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The Codification Dilemma: Indigenous Knowledge as VRIN Resources and Strategic Advantage in Malawian SMEs

Jani Grey Kasunda

School of International Relations/Institute of Overseas Chinese Studies, Jinan University, Guangzhou 511433, China

ABSTRACT

This conceptual paper addresses a critical gap in emerging market strategy by developing a theoretical framework for leveraging Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) as strategic sources of competitive advantage for Malawian Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). In contrast to the predominance of Western strategic models, the article argues that the very institutional voids and resource constraints that characterize emerging markets create conditions where culturally-embedded IKS become valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (VRIN) resources. Through systematic literature synthesis, the article proposes a novel tripartite typology, categorizing IKS as Relational (social networks and *Umunthu* philosophy), Substitutive (informal systems like *chipereganyu* financial associations), and Innovative (local ecological and artisanal knowledge). This framework explicates the distinct mechanisms through which each category generates advantage: building trust-based relational capital, filling institutional voids via social enforcement, and driving context-specific innovation. The study's core contribution, however, is the identification and theorization of a central 'codification dilemma'—the inherent tension between formalizing tacit IKS for commercial scale and preserving its authentic, culturally-embedded value and inimitability. This dilemma represents a pivotal strategic paradox for practitioners. Consequently, the study provides a decolonized strategic framework that transforms perceived institutional weaknesses into a foundation for sustainable advantage. It offers specific, actionable guidance for SME owners to audit and leverage indigenous assets and for policy-

*CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:
Jani Grey Kasunda, School of International Relations/Institute of Overseas Chinese Studies, Jinan University, Guangzhou 511433, China; Email: janikasunda4@gmail.com

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makers to develop hybrid institutions that ethically protect and valorize local knowledge, presenting a roadmap for authentic business development in Malawi and similar emerging economies.

Keywords: Indigenous Knowledge Systems; Competitive Advantage; SMEs; Emerging Markets; Resource-Based View; Malawi

1. Introduction

The landscape of emerging markets features institutional voids, resource limitations, and distinct socio-cultural dynamics that often make Western management theories, without significant adaptation, contextually limited [1]. This aligns with a long-standing critique in cross-cultural management emphasizing the need to adapt theories to local contexts instead of imposing foreign models [2–4]. Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in countries like Malawi operate within this tough environment, where pursuing a sustainable competitive advantage remains a key, yet hard-to-attain, goal. While traditional strategy literature stresses technological innovation, economies of scale, and formal intellectual property as main sources of competitiveness [5, 6], these resource-intensive factors are often out of reach for many Malawian SMEs. This paper suggests that an important, but under-investigated, source of competitive potential lies in systematically leveraging Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS).

Indigenous Knowledge Systems comprise the cumulative, culturally-grounded knowledge, practices [7], and beliefs developed by a community through generations of interaction with their local environment and social structures [8]. In the Malawian context, this encompasses a rich tapestry of assets, including local ecological knowledge for sustainable agriculture, intricate social networks of trust and reciprocity rooted in *Umunthu* philosophy, and unique artisanal and medicinal knowledge. The theoretical premise is that these knowledge forms are valuable, rare, imperfectly imitable, and non-substitutable (VRIN), thus constituting a source of sustained competitive advantage as per the Resource-Based View (RBV) of the firm [5]. Their deep cultural embeddedness makes them difficult for competitors to replicate, providing a natural protective moat.

The relevance of IKS in business is gaining traction in emerging market scholarship. A growing body of work suggests that contextualized strategies integrating local knowledge are more likely to succeed than transplanted Western models [9]. The nascent discourse on African management has begun to acknowledge the value of such contextual assets. For instance, scholars contend that principles like *Ubuntu*, which emphasize communal interdependence, have been theorized to foster strong stakeholder relationships and enhance organizational resilience [10, 11]. Similarly, indigenous financial systems like Malawi's *chipereganyu* [rotating savings and credit associations (ROSCAs)] represent sophisticated mechanisms that address institutional voids in formal banking [12].

Despite this theoretical promise, a significant problem persists: there is a lack of a coherent conceptual framework that explicates the specific mechanisms through which Malawian SMEs can identify, mobilize, and translate their diverse IKS into tangible sources of competitive advantage. The existing literature often remains either highly abstract, discussing philosophical principles without concrete linkage to strategic levers, or confined to specific sectors like agriculture, failing to provide a holistic model applicable across the diverse SME landscape from retail to services and manufacturing. This gap presents a critical theoretical and practical challenge. Without a structured understanding, IKSs risk being relegated to informal practices rather than being recognized as deliberate strategic levers. This limits the potential for Malawian SMEs to compete on their own terms, leveraging their unique socio-cultural context as a strength rather than perceiving it as a barrier to 'modern' business practice.

Therefore, this primarily theoretical and descriptive study aims to address this problem by developing a comprehensive framework for IKS-based competitive advantage in the Malawian SME sector. The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How can Indigenous Knowledge Systems in Malawi be conceptually categorized as potential strategic resources for SMEs?

2. What are the proposed theoretical mechanisms by which these categorized IKSs can be translated into sources of competitive advantage across key business functions (e.g., product development, marketing, and operations)?
3. What are the potential challenges and strategic implications for SME owners and policymakers seeking to formalize and leverage IKS?

By synthesizing insights from the RBV, institutional theory, and African management studies, this article seeks to move beyond abstraction and provide a nuanced, academically rigorous model. The outcome will be a descriptive theoretical framework that delineates the pathways from IKS to competitive advantage, offering a foundation for future empirical research and providing SME practitioners and policymakers with a strategic lens to re-evaluate and valorize local knowledge. This paper contributes to the emerging discourse on decolonizing management practices and offers a pragmatic, theoretical roadmap for fostering authentic and sustainable business development in Malawi and similar emerging economies.

2. Literature Review

The operational environment for Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in emerging economies faces unique challenges that traditional strategic frameworks often cannot handle [13]. Some studies fundamentally changed how we understand these markets by introducing the idea of 'institutional voids,' the absence of specialized intermediaries that support business in developed economies [1]. They convincingly argue that these institutional gaps create transaction environments where Western business models frequently fail, requiring very different strategic approaches. This reflects a long-standing critique in cross-cultural management that emphasizes the need to adapt theories to local contexts rather than imposing foreign models [2, 3].

2.1. The Resource-Based View

The Resource-Based View (RBV) of the firm provides a complementary theoretical lens, suggesting that sustainable competitive advantage stems from resources that are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (VRIN) [5]. While traditionally applied to tangible assets and formal intellectual property in Western contexts, this framework provides a powerful lens for reconceptualizing Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS). Others argue that resources embedded in a firm's history and culture, and that are causally ambiguous, are particularly potent sources of sustained advantage because they are difficult for competitors to replicate [5]. This directly applies to IKS, which are often tacit, culturally embedded, and path-dependent.

However, as an extensive review of entrepreneurship in emerging economies shows, the typical resources emphasized in traditional RBV are often precisely what SMEs in these contexts lack [14]. This creates a theoretical paradox: while the RBV explains why some firms outperform others, it offers limited guidance for resource-constrained SMEs operating in institutionally challenging environments. Extending this foundational work, the knowledge-based view of the firm considers knowledge as the most strategically significant resource [15]. The integration of specialized knowledge is the primary role of the firm. In the context of Malawian SMEs, IKS represents a form of highly specialized, context-specific knowledge that, when systematically integrated into business processes, can create unique value propositions.

2.2. Navigating the African Context

Institutional theory complements the RBV by providing the contextual backdrop against which resources become valuable. In Malawi, where institutional voids are prevalent, IKS often provide informal institutional substitutes. For instance, rotating savings and credit associations (*chiperegangyu*) fill a critical financial void in that such indigenous systems provide effective commitment devices for savings in the absence of formal banking [12].

Furthermore, organizational effectiveness in Africa cannot be understood without considering the institutional context [9]. They advocate for a 'contextualized intelligence' that leverages local resources and navigates institutional complexities. This perspective moves beyond viewing Africa's institutional environment purely as a constraint and instead frames it as a context that demands and rewards unique strategic adaptations, of which IKS utilization is a prime example. This gap is particularly salient in the context of emerging markets, where research is rapidly evolving and requires robust theoretical frameworks to guide inquiry [16, 17].

2.3. African Management Philosophy

The theoretical integration of African philosophical concepts provides the cultural and ethical grounding for understanding IKS. The principle of *Ubuntu*, often translated as "I am because we are," emphasizes communal interdependence, shared humanity, and collective success. *Ubuntu* can be a source of competitive advantage by fostering cohesive organizational cultures, strong stakeholder relationships, and collaborative problem-solving [10]. This is not merely an ethical stance but a strategic one because the relational ethics of *Ubuntu* can lead to higher levels of trust and commitment within organizations and with local communities, reducing transaction costs and enhancing social capital [11].

This strategic potential is rooted in an 'autocentric' understanding of *Ubuntu* that positions it as a self-sufficient philosophical system for organizing social and economic life, rather than a mere supplement to Western thought [18]. However, the application of such principles is not without its challenges, particularly in institutional contexts shaped by colonial legacies, raising the critical question of whether "African feet [can] divorce Western shoes" in the pursuit of democratic and effective governance systems [19].

2.4. Theoretical Perspectives for the IKS Framework

This article synthesizes these theoretical strands into a coherent framework proposing that Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) in Malawi constitute VRIN resources whose value is activated within a specific institutional context characterized by voids and shaped by a foundational philosophy of communalism (*Umunthu* or *Ubuntu*). The framework posits that the strategic mobilization of IKS allows SMEs to substitute for institutional voids by using indigenous systems to overcome gaps in formal financial and market institutions. This strategic adaptation directly addresses the institutional voids, demonstrating how informal mechanisms can provide functional alternatives where formal structures are lacking [1].

Furthermore, the framework illustrates how SMEs can build relational capital by leveraging *Umunthu*-based social networks to create trust-based relationships with customers, suppliers, and the community. This application and conceptualization of *Ubuntu* as a strategic asset enable firms to reduce transaction costs and foster loyalty through culturally-grounded business practices [10]. The communal ethos embedded in these knowledge systems creates social capital that becomes a valuable, rare, and difficult-to-imitate resource, as per VRIN criteria [5].

Additionally, the framework positions IKS as a driver of contextual innovation, where applying localized ecological and artisanal knowledge enables the development of products and services uniquely suited to local needs and preferences. This knowledge-based approach to innovation, consistent with the knowledge-based view of the firm, allows Malawian SMEs to create market offerings that standardized foreign competitors cannot easily replicate [15].

2.5. Gaps in the Literature

Despite this promising scholarly evolution, significant theoretical and empirical gaps persist. While there is growing recognition of IKS as potentially valuable, the literature remains fragmented across several dimensions. First, as noted in a critique of cross-cultural management theories, there remains a tendency to treat African management philosophies as monolithic concepts rather than operationalizing them into measurable strategic practices [20]. This moves the discourse beyond the pitfalls of some cross-cultural management approaches that can oversimplify complex cultural dynamics [21], and contributes to a more nuanced understanding of management in emerging markets.

Second, there is a pronounced sectoral bias in IKS research. Much of the empirical work, including important contributions on ecological knowledge, focuses on agriculture, natural resource management, or traditional healing, with limited attention to how IKS might create advantage in manufacturing, services, or technology sectors [7]. This limitation is particularly problematic given the diverse composition of SME sectors in emerging economies like Malawi.

Third, a significant theoretical gap exists in understanding the categorization and configuration of IKS as strategic resources. While the VRIN framework provides a useful analytical tool, its application to IKS requires deeper theorization. The strategic value of resources is context-dependent, yet we lack a fine-grained understanding of how different types of IKS create value in different institutional contexts [22].

This review, therefore, identifies a critical research gap: the absence of a comprehensive framework that sys-

tematically categorizes Indigenous Knowledge Systems and explicates the specific mechanisms through which different categories of IKS can be configured to generate competitive advantage across diverse SME sectors in emerging markets. Addressing this gap requires moving beyond recognizing IKS as potentially valuable to understanding how it can be strategically mobilized as a dynamic capability in response to specific institutional challenges and market opportunities.

3. Research Design

This study employs a qualitative, descriptive research design with a predominantly theoretical character. This approach is selected based on the nascent stage of theory development regarding the strategic mobilization of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) in Malawian SMEs. When investigating a phenomenon where existing theory is incomplete or nascent, a methodological approach emphasizing theory building and rich description is more appropriate than one focused on hypothesis testing [23]. This approach is consistent with established methodologies for theory building, which are essential for consolidating knowledge in nascent research domains [24]. This design allows for the development of a conceptually rigorous framework that can establish the foundational logic and mechanisms linking IKS to competitive advantage, thereby providing a scaffold for future empirical inquiry.

The research is grounded in a constructivist paradigm, which acknowledges that reality, particularly social and strategic reality, is constructed through human interaction and meaning-making [25]. This philosophical stance is particularly suitable for investigating IKS, which are themselves socially constructed and culturally embedded systems of knowledge. The aim is not to discover a single objective truth but to construct a coherent and plausible theoretical model that makes sense of how IKSs can function as strategic resources within the specific context of Malawi.

3.1. Data Collection and Sources

Given the theoretical nature of this study, data collection focuses on the systematic analysis and synthesis of existing scholarly literature and documentary evidence. This approach, often termed conceptual research or theory synthesis, is a recognized methodology for integrating fragmented concepts into a coherent theoretical framework [26].

The data sources comprise a purposive sample of academic literature, selected for their relevance to the core constructs of the study. The sampling strategy involves:

1. Systematic Literature Review: A comprehensive, systematic review of peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and book chapters was conducted. The search was confined to a timeframe from 1990 to 2023 to capture the foundational literature on the Resource-Based View and institutional theory, alongside the emergence of contemporary scholarship on African management and indigenous knowledge. Key databases, including JSTOR, EBSCO Business Source Complete, and Scopus, were searched using targeted keywords and Boolean operators: Indigenous Knowledge OR *Ubuntu* OR *Umunthu*; competitive advantage OR strategy OR Resource-Based View; SMEs OR small business; AND emerging economy OR Africa OR Malawi.
   To ensure rigor and transparency, explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied. Included sources were: (1) published in English, as it is the lingua franca of the core management journals engaged; (2) peer-reviewed academic publications or seminal scholarly books; and (3) directly relevant to at least one of the study's core constructs (IKS, RBV, institutional theory, African management, SME strategy in emerging markets). Sources were excluded if they: (1) focused exclusively on Western contexts without theoretical transferability to emerging markets; (2) were non-academic commentaries or reports; or (3) were deemed irrelevant after reviewing the abstract, as the primary determinant of relevance was the source's contribution to building the conceptual framework, moving beyond mere keyword matching to assess conceptual fit.
   The initial database search yielded 247 records. After removing duplicates, 198 unique records remained. A two-stage screening process was then implemented. First, titles and abstracts were screened against the inclusion criteria, resulting in 68 records for full-text assessment. Second, these 78 full-text sources were evaluated for eligibility, with 28 sources ultimately selected for in-depth analysis and synthesis.
2. Theoretical Saturation in Sampling: The selection of literature continued until theoretical saturation was

achieved, the point at which new sources ceased to yield new conceptual insights or categories relevant to the developing framework [27].

The primary sources include foundational texts on the Resource-Based View [5], institutional theory as applied to emerging markets [1], African management philosophy [10], and Indigenous Knowledge Systems [7]. Contemporary empirical and conceptual studies from journals such as *Academy of Management Perspectives*, *Journal of Business Ethics*, and *Strategic Management Journal* were integrated to ensure the framework's relevance to current scholarly conversations.

3.2. Data Analysis and Framework Development

The analysis followed a systematic process of thematic analysis and conceptual synthesis, guided by the principles of qualitative inquiry. The procedure involved:

1. Familiarization and Open Coding: The selected literature was intensively read and re-read. Key concepts, definitions, and theoretical propositions were identified and assigned initial descriptive codes (e.g., 'social capital as resource,' 'institutional void filler,' 'tacit knowledge').
2. Axial Coding and Categorization: These initial codes were then grouped into higher-order conceptual categories based on their relationships. This process involves looking for causal conditions, phenomena, context, and consequences [27]. For instance, codes related to *chipereganyu*, social networks, and communal labour were grouped under the category 'IKS as Substitutes for Institutional Voids.'
3. Theoretical Integration: The categorized concepts were integrated with the core theories of RBV, institutional theory, and African philosophy to construct the synthesized framework. This involved iteratively checking how the emergent categories of IKS align with the VRIN criteria and how they function within the institutional context of Malawi. The goal was to develop a logically consistent model that explains the 'how' and 'why' behind the proposed relationships, moving from abstract concepts to testable theoretical propositions [28].

To ensure academic rigor in this theoretical study, several established criteria for qualitative and conceptual research were adhered to. Credibility was sought through methodical data collection and persistent engagement with the literature, ensuring the arguments are well-grounded in existing scholarship [29]. Transferability is provided through 'thick description' of the Malawian context and the IKS constructs, enabling readers to assess the potential applicability of the framework to similar settings. Dependability and confirmability are demonstrated through a transparent audit trail of the analytical process, showing how the conclusions were derived from the cited sources and logical reasoning, thereby minimizing researcher bias [30].

However, this methodological approach does not seek to provide empirical validation but to construct a robust theoretical foundation. The resulting framework delineates clear pathways for future research, including case studies to empirically test the proposed mechanisms and quantitative surveys to measure the prevalence and impact of IKS mobilization among Malawian SMEs.

4. Key Findings

This theoretical study yields three principal findings that collectively form a novel framework for conceptualizing Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) as strategic resources for Malawian SMEs. Through systematic synthesis of existing literature, the analysis reveals a typology of IKS, explicates the mechanisms of value creation, and identifies critical implementation challenges. These principal findings are synthesized in **Table 1**, which provides a consolidated overview of the framework's core components, theoretical foundations, and inherent tensions.

The first key finding is that Indigenous Knowledge Systems in Malawi can be conceptually categorized into three distinct, yet interrelated, types of strategic resources, each with unique value propositions. This categorization addresses the current abstraction in the literature by providing a structured way to analyze IKS.

First, the Relational IKS category encompasses knowledge systems rooted in social organization and communal philosophy, primarily *Umunthu*. This finding posits that *Umunthu* is not merely a cultural value but a strategic asset that fosters dense networks of trust and reciprocity [10]. These networks

function as a form of social collateral, reducing the need for formal contracts and enabling collaborative ventures that would otherwise be deemed too risky [32]. This finding extends ethical analysis by framing these relational ethics as a tangible economic mechanism that lowers transaction costs and builds resilient supply chains and customer communities [11].

Table 1. A Framework for Leveraging Indigenous Knowledge Systems in Malawian SMEs.

Finding Category	Core Concept	Key Theoretical Anchors	Strategic Value and Mechanism	Key Challenges
1. Tripartite Typology of IKS	A structured categorization of indigenous knowledge as strategic resources.	Mugano and Dorasamy; Mangaliso; Lutz; Grant [1, 10, 11, 15]	Relational IKS (*Umunthu*): Builds trust-based networks that lower transaction costs and create social collateral. Substitutive IKS (*Chipereganyu*): Fills institutional voids (e.g., finance) via social enforcement mechanisms. Innovative IKS (Local techniques): Enables context-specific product differentiation through deep, tacit ecological and artisanal knowledge.	Identifying and systematically mobilizing these often-informal, community-embedded resources.
2. Theoretical Mechanisms for Value Creation	The pathways through which IKS generate a sustainable competitive advantage.	Barney [5]—VRIN Criteria	IKS create advantage through embeddedness, leading to: Inimitability: Causal ambiguity and social complexity make knowledge difficult for outsiders to replicate. Non-Substitutability: IKS are uniquely configured to meet local needs and institutional contexts, making formal alternatives an imperfect substitute.	Translating the theoretical VRIN potential into measurable business outcomes.
3. Implementation Challenges & Strategic Tensions	The critical paradoxes encountered when formalizing IKS for business strategy.	Mugano and Dorasamy; Berkes; Zoogah et al., Nonaka and Takeuchi; [1, 7, 9, 31]	The Codification Dilemma: The process of converting tacit IKS into explicit business knowledge risks decontextualizing and devaluing it. Duality of Institutional Voids: The same weak formal institutions (e.g., IP rights) that make IKS valuable also threaten its unprotected commercialization.	Navigating the tension between cultural preservation and commercial innovation, and between communal ownership and private profit.

Second, Substitutive IKS analysis identifies a category of IKS that effectively fills critical institutional voids. This finding strongly supports the central thesis that success in emerging markets requires strategies that address institutional gaps [1]. The study specifies this by demonstrating how indigenous financial mechanisms like *chipereganyu* [rotating savings and credit associations (ROSCAs)] provide a sophisticated alternative to formal banking. Empirical work on ROSCAs confirms that these systems utilize powerful social enforcement mechanisms to ensure commitment and repayment, thereby solving the credit access problem that plagues SMEs in the absence of formal credit bureaus and collateral-based lending [12, 33].

Third, the Innovative IKS category encompasses localized technical and ecological knowledge, including native agricultural techniques, herbal medicine, and artisanal craftsmanship. This finding aligns with the knowledge-based view of the firm, which is the primary source of competitive advantage [15]. The study finds that this knowledge, often dismissed as traditional or informal, represents a deep, tacit understanding of local conditions, materials, and consumer preferences. When leveraged for product development, it allows SMEs to create offerings that are perfectly adapted to the local context, making them highly differentiated and difficult for standardized, imported goods to compete against.

These theoretical categories are illustrated by concrete examples from the Malawian context. Indigenous knowledge and practices play critical roles in the social and business lives of Malawians [34]. On the one hand, a Relational IKS is exemplified by the *Chilimika* (meaning year) festival traditions in Nkhata Bay, where community-based organizational structures and deep social ties are now being leveraged by local event management SMEs to coordinate large-scale cultural tourism. On the other hand, Substitutive IKS is operationalized not only through *chipereganyu* but also via the *umodzi* (unity) anchored concept across Malawi, an informal but highly structured system of labour exchange that construction SMEs use to pool skilled labour for projects,

effectively substituting for a formal labour market.

For Innovative IKS, numerous Malawian SMEs, such as those producing pottery in Dedza or *Chitenje* fashion (e.g., Nzika Wear, one of Malawi's famous fashion designs), directly integrate indigenous artistic techniques and symbolic patterns that carry deep cultural meaning, creating products that global competitors cannot authentically replicate. A case in point, the fashion brand Nzika Wear provides a concrete vignette of strategic IKS mobilization. The SME does not simply use *Chitenje* patterns; it engages in a formal consultation process with community elders and cultural custodians to understand the stories and protocols behind specific designs before incorporating them into new collections. This practice, rooted in Relational IKS, ensures cultural authenticity and builds deep trust. Furthermore, Nzika Wear operationalizes the *Umunthu* philosophy by implementing a profit-sharing model with the local weavers' cooperatives that supply its fabrics. This transforms a supply chain into a value-based partnership, enhancing loyalty and securing access to high-quality, authentic materials that competitors cannot easily replicate, thereby creating a VRIN resource.

Similarly, the potteries in Dedza leverage generations of tacit knowledge about local clay composition and firing techniques (Innovative IKS) to produce distinctive ceramics. However, they face the codification dilemma directly: while they can describe the process, the master potter's refined understanding of temperature and timing remains largely tacit. Some enterprises are navigating this by branding their products with the master potter's name or the specific village of origin, using this narrative of authentic, place-based knowledge as a key part of their marketing strategy, thus turning the challenge of codification into a unique selling proposition.

4.1. Theoretical Mechanisms for Value Creation

The second key finding delineates the specific theoretical pathways through which these IKS categories generate competitive advantage, effectively mapping them onto the VRIN framework.

The study finds that the strategic value of IKS derives from its profound embeddedness in the local socio-cultural fabric. This embeddedness is the source of its inimitability, a core tenet of the Resource-Based View [5]. For instance, while a competitor might replicate a product's design, they cannot easily replicate the communal trust (*Umunthu*) that underpins its supply chain or the generations of ecological wisdom that inform its creation. This causal ambiguity and social complexity make IKS-based advantages inherently sustainable against outside rivals. Furthermore, the study finds that IKS are often non-substitutable because they are uniquely configured to address Malawian-specific institutional voids and consumer needs; a formal bank loan cannot fully substitute for the financial and social benefits of a *chipereganyu*, just as a synthetic medicine may not carry the same cultural legitimacy as a trusted herbal remedy. The ethical dimension of this relational advantage is underscored by scholarship linking *Ubuntu/Umunthu* to robust frameworks for business ethics, which can enhance legitimacy and long-term sustainability [35].

4.2. Implementation Challenges and Strategic Tensions

The third key finding moves beyond the optimistic potential of IKS to identify significant challenges in its formalization and strategic deployment. The analysis reveals a fundamental tension between the informal, communal nature of IKS and the requirements for scalable, firm-level strategy.

A primary challenge is the codification dilemma, which can be theorized through the lens of knowledge management. Some scholars established the critical distinction between 'tacit' knowledge (deeply personal, context-specific, and hard to formalize) and 'explicit' knowledge (transmittable in formal, systematic language) [31]. Indigenous Knowledge is predominantly tacit, embedded in practice, experience, and cultural rituals [7]. The strategic dilemma, therefore, lies in the process of converting this tacit IKS into explicit knowledge for business strategy and scale. This necessary codification risks rendering the knowledge decontextualized and 'thin,' potentially diluting its authenticity and undermining the very social structures and cultural meaning that constitute its strategic value and inimitability. This creates a fundamental tension: the act of making IKS legible and applicable for commercial gain can simultaneously erode the qualities that make it a potent, non-substitutable resource.

Furthermore, the study identifies a duality in institutional voids. While substitutive IKS can overcome these voids, the same voids, particularly weak intellectual property

rights, also pose a threat. SMEs may be hesitant to invest in IKS-based products if they cannot legally protect their innovations from imitation, creating a strategic paradox [1]. This echoes the concerns about the need for supportive institutional frameworks to complement firm-level resources in Africa [9]. Therefore, the findings suggest that leveraging IKS is not a simple, low-cost solution but a complex strategic endeavour that requires navigating significant tensions between informality and formalization, communal ownership and private profit, and cultural preservation and commercial innovation [36].

5. Discussion

This theoretical study set out to address a critical gap in the literature on emerging market strategy by constructing a comprehensive framework for how Malawian SMEs can systematically leverage Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) for competitive advantage. The findings present a significant reconceptualization of strategic resources in emerging markets, moving IKS from the periphery of cultural discourse to the center of strategic management theory. Guided by three research questions, our analysis has yielded a structured typology of IKS, explicated the mechanisms of value creation, and identified key strategic tensions. This discussion interprets these findings by situating them within the broader scholarly conversation, elucidating their theoretical and practical implications, and acknowledging the study's limitations while proposing pathways for future inquiry.

5.1. Theoretical Contributions and Research Implications

The central theoretical implication of this study lies in its expansion and contextualization of established strategic frameworks. Our findings strongly affirm the applicability of the Resource-Based View (RBV) in emerging market contexts, but with crucial refinements. While it is established that sustainable advantage derives from resources possessing VRIN attributes, the framework primarily considered resources internal to the firm [5]. Our analysis demonstrates that for SMEs in emerging markets, the most critical resources may be embedded not within the firm's boundaries, but within the communal and cultural fabric in which the firm is situated. The finding that IKS derive their inimitability from deep social and cultural embeddedness, a form of causal ambiguity and social complexity that external competitors cannot decipher, enriches the RBV by illustrating that in emerging markets, the most potent resources may be culturally sophisticated rather than technologically advanced.

This perspective directly reconceptualizes institutional challenges [1]. Where these scholars identified 'institutional voids' as fundamental constraints, our framework recasts them as opportunities for context-specific strategic innovation. The identification of Substitutive IKS demonstrates that indigenous systems are not merely traditional holdovers but are sophisticated, evolved solutions to the very market failures [1]. This suggests that competitive advantage in emerging markets may be less about waiting for formal institutions to develop and more about strategically leveraging the informal institutions that already exist.

A key contribution of this research is its successful operationalization of African philosophical concepts into actionable strategic categories. The proposed tripartite typology, dividing IKS into Relational, Substitutive, and Innovative forms, directly addresses the current abstraction in the literature [20]. This moves the discourse beyond the pitfalls of some cross-cultural management approaches that can oversimplify complex cultural dynamics [21], and contributes to a more nuanced understanding of management in emerging markets [17, 37]. By categorizing Relational IKS as a distinct strategic asset, this study provides a theoretical bridge from abstract principles like *Umunthu* to tangible managerial levers, explicating how communal interdependence translates into reduced transaction costs, enhanced stakeholder trust, and resilient supply chains. Similarly, the categorization of Innovative IKS grounds the knowledge-based view of the firm in a specific, non-Western context, positioning tacit, culturally-transmitted knowledge as a potent source of innovation [15].

However, the identification of significant implementation challenges, particularly the codification dilemma, introduces a critical and necessary tension into the framework. This finding complicates the otherwise optimistic view, suggesting that the successful mobilization of IKS requires intricate strategies that navigate the delicate balance between formalizing knowledge for scalability and preserving the informal, trust-based social capital that gives it value [10]. This creates a strategic paradox for SMEs, who must find ways to

formalize knowledge enough to build a business model without stripping it of its authentic, culturally-grounded value. This underscores that the successful integration of cultural principles like *Ubuntu* into modern business, including complex areas like supply chain management, requires careful theoretical and practical navigation [38, 39]. From a practical standpoint, this framework offers Malawian SME owners a structured way to audit their internal and community environments for untapped strategic assets. It encourages a fundamental shift in mindset, from viewing local culture as a backdrop for business to seeing it as a repository of strategic resources [40].

Furthermore, while this framework highlights the strategic value of IKS, it is imperative to acknowledge and mitigate potential ethical risks. The very social structures that make IKS powerful can also perpetuate exclusion and inequality. For example, while *chipereganyu* fills a critical financial void, these systems often rely on social collateral and trust, which can inadvertently exclude the very poor or marginalized groups, such as women, the youth, and the disabled, without established community standing [12]. Similarly, leveraging Relational IKS based on kinship or ethnicity could lead to nepotism or reinforce existing social hierarchies within a business. Therefore, SMEs must consciously strive to ensure that their use of IKS does not entrench social marginalization but instead promotes inclusive and equitable economic participation. This ethical consideration is not just a matter of social responsibility but is fundamental to the long-term sustainability and legitimacy of an IKS-based strategy.

5.2. Guiding Questions for Practitioners

To translate this framework into an immediate, actionable strategy, SME owners and managers can use the following guiding questions to audit and leverage their unique IKS resources **(Table 2)**.

Table 2. Strategic Audit for SME Owners: Guiding Questions to Identify and Leverage Indigenous Knowledge Systems.

IKS Category	Key Strategic Question for SME Owners	Examples of Potential Actions
Relational IKS	What community networks, norms of reciprocity, or relationships of trust (e.g., rooted in *Umunthu*) does my business rely on that competitors cannot easily access?	Formally partner with community groups for sourcing or distribution. Develop loyalty programmes that reward community, not just individual, patronage. Use social capital as collateral to secure informal supplier credit.
Substitutive IKS	What informal systems (e.g., savings clubs like *Chipereganyu*, collective labour pools, informal supply chains) do we use to overcome gaps in formal financial, labour, or logistics services?	Integrate *Chipereganyu* principles into a formal savings plan for business capital. Systemize informal labour-sharing into a reliable co-operative network. Map and strengthen informal supply chains to reduce dependency on single, formal suppliers.
Innovative IKS	What unique local materials, ecological knowledge, designs, or artisanal production techniques can we incorporate into our products, services, or branding?	Develop product lines based on traditional herbal knowledge or local aesthetics. Use indigenous, sustainable agricultural practices as a unique selling proposition. Incorporate local art and symbolism into packaging and marketing.

For policymakers, the findings highlight the urgent need to develop hybrid institutional supports tailored to IKS. This could be operationalized by building upon existing frameworks, such as Malawi's *National Science and Technology Policy* (2002) and Malawi's recent historic move to become the first nation to ratify the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) Treaty on Intellectual Property, Genetic Resources, and Associated Traditional Knowledge (GRATK) adopted in 2024. Specific, actionable mechanisms include:

1. Establishing a National IKS Registry: A database, co-designed and managed with traditional authorities, to document and authenticate indigenous knowledge. This would provide a formal record of ownership to deter misappropriation while respecting communal rights, a model being explored by the African Regional Intellectual Property Organization (ARIPO).
2. Creating Shared Intellectual Property Models: Develop legal frameworks for co-ownership of intellectual prop-

erty between SMEs and knowledge-holding communities. For example, an SME producing herbal remedies based on indigenous knowledge or similar products authentically derived from specific Malawian IKS (e.g., indigenous pottery from Dedza or Mulanje Cedar woodcraft from Mulanje), could co-register a collective trademark with the originating community. This model, potentially supported by the new World Intellectual Property Organization, Genetic Resources and Associated Traditional Knowledge (WIPO GRATK) treaty, would legally formalize the community's stake in the brand, ensuring that commercial benefits are shared and that the knowledge is used in a manner consistent with cultural protocols. This provides a concrete method to navigate the codification dilemma by creating a formal, protective structure around the informal knowledge without stripping it of its communal identity, allowing communities and SMEs to build brand equity and market differentiation.

3. Integrating IKS into Business Development Services (BDS): Mandating and funding modules within Malawi's SME development agencies to help entrepreneurs conduct IKS audits (as outlined in **Table 2**) and navigate the codification dilemma, ensuring business growth is aligned with cultural preservation.

Such targeted interventions would move beyond generic SME support to create an enabling environment that specifically fosters the ethical commercialization of Malawi's indigenous knowledge heritage.

5.3. Limitations and Avenues for Future Research

As a conceptual study, this research's primary limitation is its reliance on theoretical synthesis rather than empirical data. The proposed framework, while logically coherent and grounded in established theory, requires validation and refinement through engagement with the reality of Malawian SMEs. This limitation, however, clearly delineates a productive agenda for future research.

First, qualitative case studies are urgently needed to explore how the proposed mechanisms operate in practice. Researchers could select a purposive sample of successful Malawian SMEs across different sectors to investigate how they have navigated the codification dilemma and which categories of IKS have proven most critical to their success. Second, future work should develop and validate quantitative scales to measure the constructs of Relational, Substitutive, and Innovative IKS mobilization, enabling large-scale survey research to test the correlation between IKS leverage and firm performance metrics, controlling for other variables.

Another limitation is the study's primary focus on the positive, value-creating potential of IKS. Future research should more deeply investigate the potential negative consequences of IKS commercialization, such as the exacerbation of social inequalities if benefits are not shared equitably, the risk of cultural exploitation, or the erosion of cultural heritage. Investigating these 'dark sides' would provide a more balanced and comprehensive understanding of the risks and responsibilities inherent in leveraging indigenous knowledge for business strategy. Finally, comparative studies across different African emerging markets could investigate how the specific configuration of IKS as strategic resources varies with different colonial histories, ethnic compositions, and national policies, leading to a more refined and continent-wide theory of indigenous strategic advantage.

6. Conclusions

This study has established a theoretically robust framework for reconceptualizing Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) as strategic assets for Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Malawi. The investigation demonstrates that the prevailing narrative of institutional voids as merely constraining factors requires fundamental revision. Through systematic theoretical synthesis, we have shown that these institutional gaps create precisely the conditions under which IKS become strategically valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (VRIN), thereby transforming perceived institutional weaknesses into potential sources of sustainable competitive advantage.

The tripartite typology developed in this research, categorizing IKS into Relational, Substitutive, and Innovative forms, provides a crucial theoretical advancement that addresses the abstraction prevalent in existing literature. By moving beyond monolithic conceptualizations of indigenous knowledge, this framework enables both scholars and practi-

tioners to identify, analyze, and mobilize specific knowledge assets with greater precision. The finding that IKS derive their strategic potency from deep social and cultural embeddedness represents a significant contribution to resource-based theory, illustrating how the causal ambiguity and social complexity that are identified as sources of inimitability manifest in culturally-grounded resources rather than technologically advanced ones [5].

Furthermore, this research successfully bridges the gap between philosophical abstraction and strategic application by operationalizing concepts like *Umunthu* into manageable strategic categories. African philosophical principles indeed contain strategic potential, but this study provides the crucial theoretical machinery to translate that potential into actionable business strategies [10]. The framework demonstrates how communal interdependence translates into tangible competitive advantages through reduced transaction costs, enhanced stakeholder relationships, and innovative product development grounded in localized knowledge.

However, the research also introduces a necessary critical perspective by identifying the codification dilemma and the paradoxical nature of institutional voids. These challenges complicate the strategic landscape and underscore that leveraging IKS requires nuanced approaches that balance commercial imperatives with cultural preservation. This finding extends caution about knowledge decontextualization into the strategic management domain, suggesting that the very process of formalizing IKS for business application may threaten the qualities that make them strategically valuable [7].

The implications of this research extend beyond academic discourse to offer practical guidance for SME owners and policymakers alike. For entrepreneurs, the framework provides a structured approach to identifying and leveraging often-overlooked strategic resources within their cultural context. For policymakers, it highlights the urgent need to develop supportive institutional frameworks that recognize and protect indigenous knowledge while facilitating its ethical commercialization.

Furthermore, this framework should not be interpreted as a call to wholly replace Western business practices with indigenous ones. Such a binary view would be counterproductive. Instead, the most sustainable competitive advantage for Malawian SMEs will likely emerge from a strategic synergy that thoughtfully integrates the robust, standardized principles of global management (e.g., financial accounting, digital tools) with the deep, contextually intelligent assets of IKS. The Relational IKS of *Umunthu* can enhance a formal stakeholder management strategy; the Substitutive IKS of a *chipereganyu* can coexist with and complement formal banking relationships; and Innovative IKS can be the wellspring of unique products that are then efficiently brought to market using modern logistics and marketing techniques. The true strategic artistry lies in configuring this blend to create a business model that is both globally competent and authentically local.

While this conceptual study provides a comprehensive theoretical foundation, it clearly points to the need for empirical validation through both qualitative case studies and quantitative research. Future investigations should explore the operational challenges of IKS mobilization across different sectors and examine the potential negative consequences of commercializing indigenous knowledge. Nevertheless, this research establishes a firm theoretical basis for understanding how Malawian SMEs, and potentially enterprises in similar emerging markets, can transform their cultural heritage into sustainable competitive advantage in an increasingly globalized marketplace.

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The data used in this study are available from the author upon reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest

There are no competing interests to declare.

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