



Indigenous and culturally-embedded strategy-making in South African firms

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Abstract

The study investigated Indigenous and Culturally-Embedded Strategy-Making in South African firms, guided by two research objectives: examining the current state of IKS integration and identifying barriers and facilitating factors influencing adoption. The study adopted an interpretivist paradigm and employed a qualitative multiple case study design. Purposive sampling selected 25 participants from SMEs, multinational corporations, and state-owned enterprises, including senior managers, strategic planners, human resource directors, and indigenous knowledge practitioners. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and document analysis, and analysed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed that while organisations have policies recognising indigenous knowledge, these are rarely translated into operational frameworks. Ubuntu values were often adopted superficially without substantive integration. However, some SMEs demonstrated meaningful integration, building business models around indigenous knowledge. Significant barriers included Western centric strategic dominance, resource constraints, inadequate training, and resistance to change. Facilitating factors included government frameworks, leadership commitment, and multi stakeholder collaboration. The study contributes to Decolonial Theory, Ubuntu Philosophy, and IKS Theory by empirically validating epistemic dissonance, identifying barriers to Ubuntu operationalisation, and demonstrating that meaningful integration requires systemic incorporation. The findings offer practical implications for corporate leaders, SMEs, policymakers, and academic institutions, contributing to social and restorative justice by exploring how firms can redress historical inequities and foster inclusive economic landscapes.

Keywords: Indigenous knowledge systems, ubuntu, culturally-embedded strategy-making, South African firms, strategic management

Introduction

The strategic management landscape in South Africa exists at a complex intersection of globalised business practices and deeply rooted indigenous knowledge systems. Within this context, there has been a discernible shift towards exploring culturally-embedded approaches to strategy-making that resonate with the country's diverse socio-cultural fabric (Seleke, 2026) ^[17]. Central to this discourse is the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*, which emphasises communality, interconnectedness, and collective responsibility, offering a profound alternative to the predominantly individualistic and profit-centric models of Western corporate strategy (Olatubosun & Nyazenga, 2020) ^[13]. This paradigm shift is not merely an academic exercise but a practical necessity, as scholars and practitioners increasingly recognise that strategies divorced from local cultural realities often fail to foster sustainable development, social cohesion, and inclusive economic growth (North-West University, 2026) ^[12]. The imperative to develop Indigenous and Culturally-Embedded Strategy-Making frameworks is thus driven by a desire to decolonise business thought, promote epistemic justice, and create resilient enterprises that are accountable to broader societal stakeholders, moving beyond the traditional shareholder primacy model (Theledi, 2025; Heleta & Dilraj, 2024) ^[5, 18]. The relevance of this topic is underscored by the increasing body of research advocating for the integration of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) into various sectors, from agriculture and entrepreneurship to corporate governance and education (Walter Sisulu University, 2026) ^[12]. Studies indicate that leveraging IKS, such as communal decision-making and traditional ecological knowledge, can provide firms with unique competitive advantages, foster

innovation, and enhance brand differentiation (Department of Science, Technology and Innovation, 2026) ^[4]. Furthermore, incorporating cultural values into strategy is seen as a crucial mechanism for addressing South Africa's persistent socio-economic challenges, including extreme inequality, unemployment, and the marginalization of historically disadvantaged communities (University of Johannesburg Centre for Africa-China Studies, 2025) ^[19]. The South African government has recognised this potential through legislative frameworks such as the Protection, Promotion, Development and Management of Indigenous Knowledge Act (2019) ^[22], which aims to protect indigenous knowledge as intellectual property and facilitate its commercialization for economic development (Chokwe, 2024) ^[3]. This study, therefore, investigates how South African firms are navigating this complex terrain, moving beyond a superficial acknowledgment of culture towards a genuine, systemic integration of indigenous paradigms into their strategic DNA (Theledi, 2025) ^[18].

Problem Statement

Despite the growing recognition of the potential benefits of indigenous knowledge and culturally-embedded practices, South African firms face significant challenges in effectively translating these paradigms into actionable and coherent strategic frameworks. A pervasive problem exists where strategic management continues to be dominated by Western-centric models that often overlook or undervalue local cultural contexts, leading to a disconnect between corporate strategy and the socio-cultural realities in which these firms operate (Heleta & Dilraj, 2024) ^[5]. This conceptual and practical gap results in missed opportunities for innovation and community engagement and can

contribute to social friction, as witnessed in frequent protests by mining communities against corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives that do not align with local values (University of Johannesburg Centre for Africa-China Studies, 2025) ^[19]. While policies such as the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (BBBEE) Act aim to foster economic transformation, their implementation often remains compliance-driven rather than representing a genuine strategic commitment to stakeholder inclusivity, with many companies sidestepping these requirements entirely (Chokwe, 2024) ^[3].

Furthermore, the integration of indigenous knowledge into formal business strategy is fraught with challenges. Research highlights a lack of strategic planning, cultural differences, and shortages in sustainable supply chains as key barriers for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) attempting to incorporate IKS into their operations (Department of Science, Technology and Innovation, 2026) ^[4]. In the corporate sector, efforts to embed philosophies like *Ubuntu* often struggle against the entrenched shareholder primacy model, creating a legal and theoretical tension that complicates the pursuit of a more stakeholder-inclusive approach (Olatubosun & Nyazenga, 2020). Theledi (2025) ^[13, 18] further argues that while multinational companies operating in South Africa may acknowledge *Ubuntu* in their public rhetoric, they frequently fail to operationalise these values in meaningful strategic decision-making, resulting in superficial cultural integration that does little to address systemic inequities. Similarly, Seleke (2026) ^[17] contends that the absence of robust institutional frameworks and inadequate training in indigenous knowledge systems within business schools perpetuates the marginalization of culturally-embedded approaches to strategy. There is, therefore, a critical need for empirical investigation and theoretical development to understand how firms can systematically and authentically develop and implement strategies that are culturally embedded, moving beyond tokenism to foster genuine social impact and business resilience in the South African context (North-West University, 2026; Walter Sisulu University, 2026) ^[12].

Research Objective

The study investigates how South African firms are navigating the complex process of developing and implementing Indigenous and Culturally-Embedded Strategy-Making frameworks, moving beyond superficial acknowledgment towards genuine systemic integration of indigenous paradigms into their strategic DNA. Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. Critically examine the current state and extent of integration of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) and culturally-embedded practices into the strategic management processes of South African firms and;
2. Identify and analyses the key barriers, challenges, and facilitating factors that influence the successful adoption of culturally-embedded strategy-making in South African firms

Significance of the Study

This study addresses a critical gap in strategic management literature by providing contextualised understanding of indigenous and culturally-embedded strategy development in South African firms (Theledi, 2025) ^[18]. The research offers actionable insights for practitioners, policymakers,

and corporate leaders on stakeholder engagement, resilient business models, and leveraging indigenous knowledge for competitive advantage (Seleke, 2026; North-West University, 2026 ^[12, 17]; Department of Science, Technology and Innovation, 2026) ^[4].

From a policy perspective, the study informs refinement of frameworks like the Indigenous Knowledge Systems Policy (2024) ^[8] and Indigenous Knowledge Act (2019) ^[22], evaluating their effectiveness in promoting IKS-based enterprises and equitable benefit-sharing (Chokwe, 2024; Walter Sisulu University, 2026) ^[3, 12]. Academically, it advances decoloniality and epistemic justice discourse within management studies (Heleta & Dilraj, 2024) ^[5]. Ultimately, the research contributes to social and restorative justice by exploring how firms can redress historical inequities and foster inclusive economic landscapes in South Africa (Olatubosun & Nyazenga, 2020 ^[13]; University of Johannesburg Centre for Africa-China Studies, 2025) ^[19].

Literature Review: Theoretical Framework

Theoretical Framework

Three interconnected theoretical perspectives such as Decolonial Theory, Ubuntu Philosophy and Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) Theory underpin the study

Decolonial Theory: interrogates the persistent dominance of Western paradigms in business research and practice, exposing the epistemic dissonance between imported models and local realities that perpetuates marginalization of indigenous ways of knowing (Nkosi & van der Merwe, 2026) ^[4]. This framework posits that centring indigenous epistemologies directs research towards more authentic inquiry (Heleta & Dilraj, 2024) ^[5].

Ubuntu Philosophy: encapsulated in "Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu" (a person is a person through other persons), emphasises communality, interconnectedness, and collective responsibility (Olatubosun & Nyazenga, 2020). Sarpong and Maclean (2015) ^[13, 16] demonstrate how Ubuntu can enhance relational pluralism and nurture strategic foresight in organisations, complementing Western perspectives rather than replacing them (Theledi, 2025) ^[18].

Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) Theory: frames indigenous knowledge as a living body of knowledge, skills, and practices sustained and passed through generations (Zondi, 2021). Mawere and Mukonza (2024) ^[9] argue that operationalizing indigenous approaches demands a nuanced strategy aligning IKS with community needs and modern developments, offering critical insights for sustainable development and strategic decision making (Department of Science, Technology and Innovation, 2026; Walter Sisulu University, 2026) ^[4, 12]. These three interconnected perspectives collectively frame this study's investigation of how South African firms can authentically integrate indigenous paradigms into their strategic DNA (Seleke, 2026; North-West University, 2026) ^[12, 17].

Integration of IKS and Culturally-Embedded Practices in South African Firms

Integration of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) and culturally embedded practices into South African firms must be understood through Decolonial Theory, Ubuntu

Philosophy, and IKS Theory. While recognition of indigenous knowledge's value for business sustainability grows, significant gaps persist between policy aspirations and operational reality (Manyaga, Goldman & Thomas, 2024)^[8].

Decolonial Theory holds that centring indigenous epistemologies reduces conceptual dissonance and directs research towards authentic inquiry (Nkosi & van der Merwe, 2026). Heleta and Dilraj (2024)^[5] demonstrate that frameworks designed for African contexts often maintain Western centric ideologies, undermining decolonial objectives. Olatubosun and Nyazenga (2020)^[13] confirm corporate governance standards in developing countries do not resonate with native cultural values.

Research indicates South African SMEs increasingly explore IKS to enhance sustainability, yielding opportunities including collaboration, market access, and competitive advantage (Manyaga, Goldman & Thomas, 2024)^[8]. These findings support IKS Theory, which frames indigenous knowledge as living knowledge sustained through generations (Zondi, 2021). Mawere and Mukonza (2024)^[9] argue operationalizing indigenous approaches demands nuanced strategy aligning IKS with community needs.

Ubuntu Philosophy demonstrates Ubuntu enhances relational pluralism and nurtures strategic foresight, complementing Western perspectives (Sarpong & Maclean, 2015). Theledi (2025)^[16, 18] confirms business leaders acknowledge Ubuntu's relevance, with integration occurring through strategic alignment with Ubuntu values.

However, integration often remains superficial. Seleke (2026)^[17] argues repositioning indigenous knowledge requires fundamental epistemic shift. Theledi (2025)^[18] confirms leaders face challenges operationalizing Ubuntu within Western corporate structures. University of Johannesburg Centre for Africa-China Studies (2025)^[19] reveals multinational companies acknowledge Ubuntu rhetorically but fail to operationalise it meaningfully. These findings suggest culturally embedded strategies struggle against entrenched Western paradigms and may be adopted symbolically rather than substantively integrated into strategic DNA.

Barriers, Challenges and Facilitating Factors

Successful adoption of culturally embedded strategy making in South African firms is influenced by barriers and facilitating factors understood through Decolonial Theory, Ubuntu Philosophy, and IKS Theory.

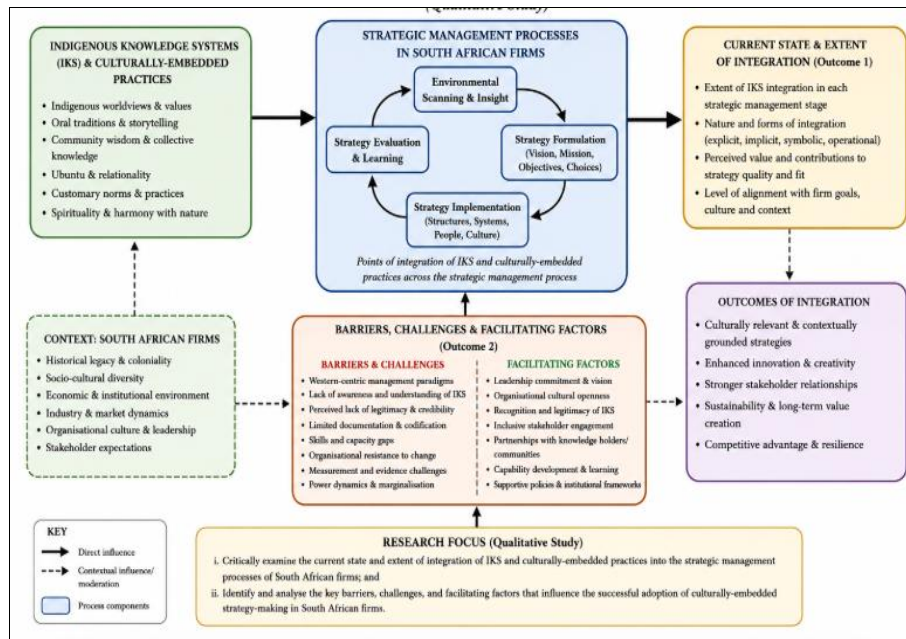
Barriers and Challenges: IKS Theory holds that operationalizing indigenous approaches demands nuanced strategy (Mawere & Mukonza, 2024)^[9]. Research highlights three principal barriers: cultural differences, lack of strategic planning, and supply chain shortages (Manyaga, Goldman & Thomas, 2024)^[8]. Zondi (2021) confirms legislative

frameworks exist but practical mechanisms for protecting and commercializing IKS remain underdeveloped. Decolonial Theory posits that Western centric models create epistemic dissonance perpetuating marginalization of indigenous knowledge (Nkosi & van der Merwe, 2026). Olatubosun and Nyazenga (2020)^[4, 13] found African investment managers more grounded in Western philosophies than Ubuntu. Theledi (2025)^[18] confirms leaders face resistance to change and difficulty operationalizing Ubuntu within Western structures. Seleke (2026)^[17] argues inadequate training in IKS within business schools perpetuates marginalization. Chokwe (2024)^[3] confirms BBBEE implementation remains compliance driven rather than representing genuine strategic commitment.

Facilitating Factors: IKS Theory emphasises strategic collaboration between government, academia, and industry as critical enabler. Department of Science, Technology and Innovation has institutionalized frameworks including Indigenous Knowledge Systems Act (2019)^[22] and uBu-Ntu Bio-Innovation Model, providing pathways for commercialization and capacity building (Department of Science, Technology and Innovation, 2026^[4]; Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2025)^[14]. Ubuntu Philosophy holds that integrating Ubuntu values into organisational culture enhances commitment and satisfaction (Theledi, 2025). Mangaroo-Pillay (2020)^[7, 18] demonstrates cultural embeddedness through Ubuntu could enhance strategic implementation. Decolonial Theory asserts successful adoption requires sustained commitment and creation of frameworks reflecting African contexts (Seleke, 2026; Heleta & Dilraj, 2024)^[5, 17]. Ultimately, facilitating factors directly respond to theoretical imperatives, underscoring importance of moving beyond window dressing towards authentic integration.

Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework for the study, illustrating how Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) and culturally-embedded practices are integrated into the strategic management processes of South African firms. The framework shows that IKS and cultural practices can influence key strategic management activities, including environmental scanning, strategy formulation, implementation, and evaluation. It further highlights the current state and extent of this integration while identifying the organizational, institutional, and contextual barriers and facilitating factors that shape the successful adoption of culturally-embedded strategy-making. The framework serves as a guide for exploring participants' experiences and perspectives regarding the role of indigenous knowledge in enhancing strategic management practices within South African firms.



Source: Author's construct, 2026^[17]

Fig 1: Conceptual Framework Illustrating the Integration of Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Culturally-Embedded Practices into the Strategic Management Processes of South African Firms.

Methodology

Philosophical Foundation

This study was grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, holding that social reality is constructed through human interpretation (Nkosi & van der Merwe, 2026). Interpretivism aligned with Decolonial Theory, emphasising centring indigenous epistemologies, and Ubuntu Philosophy, emphasising communality and collective meaning making (Heleta & Dilraj, 2024; Olatubosun & Nyazenga, 2020)^[5, 13].

Research Approach

A qualitative approach was adopted, enabling deep exploration of participants' experiences and interpretations of culturally embedded strategy making. This approach captured rich, contextualised data on how firms navigate tensions between Western centric models and indigenous paradigms (Seleke, 2026; Theledi, 2025)^[17, 18]. Qualitative inquiry allowed exploration of complexities that quantitative methods cannot adequately capture (Manyaga, Goldman & Thomas, 2024)^[8].

Research Design

A multiple case study design was employed, enabling in depth examination of how different firms approach culturally embedded strategy making within their unique organisational contexts (Yin, 2018)^[21]. This design facilitated comparison across cases to identify common patterns, barriers, and facilitating factors. The case study approach aligned with IKS Theory, recognising that indigenous knowledge is context specific and must be understood within its organisational setting (Zondi, 2021; Mawere & Mukonza, 2024)^[9].

Sampling

Purposive sampling was used to select participants with relevant knowledge and experience in strategic management and culturally embedded practices. The sample comprised 25 participants drawn from South African firms across

various sectors, including SMEs, multinational corporations, and state-owned enterprises. Participants included senior managers, strategic planners, human resource directors, and indigenous knowledge practitioners, ensuring selection of information rich cases (Patton, 2015)^[15].

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi structured interviews with 25 participants, exploring experiences with IKS and Ubuntu integration, barriers, and facilitating factors. Interviews lasted 60 to 90 minutes. Document analysis of organisational policies supplemented interview data (Department of Science, Technology and Innovation, 2026^[4]; Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2025)^[14].

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006)^[1] six phase frameworks: familiarisation with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Coding was both deductive, guided by the theoretical framework (Decolonial Theory, Ubuntu Philosophy, IKS Theory), and inductive, allowing emergent themes to arise from the data. This dual approach ensured theoretical grounding while remaining open to unanticipated insights (Seleke, 2026; Theledi, 2025)^[17, 18].

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was ensured through credibility (triangulation and member checking), transferability (thick description), dependability (audit trail), and confirmability (reflexivity) (Lincoln & Guba, 1985)^[6].

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was secured from all participants, who were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Data were stored securely and anonymised to protect participant identities and organisational sensitivities.

Results

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

The demographic profile of the 25 participants who took part in this study is presented below. Purposive sampling ensured the selection of participants with relevant knowledge and experience in strategic management and culturally embedded practices across various sectors of South African firms. Of the 25 participants, 17 were female and 8 were male, reflecting the gender composition of strategic management and human resource professionals in the participating organisations.

Participants ranged in age from 18 to 64 years. The largest age group was 35 to 44 years with 8 participants, followed by 25 to 34 years and 45 to 54 years with 6 participants each. Three participants were aged 55 to 64 years, and two participants were aged 18 to 24 years. This distribution indicates a predominance of mid-career professionals with substantial experience in strategic management.

Participants were drawn from three main sectors: small and medium enterprises (SMEs) comprising 10 participants, multinational corporations comprising 8 participants, and state-owned enterprises comprising 7 participants. This sectoral distribution enabled comparative analysis across different organisational contexts and ownership structures.

Participants occupied various roles relevant to strategy making and culturally embedded practices. Senior managers constituted 7 participants, strategic planners numbered 5 participants, human resource directors numbered 5 participants, indigenous knowledge practitioners numbered 4 participants, and other executive roles accounted for 4 participants. This diversity of positions provided multiple perspectives on strategy making processes and cultural integration. Most participants held tertiary qualifications, with bachelor's degrees held by 10 participants, master's degrees by 8 participants, diplomas by 3 participants, and doctorates by 4 participants. This high level of education ensured participants possessed the cognitive and analytical capacity to articulate complex strategic and cultural issues.

Trustworthiness Results

Following the demographic analysis, trustworthiness was assessed through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) ^[6]. Credibility was enhanced through triangulation of data sources and member checking, with all 25 participants confirming the accuracy of their interview transcripts. Transferability was achieved through thick description of cases and inclusion of participants from diverse sectors including SMEs, multinational corporations, and state-owned enterprises. Dependability was established through a comprehensive audit trail documenting all research decisions including sampling procedures, interview protocols, coding processes, and thematic development. Confirmability was ensured through reflexivity, with findings grounded in participants' direct quotations and experiences rather than researcher interpretation. These trustworthiness measures ensured that findings for both research objectives accurately reflect participants' experiences and perspectives on IKS integration and culturally embedded strategy making.

Objective One: Current State of IKS Integration

The first research objective sought to critically examine the current state and extent of integration of Indigenous

Knowledge Systems (IKS) and culturally embedded practices into the strategic management processes of South African firms. Three themes emerged from the data.

Theme 1: Policy Recognition versus Operational Reality

Most participants acknowledged that while their organisations had policies recognising the importance of indigenous knowledge and cultural values, these policies were rarely translated into operational strategic frameworks. A senior manager from a multinational corporation stated: "Our company has a diversity and inclusion policy that mentions Ubuntu, but when it comes to actual strategy making, we follow Western models. The policy is there for compliance, not for real change." An indigenous knowledge practitioner from an SME echoed this sentiment: "The government has good policies, but at the ground level, nothing changes. We are still expected to fit into Western business models." Another participant from a state-owned enterprise observed: "We have transformation policies that reference indigenous knowledge, but there is no implementation plan. It is just words on paper."

Theme 2: Superficial Adoption of Ubuntu Values

Participants reported that Ubuntu values were often adopted superficially or rhetorically without substantive integration into strategic processes. A human resource director observed: "We talk about Ubuntu in our mission statement, but our performance management systems still reward individual achievement over collective success. There is a disconnect between what we say and what we do." Another participant from a state-owned enterprise noted: "Ubuntu is mentioned in speeches and documents, but when decisions are made, profit and shareholder value come first. Ubuntu is window dressing." A strategic planner added: "Our leadership talks about Ubuntu at conferences, but internally, we operate like any other Western corporation. The rhetoric does not match the reality."

Theme 3: Strategic Alignment with Indigenous Knowledge

Some participants, particularly from SMEs, reported more meaningful integration of indigenous knowledge into their strategic processes. A strategic planner from an SME explained: "Our business relies on traditional knowledge of medicinal plants. We have built our entire supply chain around indigenous knowledge, and we consult with traditional healers as part of our strategic planning." Another participant noted: "We have incorporated communal decision-making practices into our board meetings, which has improved collaboration and trust." An indigenous knowledge practitioner stated: "We have developed our business model around indigenous knowledge. It is not just an add on; it is central to everything we do."

Objective Two: Barriers, Challenges and Facilitating Factors

The second research objective also sought to identify and analyse the key barriers, challenges, and facilitating factors that influence the successful adoption of culturally embedded strategy making in South African firms. Two overarching themes emerged: barriers and facilitating factors.

Theme 1: Barriers to Culturally Embedded Strategy Making

Participants identified several barriers that hindered the successful adoption of culturally embedded strategy making.

Subtheme 1.1: Western Centric Strategic Dominance

The dominance of Western centric strategic models was identified as a pervasive barrier. A senior manager stated: "Business schools teach Western models. Our executives are trained in SWOT analysis, Porter's Five Forces, and shareholder value maximisation. These frameworks do not leave room for Ubuntu or indigenous knowledge." Another participant noted: "We are expected to present strategies in Western formats to attract investors. Indigenous approaches are seen as unsophisticated." A human resource director added: "Our entire strategic planning process is based on Western methodologies. There is no space for indigenous perspectives."

Subtheme 1.2: Lack of Strategic Planning and Resources

Participants from SMEs particularly highlighted resource constraints as a significant barrier. An SME owner explained: "We do not have the resources to conduct research on indigenous knowledge or to develop systems for protecting it. We are focused on survival." A strategic planner added: "There is no budget allocated for indigenous knowledge integration. It is seen as a nice to have, not a strategic priority." Another participant noted: "We lack the capacity to document and protect our indigenous knowledge. This makes it difficult to commercialize or integrate into strategy."

Subtheme 1.3: Inadequate Training and Institutional Support

Participants reported insufficient training and institutional support for culturally embedded strategy making. A human resource director noted: "Our employees do not understand what Ubuntu means in practice. There is no training on how to incorporate cultural values into decision making." A senior manager from a state-owned enterprise added: "The government has not provided clear guidelines on how to implement indigenous knowledge policies. We are left to figure it out ourselves." A strategic planner stated: "Business schools are not teaching indigenous knowledge systems. Graduates enter the workforce without any understanding of how to integrate culture into strategy."

Subtheme 1.4: Resistance to Change and Cultural Dissonance

Resistance from employees and leaders was identified as a challenge. A strategic planner stated: "Older executives are resistant to changing the way we do strategy. They see indigenous approaches as inferior." Another participant observed: "There is cultural dissonance between younger employees who embrace transformation and older leaders who prefer Western methods." A senior manager added: "Some employees view Ubuntu as a threat to their authority. They prefer hierarchical decision making over communal approaches."

Theme 2: Facilitating Factors

Participants identified several factors that facilitated the successful adoption of culturally embedded strategy making.

Subtheme 2.1: Government and Institutional Frameworks

Participants acknowledged the role of government policies and institutional frameworks in facilitating IKS integration. A senior manager noted: "The Indigenous Knowledge Systems Act provides a legal framework for protecting indigenous knowledge. This gives us confidence to invest in IKS based enterprises." Another participant added: "The uBu-Ntu Bio-Innovation Model has been helpful in providing structured pathways for commercialization." An indigenous knowledge practitioner stated: "The government's recognition of indigenous knowledge as intellectual property has opened up opportunities for us."

Subtheme 2.2: Leadership Commitment and Cultural Alignment

Leadership commitment emerged as a critical facilitating factor. A human resource director stated: "When our CEO publicly commits to Ubuntu values and models them in decision making, it sends a powerful message. Employees take cultural integration seriously." Another participant noted: "Our leaders have integrated Ubuntu into performance management systems, which has increased employee commitment and satisfaction." A senior manager added: "Leadership buy in is essential. Without it, any cultural integration initiative will fail."

Subtheme 2.3: Multi Stakeholder Collaboration

Collaboration between government, academia, industry, and communities was identified as an enabler. An indigenous knowledge practitioner stated: "Our partnership with a local university has helped us document and protect our indigenous knowledge. This has opened up new business opportunities." Another participant added: "Smart Village dialogues have brought together different stakeholders to promote IKS based enterprises." A strategic planner noted: "Collaboration with communities has helped us understand how to align our strategies with local cultural values."

Subtheme 2.4: Recommendations for Authentic Integration

Participants offered recommendations for achieving authentic integration of culturally embedded practices. A senior manager stated: "We need to move beyond adding Ubuntu to our mission statements. We need to fundamentally rethink how we do strategy from an African perspective." An indigenous knowledge practitioner added: "Decolonization is not about replacing Western models with African ones. It is about creating space for multiple ways of knowing." A human resource director recommended: "We need training programmes that help employees understand and apply Ubuntu in their work. This should be integrated into induction and ongoing professional development." A strategic planner added: "Business schools need to incorporate IKS and African philosophy into their curricula. Future leaders must be equipped with these frameworks." An SME owner stated: "We need strategic frameworks that reflect South African realities, not just imported models. These frameworks should be developed in consultation with communities and indigenous knowledge holders."

Discussion

Objective One: Current State of IKS Integration

The first research objective examined the current state of IKS and culturally embedded practices integration in South

African firms through Decolonial Theory, Ubuntu Philosophy, and IKS Theory.

Theme 1: Policy Recognition versus Operational Reality

The finding that policies exist but are rarely translated into operational frameworks supports Heleta and Dilraj (2024) and Seleke (2026) ^[5, 17], who demonstrated that decolonization often remains superficial. From a Decolonial Theory perspective, this represents "epistemic dissonance" (Nkosi & van der Merwe, 2026), where organisations acknowledge alternative knowledge systems but continue operating within Western frameworks. Participants' observation that "the policy is there for compliance" aligns with Chokwe's (2024) ^[3] finding that BBBEE implementation remains compliance driven. From an IKS Theory perspective, Zondi (2021) argued practical mechanisms for protecting IKS remain underdeveloped. Broodryk (2006) ^[2] emphasised that Ubuntu Management Philosophy requires operationalisation of communal values beyond policy acknowledgment. Sarpong and Maclean (2015) ^[16] argue Ubuntu can "nurture strategic foresight" through relational pluralism, yet without operational commitment this potential remains unrealized.

Theme 2: Superficial Adoption of Ubuntu Values

The finding that Ubuntu values are adopted superficially supports Theledi's (2025) ^[18] observation that leaders face challenges operationalising Ubuntu within Western structures. Broodryk (2006) ^[2] introduced ONPO (Obstacles, Negatives, Positives, Opportunities) analysis as an Ubuntu informed strategic tool contrasting with traditional SWOT, yet participants' experience that "Ubuntu is mentioned in speeches but profit comes first" suggests organisations have not adopted such tools. Olatubosun and Nyazenga (2020) ^[13] found Ubuntu's practical application remains limited. From a Decolonial Theory standpoint, this reflects tokenism and the need for genuine epistemic justice (Heleta & Dilraj, 2024). Sarpong and Maclean (2015) ^[5, 16] contend Ubuntu "complements" Western perspectives, yet participants' experience suggests this complementarity remains unrealised without deliberate integration into decision making.

Theme 3: Strategic Alignment with Indigenous Knowledge

Meaningful integration among SMEs supports Mawere and Mukonza's (2024) ^[9] argument that operationalising indigenous approaches demands nuanced strategy. From an IKS Theory perspective, Zondi (2021) framed indigenous knowledge as living knowledge, which participants' experience of building "entire supply chain around indigenous knowledge" exemplifies. Manyaga, Goldman and Thomas (2024) ^[8] found SMEs leveraging IKS achieve competitive advantage. Broodryk (2006) ^[2] argued Ubuntu Management Philosophy emphasises collective decision making, aligning with participants' observation that "communal decision-making improved collaboration." Sarpong and Maclean (2015) ^[16] argued Ubuntu "enhances relational pluralism," which participants' experience validates through improved collaboration and trust.

Objective Two: Barriers, Challenges, and Facilitating Factors

The second research objective identified barriers and facilitating factors with strengthened theoretical engagement.

Theme 1: Barriers to Culturally Embedded Strategy Making

Western Centric Strategic Dominance: Western model dominance supports Nkosi and van der Merwe's (2026) argument that Western centric models create epistemic dissonance. Heleta and Dilraj (2024) ^[5] demonstrated frameworks designed for African contexts maintain Western ideologies. Olatubosun and Nyazenga (2020) ^[13] found corporate governance standards do not resonate with native cultural values. Participants observed "business schools teach Western models" and "indigenous approaches are seen as unsophisticated." From an Ubuntu Philosophy perspective, this dominance prevents adoption of Ubuntu informed tools like ONPO (Broodryk, 2006). Sarpong and Maclean (2015) ^[2, 16] argue Ubuntu complements Western perspectives, yet complementarity remains unrealised.

Lack of Strategic Planning and Resources: Resource constraints support Manyaga, Goldman and Thomas (2024) ^[8], who identified resource shortages as principal barriers. From an IKS Theory perspective, Mawere and Mukonza (2024) ^[9] argued operationalising demands nuanced strategy, yet participants observed "there is no budget allocated." Zondi (2021) confirmed practical mechanisms remain underdeveloped. Broodryk (2006) ^[2] argued Ubuntu Management Philosophy requires investment in communal decision-making structures, yet resource constraints prevent such investment.

Inadequate Training and Institutional Support: Insufficient training supports Seleke's (2026) ^[17] argument that inadequate IKS training perpetuates marginalisation. Heleta and Dilraj (2024) ^[5] argued genuine decolonisation requires fundamental restructuring. From an Ubuntu Philosophy perspective, Sarpong and Maclean (2015) ^[16] argue Ubuntu's capacity to "nurture strategic foresight" requires training in indigenous "ways of knowing." Broodryk (2006) ^[2] contended Ubuntu Management Philosophy must be taught through experiential learning, which current frameworks do not support. Participants observed "business schools are not teaching IKS" and "government has not provided clear guidelines."

Resistance to Change and Cultural Dissonance: Resistance supports Theledi's (2025) ^[18] confirmation that leaders face resistance operationalising Ubuntu. Sarpong and Maclean (2015) ^[16] acknowledged Ubuntu's communal approach may conflict with hierarchical Western structures. University of Johannesburg Centre for Africa-China Studies (2025) ^[19] revealed multinational companies acknowledge Ubuntu rhetorically but fail to operationalise it. Participants observed "older executives are resistant" and "some view Ubuntu as a threat to authority." Broodryk (2006) ^[2] argued resistance often stems from lack of understanding of Ubuntu's practical benefits, including enhanced employee commitment.

Theme 2: Facilitating Factors

Government and Institutional Frameworks: Government policies facilitating IKS integration align with Department of Science, Technology and Innovation (2026) ^[4] and Parliamentary Monitoring Group (2025) ^[14]. From an IKS Theory perspective, Zondi (2021) analysed the Indigenous Knowledge Systems Act as protective legislation. Participants confirmed "the Act gives confidence to invest." From a Decolonial Theory perspective, these frameworks represent efforts to center indigenous epistemologies. From

an Ubuntu Philosophy perspective, Broodryk (2006) ^[2] argued Ubuntu Management Philosophy requires institutional support structures enabling communal decision making.

Leadership Commitment and Cultural Alignment: Leadership commitment supports Theledi's (2025) ^[18] finding that alignment with African values increases commitment. Broodryk (2006) ^[2] contended Ubuntu Management Philosophy requires leaders to model communal values, validated by participants' observation that "CEO commitment sends powerful message." Mangaroo-Pillay (2020) ^[7] demonstrated cultural embeddedness enhances strategic implementation. Sarpong and Maclean (2015) ^[16] argue leadership commitment enables Ubuntu to "nurture strategic foresight" by creating conditions where diverse perspectives inform strategic thinking.

Multi Stakeholder Collaboration: Collaboration aligns with North-West University (2026) ^[12], documenting how multi stakeholder collaboration promotes IKS enterprises. From an IKS Theory perspective, Mawere and Mukonza (2024) ^[9] argued operationalising demands nuanced strategy aligning IKS with community needs. Participants noted "Smart Village dialogues have brought together stakeholders," reflecting Ubuntu Philosophy principles of communality (Broodryk, 2006). Sarpong and Maclean (2015) ^[2, 16] argue collaborative approaches represent Ubuntu's capacity to "enhance relational pluralism" and nurture strategic foresight through multiple perspectives.

Recommendations for Authentic Integration: Participants' call for "fundamental epistemic shift" supports Seleke (2026) ^[17] and Nkosi and van der Merwe's (2026) ^[17] call for centring indigenous epistemologies. From a Decolonial Theory perspective, this reflects moving beyond superficial integration. From an Ubuntu Philosophy perspective, Broodryk (2006) ^[2] argues authentic Ubuntu integration requires adopting Ubuntu informed strategic tools like ONPO analysis. Sarpong and Maclean (2015) ^[16] contend this approach enables Ubuntu to "nurture strategic foresight" through collective sense making. Recommendations for training and context specific frameworks support Seleke (2026), Heleta and Dilraj (2024), and Mawere and Mukonza (2024) ^[5, 9, 17], demonstrating how participants envision operationalising Ubuntu and IKS through inclusive, participatory approaches.

Conclusion

The study investigated Indigenous and Culturally-Embedded Strategy-Making in South African firms, guided by two research objectives: examining the current state of IKS integration and identifying barriers and facilitating factors influencing adoption.

The findings reveal a complex landscape where policy recognition exists but operational implementation remains limited. Superficial adoption of Ubuntu values was prevalent across organisations, with participants describing a disconnect between rhetoric and practice. However, some SMEs demonstrated meaningful integration, building business models around indigenous knowledge and incorporating communal decision making into strategic processes. The study identified significant barriers including Western centric strategic dominance, resource constraints, inadequate training, and resistance to change. Facilitating factors included government frameworks, leadership commitment, and multi stakeholder collaboration.

Participants recommended fundamental epistemic shifts, capacity building, and development of context specific frameworks for authentic integration.

Theoretical Contributions

The study makes several contributions to the theoretical literature on Indigenous and Culturally-Embedded Strategy-Making. First, it empirically validates Decolonial Theory by demonstrating how epistemic dissonance manifests in South African firms, where organisations acknowledge indigenous knowledge systems yet continue operating within Western centric frameworks (Nkosi & van der Merwe, 2026; Heleta & Dilraj, 2024) ^[5]. The findings confirm that superficial integration represents tokenism rather than genuine epistemic justice, supporting the decolonial call for fundamental restructuring of knowledge systems.

Second, the study contributes to Ubuntu Philosophy by empirically examining Sarpong and Maclean's (2015) ^[16] argument that Ubuntu can "nurture strategic foresight" through relational pluralism. The findings reveal that while Ubuntu's potential for enhancing collaboration and commitment is recognised, operationalisation remains challenging within Western oriented structures. The study extends Broodryk's (2006) ^[2] Ubuntu Management Philosophy by identifying specific barriers and facilitating factors that influence Ubuntu's integration into strategic management, including the need for Ubuntu informed strategic tools like ONPO analysis.

Third, the study contributes to IKS Theory by empirically examining Mawere and Mukonza's (2024) ^[9] argument that operationalising indigenous approaches demands nuanced strategy aligning IKS with community needs. The findings demonstrate that meaningful integration occurs when organisations move beyond superficial acknowledgment towards systemic incorporation, particularly among SMEs where IKS is central to business models. The study also validates Zondi's (2021) analysis of legislative frameworks, confirming that while policies exist, practical mechanisms for protecting and commercializing IKS remain underdeveloped.

Practical Implications

The findings offer practical implications for various stakeholders. For corporate leaders, the study highlights the importance of moving beyond rhetorical acknowledgment of Ubuntu towards substantive integration into strategic processes. Leadership commitment emerged as a critical facilitating factor, suggesting that executives must model Ubuntu values and align performance management systems with cultural principles. The study also recommends adopting Ubuntu informed strategic tools like ONPO analysis (Broodryk, 2006) ^[2] to enable inclusive decision making.

For SMEs and entrepreneurs, the findings demonstrate that leveraging indigenous knowledge can provide competitive advantage, market access, and brand differentiation. SMEs should consider building business models around IKS and incorporating communal decision-making practices to enhance collaboration and trust. The study also highlights the importance of partnerships with universities and communities for documenting and protecting indigenous knowledge.

For policymakers, the findings reveal gaps between policy aspirations and operational reality, suggesting the need for

clearer implementation guidelines and institutional support mechanisms. The Indigenous Knowledge Systems Act (2019) ^[22] provides a legislative framework, but practical mechanisms for protection, commercialization, and benefit sharing remain underdeveloped. Policymakers should invest in capacity building programmes, business acceleration initiatives, and multi stakeholder collaboration platforms to support IKS based enterprises.

For academic institutions, the findings highlight the need for curriculum reform to incorporate IKS and African philosophy into business education. Participants emphasised that business schools continue teaching Western models without leaving room for Ubuntu or indigenous knowledge. Institutions should develop benchmarked frameworks reflecting African contexts and community needs (Seleke, 2026; Heleta & Dilraj, 2024) ^[5, 17].

Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations. The sample comprised 25 participants from South African firms across various sectors, which may limit generalisability to other contexts or sectors. The study focused on organisational perspectives and did not include community voices or indigenous knowledge holders, who could provide additional insights. The qualitative approach enables depth but limits statistical generalisability. The study was conducted within a specific timeframe, and findings may not capture evolving dynamics in IKS integration.

Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the findings, several directions for future research emerge. Longitudinal studies could examine how IKS integration evolves over time within organisations. Comparative studies across sectors could identify sector specific barriers and facilitating factors. Studies incorporating community perspectives and indigenous knowledge holders could provide more comprehensive understanding of IKS integration dynamics. Research could examine the effectiveness of specific interventions, such as Ubuntu informed strategic tools like ONPO analysis, in facilitating cultural integration. Studies could investigate how business school curricula can be reformed to incorporate IKS and African philosophy, addressing training gaps identified by participants.

Final Remarks

This study contributes to knowledge on Indigenous and Culturally-Embedded Strategy-Making in South African firms. Findings reveal a complex landscape where policy recognition exists but operational implementation remains limited, Ubuntu values are superficially adopted, and significant barriers impede authentic integration. Promising practices emerge among SMEs, where indigenous knowledge is central to business models and communal decision making enhances collaboration.

The theoretical framework comprising Decolonial Theory, Ubuntu Philosophy, and IKS Theory provided a robust lens for understanding these dynamics, validating assertions about epistemic dissonance, Ubuntu's potential for nurturing strategic foresight, and the need for nuanced strategies aligning IKS with community needs. The findings highlight moving beyond tokenism towards genuine epistemic justice and developing institutional frameworks supporting IKS integration.

Ultimately, this research contributes to social and restorative justice by exploring how firms can redress historical inequities and foster inclusive economic landscapes. As South Africa continues towards decolonisation and epistemic justice, integrating indigenous knowledge systems into strategic management represents a critical pathway for building resilient, inclusive, and sustainable enterprises reflecting the nation's diverse cultural heritage

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