further required avoiding the assumption that gender equality necessarily means abandoning cultural identity. The analytical objective was instead to identify which elements of cultural practice promote dignity, reciprocity, and collective welfare and which institutionalised practices restrict women's autonomy or participation.

7.6 Ethical Considerations

Informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation were central ethical principles. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research and their right to decline participation.

However, ethical practice in this study involved more than obtaining formal consent. Discussions about patriarchy and women's empowerment could potentially create interpersonal or community risks. A participant criticising a traditional authority structure could experience social consequences if their identity became known. Consequently, the analysis avoids identifying individual participants or attributing potentially sensitive statements to identifiable persons.

The researcher also recognised the ethical tension between academic critique and respect for indigenous institutions. The purpose of the study was not to delegitimise Bakonzo culture but to examine how cultural institutions operate and how their effects differ across social groups.

7.7 Limitations

The qualitative design provides depth rather than statistical generalisability. Findings should therefore not be treated as representative of every Bakonzo community or every Bakonzo individual. In addition, purposive sampling may have privileged participants with greater institutional knowledge or social visibility.

The study also relied substantially on participants' interpretations of cultural practices. Some practices may have changed over time, while memories of earlier social arrangements may differ between generations. The six-month observation period reduced, but did not eliminate, this limitation.



8. Findings

8.1 Social Organisation as a Source of Solidarity and Hierarchy

The findings demonstrate that Bakonzo social organisation is fundamentally relational. Family, clan, age, community, and cultural institutions connect individuals to networks of obligation and support. Social identity is not understood exclusively through individual achievement but through membership in relationships and communities.

Extended family networks provide economic and social support, particularly during illness, bereavement, marriage, agricultural activities, and other periods of need. Elders occupy important positions as custodians of knowledge and cultural memory. Community cooperation also facilitates collective responses to social and economic challenges.

Yet the same relational system creates hierarchies. Social obligations are not equally distributed across gender, age, or institutional position. Men have historically occupied greater authority in many public and customary decision-making spaces, while women have carried substantial responsibilities in agricultural production, household management, childrearing, and community welfare.

The findings therefore challenge a simple distinction between a "communal" society and an "individualistic" society. Community does not automatically produce equality. A community can be highly cohesive while distributing authority unequally.

8.2 Clan, Kinship, and the Distribution of Authority

Clan organisation remains an important element of Bakonzo social identity. Clan affiliation historically structures social relationships, obligations, identity, and responsibilities. Certain leadership and cultural roles are associated with particular lineages and institutional positions.

The importance of hereditary and lineage-based authority creates continuity, but it also raises questions about access. When leadership is tied to ancestry or inherited legitimacy, individuals outside recognised lineages have fewer opportunities to compete for certain positions.

Gender intersects with this structure. Where leadership is associated with male lineage and customary expectations, women's participation can be restricted even when women are central to maintaining families and communities.

The findings therefore suggest that gender inequality cannot be understood independently of kinship and clan organisation. Patriarchy is embedded in institutional arrangements rather than existing only as an individual attitude.



8.3 Women's Work, Recognition, and Empowerment

Women occupy central positions in the Bakonzo household economy and community life. Their work includes agricultural production, food processing, household management, childcare, petty trade, and participation in community activities.

However, the findings indicate an important distinction between recognition of women's contribution and empowerment. Women may be respected as mothers, agricultural producers, caregivers, and community members while remaining underrepresented in positions where decisions about land, resources, public expenditure, leadership, and institutional priorities are made.

This distinction is consistent with wider evidence from Uganda. Mugumya et al. (2024) found that increasing women's numerical representation in local councils does not necessarily guarantee substantive gender-sensitive deliberation. Similarly, national evidence demonstrates that women remain much less likely than men to occupy local chairperson positions even where their overall representation has increased (United Nations Women, 2024).

The Bakonzo findings suggest that empowerment therefore requires more than recognising women's contribution. It requires expanding women's capacity to influence decisions, control resources, occupy leadership positions, and challenge decisions that adversely affect them.

8.4 Women's Agency and Negotiation

The absence of direct quotations in this article does not mean that women's experiences are analytically absent. The interview and focus group material indicates that women navigate patriarchal structures through multiple forms of agency.

Women participate in community groups, economic activities, religious networks, agricultural initiatives, family negotiations, and local political processes. These spaces allow women to build relationships, access information, mobilise resources, and increase their collective bargaining capacity.

Agency often takes indirect forms. Women may negotiate decisions within families rather than publicly confront male authority. They may use kinship relationships to secure support for education, economic activities, or household welfare. They may also mobilise through women's organisations and community development initiatives.

Such strategies should not be interpreted as evidence that patriarchy has disappeared. Rather, they demonstrate that women are active political and social actors even within unequal structures.



African feminist theory is particularly useful here because it avoids reducing resistance to highly visible confrontation. Agency can occur through negotiation, coalition-building, reinterpretation of norms, and strategic participation in existing institutions (Graness & Kopf, 2024).

8.5 Traditional Leadership and Gendered Authority

Traditional leadership contributes to cultural continuity, conflict mediation, identity formation, and community mobilisation. Participants' accounts indicate that traditional authorities are respected because they are understood as custodians of collective history and social order.

At the same time, traditional institutions can reproduce male-dominated patterns of authority. Recent research on Uganda's customary institutions demonstrates that women can experience substantially different opportunities in customary and civil political spaces (Sseremba, 2024). This distinction is important for understanding Bakonzo governance.

Formal political institutions may introduce gender quotas and legal commitments to equality, while customary institutions may continue to operate through inherited expectations concerning gender and authority. Women can therefore experience two different institutional environments simultaneously.

This institutional duality helps explain why improvements in formal representation do not necessarily translate into equal influence in customary spaces.

8.6 Informal Networks and Neopatrimonial Governance

The findings also reveal the importance of interpersonal networks in local governance and community development. Personal relationships can facilitate communication, trust, access to information, and mobilisation of resources. In communities where formal institutions are distant or under-resourced, such networks can be socially productive.

However, the same networks can become exclusionary when public resources are allocated according to loyalty, kinship, friendship, or political proximity.

This is where neopatrimonialism becomes analytically relevant. The issue is not that relationships exist, but that personalised relationships may displace formal criteria for accountability and fair access. Similar tensions have been documented elsewhere in Africa, where formal governance structures coexist with informal patronage networks (Kimani et al., 2021).

Women may be particularly disadvantaged where patronage networks are male-dominated. Limited access to political networks can reduce women's ability to influence resource allocation, obtain leadership opportunities, or shape development priorities.



8.7 Indigenous Philosophy and Social Cohesion

The indigenous philosophy examined in this study places strong emphasis on relationality, community responsibility, reciprocity, respect, and collective welfare. These principles influence everyday expectations concerning assistance to relatives, support for vulnerable members, participation in community activities, and respect for elders.

The findings indicate that these values can contribute substantially to community resilience. During economic hardship, illness, bereavement, or other difficulties, social networks can provide support that formal institutions cannot always deliver.

The philosophy also contributes to cultural continuity. Oral traditions, ceremonies, language, kinship practices, and intergenerational transmission of knowledge help maintain collective identity.

This resonates with wider scholarship that sees African relational philosophies as potential resources for rethinking development around collective wellbeing rather than individual accumulation (Bhuda & Marumo, 2022; Keahey, 2024; van Norren, 2022).

8.8 The Limits of Communalism

Despite these strengths, the findings demonstrate that community-oriented philosophy can have exclusionary consequences.

A strong emphasis on cultural continuity may privilege established norms over alternative interpretations. Outsiders may find it difficult to enter tightly connected community networks. Younger people may experience tension between inherited expectations and contemporary aspirations. Women may be encouraged to participate in community life while remaining excluded from certain authority structures.

The same principle of respect for elders that preserves cultural knowledge can also make it difficult for younger people to challenge established practices. Similarly, respect for tradition can become a basis for resisting reforms that are perceived as external.

Consequently, indigenous philosophy should be understood as a contested field. Its principles can be mobilised in support of gender equality just as easily as they can be used to defend inherited hierarchies.



9. Discussion

9.1 Gender, Culture, and the Problem of Romanticising Community

The first major analytical implication is that community solidarity and gender equality should not be treated as synonymous.

The Bakonzo social system demonstrates the productive capacity of communal institutions. Family and clan networks can provide welfare, identity, cultural continuity, and social protection. Yet solidarity can coexist with hierarchy.

African feminist theory helps explain this contradiction. Gender relations are produced through institutions that organise labour, authority, resources, and social expectations. The problem is therefore not simply whether culture is "traditional" but who has the power to interpret and enforce tradition.

This argument contributes to African feminist debates by shifting attention from the abstract opposition between tradition and modernity to the internal contestation of culture. Women do not necessarily have to reject cultural identity in order to challenge patriarchal practices. They can invoke principles of community responsibility, dignity, reciprocity, and collective welfare to argue for greater inclusion.

9.2 Indigenous Philosophy as a Political Resource

The second major finding concerns the political character of indigenous philosophy.

Indigenous philosophy is often treated as a set of ethical principles. The findings demonstrate that it is also political because it influences who belongs, who is responsible for others, who is entitled to speak, and what constitutes legitimate leadership.

This makes indigenous philosophy relevant to development policy. Development initiatives that ignore local moral systems may encounter resistance because they fail to recognise existing forms of legitimacy. Conversely, initiatives that romanticise indigenous values may reproduce exclusion.

The appropriate approach is therefore dialogical. Development interventions should engage local institutions while also creating mechanisms through which women, youth, and other marginalised groups can challenge practices that restrict participation.

Recent Ubuntu scholarship similarly argues for culturally grounded understandings of development while cautioning against imposing a single universal meaning on indigenous philosophies (Keahey, 2024; van Norren, 2022).



9.3 Neopatrimonialism and the Gendered Distribution of Opportunity

The third major implication concerns the relationship between informal networks and gender.

Neopatrimonialism is often analysed at the level of national political elites. The Bakonzo case demonstrates the value of examining personalised networks at community and local-government levels.

Informal networks can be indispensable to community life. However, where networks are concentrated among men, the benefits of informal governance become gendered.

Women may be excluded not because a formal rule explicitly prohibits their participation but because they lack access to the relationships through which opportunities are negotiated.

This observation is important because formal institutional reforms may fail when they do not address informal power. A policy can create a formal leadership position for women while informal networks continue to determine who controls information, resources, and political influence.

9.4 The Customary-Civil Institutional Interface

The findings also support a broader understanding of Uganda as a context in which civil and customary institutions coexist.

Sseremba's (2024) analysis of Uganda's customary authority demonstrates that women may experience very different forms of power in civil and customary spaces. The Bakonzo case reinforces this argument while adding a community-level perspective.

The existence of multiple institutional orders means that gender reform cannot focus exclusively on elected local government. It must also engage cultural institutions, clan structures, religious organisations, elders, and community associations.

Such engagement should not mean transferring unrestricted authority to customary institutions. Rather, it should establish dialogue between customary legitimacy and constitutional principles of equality, accountability, and human rights.



9.5 Tradition and Modernity as an Inadequate Binary

The findings challenge the assumption that Bakonzo society is moving from tradition toward modernity as though the two were mutually exclusive.

In practice, community members combine customary expectations with formal education, Christianity or Islam, market participation, local government, digital communication, national citizenship, and global development aspirations.

Tradition is therefore continuously reconstructed.

The more productive question is not whether Bakonzo society should preserve tradition or embrace modernity. It is which cultural practices should be preserved, which should be transformed, who should participate in deciding, and how transformation can occur without undermining collective identity.

10. Scholarly Contribution

This study makes a distinctive contribution in four respects.

First, it extends research on the Bakonzo beyond the dominant emphasis on ethnic mobilisation and political conflict. Existing scholarship has demonstrated the historical importance of Rwenzururu mobilisation, political identity, and struggles for recognition (Sseremba, 2019; Walker, 2026). This article shifts analytical attention toward everyday social institutions, gender, community development, and governance.

Second, the study contributes to African feminist scholarship by demonstrating that gender inequality is produced through the interaction of family, clan, customary authority, economic organisation, and informal networks. Women's empowerment therefore cannot be achieved solely through formal political representation.

Third, the study extends neopatrimonial analysis beyond national political elites. It demonstrates how informal relationships can influence local governance and women's access to resources and authority.

Fourth, the study contributes to debates on indigenous philosophy by rejecting both romanticisation and dismissal. Indigenous philosophy can be simultaneously emancipatory and restrictive. Its political significance depends on how its principles are interpreted and institutionalised.



The broader theoretical contribution is therefore a relational model of indigenous governance in which **culture, gender, informal power, and formal institutions are mutually constitutive**. This perspective can be applied comparatively to other African societies where customary and state institutions coexist.

11. Implications for Policy and Practice

11.1 Strengthening Women's Substantive Participation

Women's representation should not be measured solely through numerical presence. Local governance programmes should assess whether women influence agendas, budgets, resource allocation, conflict resolution, and development priorities.

This is particularly important given evidence that formal representation does not automatically produce substantive gender inclusion in Ugandan local government (Mugumya et al., 2024).

11.2 Engaging Traditional Institutions

Traditional leaders should be included in gender-equity initiatives because customary institutions remain socially influential. Engagement should focus on identifying cultural principles that support dignity, reciprocity, protection, and collective responsibility while challenging practices that restrict women's participation.

11.3 Supporting Women's Collective Organisation

Women's groups can provide important mechanisms for economic empowerment, political education, mutual support, and collective advocacy. Policies should therefore strengthen women's access to cooperative structures, financial resources, agricultural extension, education, leadership training, and markets.

11.4 Strengthening Accountability

Local governance reforms should address informal as well as formal institutions. Transparent procedures for resource allocation, participatory budgeting, public reporting, and community monitoring can reduce opportunities for patronage and elite capture.

11.5 Culturally Grounded Development

Development interventions should begin with existing community knowledge rather than assuming that external models are automatically superior. Indigenous understandings of



reciprocity, collective responsibility, environmental stewardship, and social welfare can strengthen locally owned development.

However, cultural participation should be inclusive. Women, youth, persons with disabilities, and socially marginalised groups should participate in determining what cultural values mean in contemporary society.

12. Conclusion

This article has examined the relationship between the Bakonzo social system, gender relations, indigenous philosophy, and governance in the Rwenzori region of western Uganda.

The central argument is that Bakonzo social organisation cannot be understood through a simple opposition between tradition and modernity, or between oppression and solidarity. Family, clan, customary authority, community reciprocity, and indigenous philosophy provide important foundations for identity, social cohesion, cultural continuity, and collective resilience. At the same time, these institutions can reproduce gendered hierarchies and unequal access to authority.

The analysis demonstrates that women's marginalisation is not produced by patriarchy alone. It emerges through the interaction of gender norms with kinship, clan organisation, customary authority, informal networks, resource distribution, and institutional arrangements.

Neopatrimonialism further complicates the picture. Personal relationships may facilitate social support and access to resources, but when loyalty replaces transparent procedures, informal networks can undermine accountability and exclude people without political connections. Because women may have less access to dominant networks, the consequences can be gendered.

The study also demonstrates that indigenous philosophy should be treated neither as an obstacle to development nor as an inherently emancipatory alternative to Western institutions. Its principles of relationality, reciprocity, dignity, community responsibility, and interconnectedness can provide important foundations for inclusive development. Yet these principles must remain open to democratic reinterpretation.

The most important implication is that culturally grounded transformation is possible. Gender equality does not necessarily require abandoning cultural identity. Instead, communities can draw upon their own principles of mutual responsibility and human dignity to challenge practices that restrict women's participation.

For policymakers, development practitioners, and scholars, the Bakonzo case therefore demonstrates the importance of engaging the institutional plurality of African societies. Effective



transformation requires attention simultaneously to formal government, customary authority, informal networks, household relations, and indigenous moral systems.

The broader contribution of the study lies in showing that indigenous philosophy is not simply a cultural inheritance. It is an active field of political negotiation through which communities define belonging, authority, responsibility, gender, and development. Understanding this complexity can contribute to more contextually grounded approaches to gender equality, accountable governance, and sustainable community development in Uganda and beyond.

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