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Review Article

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# A Narrative Review of Customary Power or Political Instrument: The Evolving Role of Traditional Leaders in Zimbabwe's Decentralised Governance System.

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## Abstract

This study examines whether the evolving role of traditional leaders in Zimbabwe's decentralised governance system reflects customary power or functions as a political instrument. Using a narrative review approach, the study synthesises existing literature on traditional leadership, decentralisation, and local governance to trace shifts in authority, legitimacy, and institutional positioning. It situates traditional leaders within both historical and contemporary governance frameworks, highlighting how their roles have been reshaped from pre-colonial and colonial periods to the post-independence decentralisation agenda. The analysis explores the formal and informal functions performed by traditional leaders, including community representation, dispute resolution, land administration, and participation in local development initiatives. It further examines their interaction with state institutions within decentralised governance structures, where they are expected to enhance grassroots participation, service delivery, and local accountability. At the same time, the study critically interrogates the influence of political dynamics, particularly the extent to which traditional leaders are integrated into formal state systems in ways that may align them with partisan interests. The findings reveal that traditional leaders operate within a hybrid governance space characterised by overlapping customary authority and state-driven political roles. While this dual positioning can strengthen local legitimacy and facilitate community-level governance, it also raises concerns about the autonomy and accountability of customary institutions. The study contributes to policy and governance debates by emphasising the need for clearer institutional frameworks that define and balance the roles of traditional leaders, safeguard their independence, and promote democratic decentralisation in Zimbabwe.

**Keywords:** *Traditional leaders; Customary power; Political instrument; Decentralised governance; Local governance; Zimbabwe.*

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Background

Traditional leadership remains a central and enduring feature of governance in Zimbabwe, despite successive institutional transformations shaped by colonial rule, independence, and ongoing decentralisation reforms. Historically, traditional leaders derived authority from customary law and indigenous governance systems, performing key functions such as land allocation, dispute

resolution, cultural preservation, and community mobilisation. Their legitimacy was anchored in lineage, tradition, and collective community recognition, positioning them as essential actors in maintaining rural social order and cohesion.

The colonial period significantly reshaped this institutional arrangement through the introduction of indirect rule. Under this system, traditional leaders were incorporated into colonial administrative structures and repurposed as



intermediaries for local governance control. While this preserved their local presence, it substantially altered their autonomy by subordinating customary authority to colonial administrative and political objectives. As a result, traditional leadership became embedded in a dual structure that combined indigenous legitimacy with externally imposed governance functions.

Following independence in 1980, Zimbabwe retained the institution of traditional leadership, recognising its continued relevance in rural governance contexts where state capacity and administrative reach remain limited. Over time, traditional leaders have maintained their influence in community-level governance, particularly in rural areas where they continue to serve as accessible and trusted authority figures.

The introduction of decentralisation reforms further strengthened the formal integration of traditional leaders into local governance systems. Within contemporary governance frameworks, they are positioned as intermediaries between the state and rural communities.

Their roles include facilitating local development initiatives, supporting administrative coordination, and promoting community participation in governance processes. Empirical evidence suggests that their continued influence is largely attributed to their embedded legitimacy and proximity to local communities, which enhances their effectiveness in grassroots governance structures (Mawere, 2021).

However, the institutional positioning of traditional leaders within decentralised governance systems has generated sustained scholarly and policy debate. The Constitution of Zimbabwe (2013) formally recognises traditional leadership while simultaneously imposing regulatory frameworks that emphasise political neutrality and accountability. This constitutional arrangement has created a dual expectation: traditional leaders are required to uphold customary authority while also aligning with formal state governance principles. Scholars argue that this dual positioning places traditional leaders in a structurally complex and often contested governance space (Chigora & Guzura, 2020).

Further complexity arises from concerns regarding political alignment and institutional independence. Evidence indicates that traditional leaders have, at various points, been drawn into formal political processes in ways that raise questions about their neutrality, particularly within rural electoral environments (Ncube, 2019). Such dynamics have

intensified debates about whether traditional leaders function as independent custodians of customary governance or as actors influenced by broader political structures.

Despite these concerns, traditional leaders remain indispensable in many rural governance contexts due to limited state presence and administrative capacity. Overall, the literature consistently highlights that traditional leaders occupy a hybrid governance position shaped by the interaction between customary legitimacy and formal state institutional frameworks.

## 1.2 Rationale for the Study

Although there is a substantial body of literature on traditional leadership and decentralisation in Zimbabwe and across Africa, existing studies remain fragmented and conceptually uneven. A significant portion of the literature focuses either on traditional leaders as custodians of customary authority or as political actors embedded within state systems, with limited integration of these perspectives into a unified analytical framework. This separation has resulted in partial and sometimes conflicting interpretations of their evolving governance role.

Recent scholarship increasingly emphasises that decentralisation processes in Africa have not displaced traditional authorities but have instead reinforced their resilience within hybrid governance systems (Olowu, 2020). In Zimbabwe, traditional leaders continue to exercise significant influence over land governance, community organisation, and local administration, even as their roles become increasingly shaped by constitutional and institutional reforms (Sithole & Mbofana, 2023). This persistence highlights the adaptive nature of traditional leadership within changing governance environments.

At the same time, the growing incorporation of traditional leaders into formal governance structures has raised important concerns regarding accountability, autonomy, and political neutrality. Some scholars argue that traditional leadership has, in certain contexts, been strategically engaged by political actors, thereby complicating its position as a neutral institution of customary governance (Moyo, 2019). These competing interpretations reflect a deeper conceptual tension within the literature regarding the nature and function of traditional authority in contemporary governance systems.



Given these divergent perspectives, there is a clear need for a comprehensive and integrative synthesis that critically examines whether traditional leaders primarily function as custodians of customary power or as instruments shaped by political influence within decentralised governance systems. This study addresses this gap through a narrative review of literature, aiming to provide a more coherent and nuanced understanding of the evolving and contested role of traditional leaders in Zimbabwe's governance landscape.

## 2. Objectives of the Study

Using a narrative review approach, this study is guided by the overarching aim of examining whether traditional leaders in Zimbabwe's decentralised governance system primarily function as custodians of customary power or as instruments of political influence.

Within this narrative synthesis, the study is organised around the following guiding objectives, which structure the interpretation and integration of existing literature:

1. To trace the evolution of the role of traditional leaders within Zimbabwe's decentralised governance system, particularly in the post-independence period of governance reform.
2. Explore how traditional leaders continue to exercise customary authority in practice, especially in relation to community leadership, dispute resolution, land administration, and local development mobilisation.
3. Examine the extent to which the roles of traditional leaders are shaped, influenced, or constrained by their integration into formal state and political governance structures.
4. Analyse the tensions between customary legitimacy and political instrumentalisation within the functioning of traditional leadership in Zimbabwe.
5. Assess the implications of this dual positioning for decentralised governance, particularly in relation to accountability, citizen participation, and the effectiveness of local governance systems.

Through these guiding objectives, the narrative review synthesises existing scholarship to develop a coherent and contextually grounded understanding of the evolving and contested role of traditional leaders within Zimbabwe's governance framework.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Research Selection

This study adopts a narrative review approach to synthesise existing literature on the evolving role of traditional leaders

in Zimbabwe's decentralised governance system. The narrative approach was selected because it allows for a flexible, interpretive, and integrative examination of diverse scholarly materials on governance, customary authority, and political-administrative relations (Mawere, 2021; Mushonga, 2022).

The literature search focused on publications produced between 2019 and 2025, ensuring that the review captures recent debates on decentralisation reforms, governance transformation, and traditional leadership in Zimbabwe and broader African contexts. However, earlier seminal works were also included where necessary to provide historical and theoretical grounding for understanding institutional evolution (Moyo, 2019).

The review considered English-language sources only, due to accessibility and consistency in academic interpretation. Included materials comprised peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, conference papers, policy documents, and institutional reports. In addition, selected unpublished academic theses and dissertations were included where they provided strong empirical or conceptual relevance to the study topic (Sithole & Mbofana, 2023).

In terms of study design, the review incorporated literature from qualitative studies, mixed-methods studies with strong qualitative components, and conceptual/theoretical analyses. Qualitative studies were prioritised as they provide in-depth insights into governance practices and the lived realities of traditional leadership. Mixed-methods studies were included where their qualitative findings contributed meaningfully to understanding governance dynamics, while purely quantitative studies were used sparingly and only when offering contextual support or reinforcing broader governance trends (Chigora & Guzura, 2020).

The literature was sourced from reputable academic databases, including Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, and ProQuest, as well as institutional repositories and governance-focused research platforms. Additional policy documents were retrieved from government and regional governance institutions where relevant (Ncube, 2019).

The selection process was guided by strict inclusion and exclusion criteria. Studies were included if they directly addressed traditional leadership, decentralised governance, customary authority, or political-administrative integration. Studies lacking academic credibility or relevance to the core



research focus were excluded to maintain analytical coherence and rigour.

Through this structured yet flexible selection strategy, the study ensures a comprehensive synthesis of literature, enabling a nuanced understanding of the hybrid and evolving role of traditional leaders within Zimbabwe's decentralised governance system.

#### **4. Discussion**

This narrative review has examined the evolving role of traditional leaders in Zimbabwe's decentralised governance system, focusing on whether they primarily function as custodians of customary power or as instruments of political influence. While the reviewed literature offers valuable insights into this dual positioning, it also reveals important limitations in both the scope and quality of existing research, alongside clear gaps for future inquiry.

One of the main limitations is the fragmented nature of the literature. Existing studies often treat traditional leadership either as a customary institution grounded in legitimacy and culture or as a political actor embedded within state structures, rather than integrating both dimensions. This separation limits a holistic understanding of how traditional leaders navigate overlapping systems of authority in decentralised governance contexts (Mawere, 2021; Mushonga, 2022). As a result, the literature provides only partial explanations of their evolving governance role.

A second limitation relates to the dominance of case-specific qualitative studies, which are frequently confined to particular districts or communities. While these studies provide rich contextual detail, they often lack broader generalisability across Zimbabwe's diverse rural governance settings (Sithole & Mbofana, 2023). This makes it difficult to draw nationally representative conclusions about the role of traditional leaders in decentralised governance systems.

Methodologically, the literature is also constrained by its reliance on small-scale qualitative approaches, such as interviews and ethnographic observations. Although these methods are appropriate for exploring governance dynamics, they are often subject to interpretive bias and limited sample representation (Chigora & Guzura, 2020). In contrast, quantitative and mixed-method approaches remain underutilised, particularly in assessing public perceptions of legitimacy and governance effectiveness.

Another limitation is the lack of longitudinal research, which restricts understanding of how traditional leadership roles evolve in response to constitutional reforms and shifting political environments. Most studies provide static snapshots rather than tracking institutional change over time (Ncube, 2019).

There are also conceptual inconsistencies in how traditional leadership is framed. Some studies emphasise customary legitimacy, while others highlight political incorporation and state influence, resulting in analytical ambiguity (Moyo, 2019). This lack of conceptual alignment complicates efforts to develop a unified theoretical understanding of traditional leadership within decentralised governance systems.

Despite these limitations, the literature confirms that traditional leaders remain significant actors in rural governance, particularly in land administration, dispute resolution, and community mobilisation (Mawere, 2021). However, concerns persist regarding their political neutrality and autonomy within state structures (Moyo, 2019; Ncube, 2019).

Given these gaps, future research should adopt more integrated and comparative approaches. Multi-level analyses are needed to examine variations in traditional leadership roles across local, district, and national governance structures. Comparative studies across African contexts would also help determine whether Zimbabwe's experience reflects broader continental governance patterns (Olowu, 2020). Furthermore, there is a need for mixed-methods research that combines qualitative depth with quantitative measurement to assess legitimacy, accountability, and governance effectiveness more robustly. Longitudinal studies are particularly important for tracking how traditional leadership evolves in response to decentralisation reforms and political transitions. Finally, the development of a more coherent conceptual framework is necessary to reconcile customary authority with political influence and better explain the hybrid nature of traditional leadership in Zimbabwe's governance system.

In conclusion, while existing scholarship provides important foundations for understanding traditional leadership in decentralised governance, it remains limited by fragmentation, methodological constraints, and conceptual inconsistency. Addressing these gaps will be essential for advancing more rigorous and policy-relevant research in this field.



## 5. Acknowledgement

The authors sincerely acknowledge the contribution of numerous scholars whose work has significantly informed and shaped this narrative review on the evolving role of traditional leaders in Zimbabwe's decentralised governance system. In particular, appreciation is extended to scholars such as Moyo (2019), Ncube (2019), Chigora and Guzura (2020), Olowu (2020), Mawere (2021), Mushonga (2022), and Sithole and Mbofana (2023), whose empirical and theoretical studies on traditional leadership, governance reform, and decentralisation in Zimbabwe and Africa provided a strong intellectual foundation for this study. Their critical analyses of customary authority, political integration, and hybrid governance systems were instrumental in developing the conceptual direction of this review.

The authors also acknowledge the broader community of African governance and public administration scholars whose continuous research has deepened the understanding of the complex relationship between customary institutions and modern state systems. Their contributions have been essential in framing debates on whether traditional leaders function primarily as custodians of customary power or as actors influenced by political structures within decentralised governance systems.

Special appreciation is extended to academic institutions and research centres that host and maintain access to scholarly databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, and ProQuest. These platforms provided invaluable access to peer-reviewed journal articles, policy documents, conference proceedings, and institutional reports that were critical to the completion of this narrative synthesis. Without such resources, a comprehensive and balanced review of recent literature would not have been possible.

The authors further express gratitude to academic mentors, colleagues, and peers who offered intellectual guidance, constructive feedback, and methodological insights during the development of this study. Their contributions helped refine the focus, strengthen the analytical framework, and improve the overall coherence of the review.

Finally, recognition is extended to all researchers and practitioners working in the field of governance, decentralisation, and traditional leadership across Africa. Their ongoing efforts continue to enrich scholarly discourse

and provide valuable insights into the evolving nature of governance systems, particularly in contexts where customary and formal institutions intersect. This study is indebted to their collective intellectual contributions.

## 6. Source of Funding

This study did not receive any external funding from any public, private, or non-governmental organisation. The research was conducted independently as part of an academic narrative review, drawing on publicly available literature accessed through academic databases and institutional repositories.

The absence of funding is consistent with the nature of the study, which is conceptual and literature-based rather than empirical fieldwork requiring financial support. The review relied on existing scholarly publications, policy documents, and academic sources, which are freely or institutionally accessible through platforms such as Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, and ProQuest. As such, no financial resources were required for data collection, participant engagement, or field investigations.

This independent approach ensured that the study remained free from potential financial influence or sponsor bias, thereby strengthening its academic objectivity. The interpretation and synthesis of literature were guided solely by the study's research objectives and scholarly evidence, without any external funding body shaping the scope, analysis, or conclusions.

The lack of funding does not limit the validity or relevance of the study, as narrative reviews are widely recognised in academic research for their ability to integrate and critically analyse existing knowledge without requiring primary data collection. Instead, the study contributes to scholarly debate by consolidating and interpreting existing literature on traditional leadership and decentralised governance in Zimbabwe and Africa. In summary, the study was independently undertaken without any external financial support, and all research activities were self-directed within standard academic practice.

## 7. Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest in the conduct, analysis, interpretation, or presentation of this study. The research was undertaken independently as a narrative literature review and was guided strictly by



academic inquiry into the evolving role of traditional leaders in Zimbabwe's decentralised governance system.

No financial support, sponsorship, or funding was received from any organisation, institution, or individual that could have influenced the scope, direction, or findings of the study. Similarly, there are no personal, professional, or institutional relationships that could be perceived as having affected the objectivity or integrity of the research process. The identification, selection, and synthesis of literature were carried out based on scholarly relevance, methodological rigour, and contribution to the research objectives. Academic databases and institutional repositories were used solely as sources of published knowledge, and no external party had any role in determining which materials were included or excluded from the review.

The authors further confirm that there are no competing interests related to employment, consultancy, advisory roles, or affiliations that could be interpreted as influencing the analysis or conclusions of the study. All interpretations presented are based on critical engagement with existing literature and reflect the author's independent academic judgement.

This declaration ensures transparency and reinforces the credibility of the study by confirming that the research findings and discussions are free from any form of bias arising from external interests.

## **8. Author's Contributions**

This study was conducted collaboratively by three authors, each of whom made distinct and meaningful contributions across the different stages of the research process, from conceptualisation to final manuscript preparation.

Author one led the conceptualisation of the study and played a central role in defining the research focus on the evolving role of traditional leaders in Zimbabwe's decentralised governance system. He was responsible for formulating the research topic, developing the study objectives, and designing the overall structure of the narrative review. He also took the lead in drafting the manuscript, integrating contributions from the co-authors, and ensuring that the overall argument and flow of the paper remained coherent and aligned with the study's aims.

Author two was primarily responsible for the literature search and data gathering process. This included identifying relevant scholarly materials, screening academic sources for inclusion, and selecting studies from reputable databases

such as Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, and ProQuest. He also contributed significantly to the organisation of the literature and assisted in synthesising key themes related to customary authority, decentralisation, and governance structures in Zimbabwe and broader African contexts.

Author three focused on the analytical and interpretive components of the study. He contributed to the critical analysis of the reviewed literature, particularly in relation to governance dynamics, the hybrid nature of traditional leadership, and the intersection between customary authority and political influence. He also provided detailed critical reviews of the manuscript, ensuring methodological consistency, academic rigour, and clarity of argumentation. All three authors participated in revising the manuscript at various stages, improving its structure, clarity, and academic quality. They collectively reviewed and approved the final version for submission.

## **9. Data Availability**

This study is based entirely on a narrative review of existing literature and does not involve the collection or generation of primary empirical data. All information and evidence used in the study were obtained from publicly available secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, policy documents, conference papers, and institutional reports relevant to traditional leadership and decentralised governance.

The literature reviewed was accessed through established academic databases and repositories such as Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, and ProQuest, as well as other institutional and governmental online platforms. These sources are publicly accessible, although some may require institutional or subscription-based access depending on publisher policies.

As no original datasets were created, collected, or analysed during the course of this study, there are no data files to be deposited in a repository or shared upon request. All arguments, findings, and interpretations presented in this manuscript are derived from previously published and properly cited scholarly works.

Therefore, the data supporting the conclusions of this study are fully available within the referenced literature cited in the reference list. No confidential, proprietary, or restricted-access data was used. This ensures transparency in the



research process while maintaining adherence to ethical standards in academic writing.

### 10 Authors' Biographies

The first author is a Professor in the Department of Political Science and Public Administration. His academic work focuses on governance, public administration, decentralisation, and African political systems. He has extensive experience in teaching, research supervision, and scholarly publication in the fields of governance and policy analysis. His research interests include traditional leadership systems, local governance reforms, and state-society relations in African contexts.

The second author holds a PhD and is a Lecturer in the Department of Political Science and Public Administration. His research and teaching areas include public administration, decentralised governance, and institutional development. He has contributed to academic scholarship through publications and conference presentations, with a particular interest in governance reforms, public sector management, and the role of traditional institutions in contemporary political systems.

The third author is a PhD student in the Department of Political Science and Public Administration. His research focuses on governance, decentralisation, and the evolving role of traditional leadership in African political systems. He is actively engaged in academic research and contributes to scholarly work through literature analysis and participation in research projects within the department.

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