

Traditional Culture and Modern Life: Values, Functions, and the Dynamics of Inheritance in the Global South

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Abstract

Traditional cultures carry values, norms, knowledge systems and practices that shape identity, social order and sustainable livelihoods. This paper examines the values and functions of traditional culture during modernization in countries of the Global South, analyses supports and obstacles to the inheritance and development of local culture under modernization pressures, and draws lessons from historical and contemporary examples in Nigeria, Africa, and China. Using a critical-synthesis methodology of scholarship and policy documents, the paper argues that traditional culture is neither simply an obstacle to modernization nor automatically preserved by it; rather, the relationship is path-dependent and contingent on policy choices, economic incentives, civil-society action and modes of cultural adaptation. Recommendations encourage culturally embedded development, legal protection for intangible cultural heritage, community-led cultural industries, and educational curricula that integrate indigenous knowledge.

Keywords: traditional culture, modernization, Global South, cultural inheritance, indigenous knowledge, cultural policy

Introduction

Scholars of cultural policy have long interrogated the complex relationship between modernization and local traditions, asking not only how modern processes transform cultural forms but also how those traditions can persist, adapt, or be repurposed within changing social landscapes. Modernization, expressed through rapid urban growth, widespread technology adoption, institutional reform, and deeper market integration, does more than alter material conditions; it reorders value priorities, social norms, and everyday practices. At the same time, these processes open new avenues for cultural creativity and economic mobilisation: digital platforms, urban festivals, creative industries, and heritage tourism can all become vehicles for reinvigorating traditional expression, monetising cultural skills, and extending the reach of local knowledge (Inglehart & Baker, 2000; Korotayev et al., 2019). Thus, modernization is not a unidirectional erasure of the past but a multi-scalar negotiation in which continuity and change coexist, sometimes uneasily.

In Global South contexts this negotiation takes place against a backdrop of historical ruptures and structural inequalities that complicate straightforward narratives of cultural resilience. Colonial

encounters systematically devalued indigenous epistemologies and legal systems, reshaping educational curricula, governance structures, and resource distributions in ways that continue to influence cultural vitality today (Onyango Ouma, 2025; Nwobodo, 2021). Moreover, uneven development trajectories, where urban elites access the gains of modernization while rural and peripheral communities are marginalised, create differential capacities to preserve or capitalise on cultural assets. Globalization further intensifies these dynamics by introducing powerful cultural and economic pressures: transnational media can delegitimise local forms for younger generations even as global markets offer new revenue streams for cultural producers. Consequently, cultural policy in the Global South must navigate layered tensions: promoting cultural continuity and community agency while ensuring equitable access to the benefits of modernization and guarding against commodification or cultural appropriation.

The International Journal of Cultural Policy aims to bridge the theoretical and the practical, publishing work that connects conceptual insight to actionable policy. This manuscript responds to that call by synthesising interdisciplinary literature with illustrative cases to offer evidence-informed guidance for policy-makers and cultural practitioners. Its objectives are threefold. First, it identifies the core values and social functions that traditional culture continues to fulfil amid modernization, including identity formation, informal governance, ecological knowledge, and cultural economies. Second, it analyses the enabling conditions and constraints, legal recognition, market linkages, education, community agency, colonial legacies, and neoliberal pressures, that affect how traditions are transmitted and transformed across generations. Third, it translates those insights into policy prescriptions aimed at aligning cultural preservation with inclusive development: legal pluralism with rights safeguards, investment in community-led cultural industries, curricular integration of indigenous knowledge, and participatory documentation and media strategies that amplify local voices while protecting cultural integrity.

Methodological approach

This paper uses a critical-synthesis method, bringing together conceptual scholarship, cross-national value studies, and targeted sectoral examples to construct a transdisciplinary analysis. It systematically reviews published academic work and policy documents (see References), compares theoretical perspectives on modernization and tradition, and integrates illustrative cases to ground abstract claims. Rather than producing new primary data, the study triangulates existing evidence to identify patterns, causal mechanisms, and policy levers relevant to cultural policy, development studies, and heritage management. This approach highlights convergences and contradictions across the literature and generates evidence-informed recommendations for sustaining traditional culture in modernizing contexts.

Theoretical framing: modernity, values, and tradition

Classic scholarship on cultural change outlines a dual dynamic in which modernization simultaneously transforms value systems and preserves elements of tradition. Large-scale comparative work suggests that processes associated with modernization, industrialization, rising education, and economic security, tend to shift societies toward more secular-rational orientations and greater emphasis on self-expression (Inglehart & Baker, 2000). Yet these broad tendencies coexist with strong continuities: cultural practices, institutional arrangements, and normative repertoires often persist because they are embedded in long-standing social structures, reproduced through institutions, and reinforced by path-dependent legacies (Korotayev et al., 2019). Thus,

modernization should be seen less as a linear replacement of the old by the new and more as a reconfiguration in which continuity and change operate simultaneously.

This ambivalence is particularly pronounced in Global South contexts where historical ruptures, most notably colonialism, have reshaped indigenous knowledge systems, legal orders, and educational hierarchies. From a postcolonial vantage, scholars argue that colonial interventions disrupted preexisting epistemologies and delegitimised local authority structures, creating a fraught field for later cultural policy and heritage work (Onyango Ouma, 2025; Nwobodo, 2021). The result is a layered terrain: while some traditional elements survive and adapt, others have been marginalised or instrumentalised in ways that complicate straightforward revivalist strategies. Comparative analyses therefore stress the importance of context, historical trajectories, institutional arrangements, and policy choices, to explain why similar modernization pressures yield different cultural outcomes across societies (Korotayev et al., 2019).

Values and functions of traditional culture in modernization

Within this complex landscape, traditional culture continues to fulfil multiple interlocking roles, social, political, ecological, and economic, that remain salient during modernization. First, traditions supply identity and social cohesion. Rituals, local languages, and customary norms create symbolic capital that anchors collective identity and facilitates mutual recognition among group members. This symbolic capital is not merely expressive; it underpins cooperative behavior and collective action, and can be intentionally mobilised through cultural policy to foster social inclusion and plural forms of citizenship (Korotayev et al., 2019).

Second, traditional institutions frequently provide pragmatic governance functions. Customary authorities and community-based dispute-resolution mechanisms offer accessible, often quicker remedies than formal courts, particularly in settings where state capacity is thin. Recognising and institutionalising plural legal orders, while safeguarding rights, can therefore reinforce both cultural continuity and effective local governance (Iber, 2022).

Third, indigenous knowledge systems embody durable ecological and livelihood wisdom. Centuries of locally adapted agricultural practices, pastoral mobility strategies, and resource-management techniques contain empirically grounded responses to environmental variability. Policies that value and integrate indigenous epistemologies can strengthen climate resilience, biodiversity conservation, and food security in ways that technocratic, top-down interventions often cannot achieve (Smith, 2019; Matemba & Sulu, 2024).

Traditions are economically productive when linked to markets through thoughtful policy interventions. Cultural goods, culinary products, handicrafts, music, and festivals, can generate income, employment, and local entrepreneurship if supported by quality standards, branding, intellectual property protections, and market access. The modernization of traditional product processes demonstrates how technical innovation and regulatory alignment can scale culturally rooted products for contemporary markets without necessarily erasing their cultural core. Cultural policy that fosters cultural entrepreneurship and builds institutional supports thus enables traditions to be adapted profitably while preserving social meaning (Mitchell, 2016; Lee & Herold, 2018).

Taken together, these dimensions show that tradition is both resource and institution: it supplies identity and governance, sustains livelihoods, and can be a vehicle for economic development. The

challenge for cultural policy is to design interventions that recognise these multiple functions, protect communities' agency over cultural assets, and create conditions in which tradition and modernity reinforce rather than undermine one another.

Traditional moral frameworks and everyday socialization remain powerful shapers of conduct, expectations, and community norms even as schooling systems expand and mass media proliferate. These moral economies, embedded in rites of passage, kinship obligations, customary sanctions, and everyday practices, structure how people interpret obligations, rights, and reputational incentives, thereby influencing behavior in both private and public spheres (Inglehart & Baker, 2000). Mass schooling and global media can erode some localized norms by promoting alternative worldviews, yet they also create opportunities to codify, transmit, and adapt traditional values within new institutional forms. When formal education and media platforms deliberately incorporate local moral vocabularies and narrative forms, they become conduits for intergenerational transmission rather than engines of wholesale replacement (Pham, Dung, & Ngo, 2022).

Intergenerational transmission operates through multiple, complementary mechanisms. Informal apprenticeship, family storytelling, ritual participation, seasonal work patterns, and language use in domestic and communal contexts sustain tacit skills and moral knowledge. Public festivals, communal labor exchanges, and local governance rituals provide repeated contexts where younger cohorts observe, practice, and internalize normative repertoires. Where these practices are attenuated, by urban migration, labor-market pressures, or stigmatizing discourses, targeted policy interventions that reproduce meaningful practice opportunities can slow knowledge attrition. Documentation and curricular codification can also buttress living transmission, provided these processes are community-led and sensitive to context so they do not freeze dynamic traditions into static museum pieces (Onyango Ouma, 2025).

Institutional Supports for Cultural Inheritance and Adaptive Development

Several institutional supports have proven effective at promoting constructive inheritance and adaptive development of local culture. First, legal recognition and protection for intangible cultural heritage and customary institutions create formal space for traditions to be practised and negotiated. Such recognition must be rights-sensitive: it should protect communal cultural expression while preventing customary norms from undermining individual rights, particularly of women, children, and marginalized groups (Onyango Ouma, 2025). Rights-aware legal pluralism can therefore both legitimise cultural practices and provide a framework for internal reform when practices conflict with human-rights norms.

Second, linking cultural producers to markets through technical assistance, quality control, product standardization, branding strategies, and intellectual property protection, can transform crafts, foods, and performance arts into sustainable livelihoods without necessarily eroding their cultural core. The modernization of traditional product processes demonstrates how technical interventions and regulatory alignment enable scale and wider distribution while preserving identity elements that confer market differentiation (Mitchell, 2016). Importantly, market integration should be accompanied by benefit-sharing mechanisms that return value to communities rather than external intermediaries.

Third, education and curriculum integration provide institutionalized pathways for transmission. Incorporating indigenous knowledge, local histories, and languages into school curricula not only affirms cultural dignity but also produces measurable social benefits, improving enrolment, retention, and relevance of schooling in local contexts (Matemba & Sulu, 2024). Educational strategies that combine classroom learning with community-based practice (e.g., school gardens, artisan apprenticeships, and ritual literacy projects) create repeated practice sites where moral and technical knowledge are learned together.

Community agency, diaspora engagement, and participatory documentation are pivotal. Diaspora networks offer remittances, market access, and political advocacy that can sustain local cultural initiatives; community-led digital archiving preserves materials for future use while retaining control over access and interpretation (Bull & Banik, 2025). These efforts must be governed by principles of local ownership, consent, and cultural integrity to avoid the commodification and depersonalization that can accompany externally driven heritage projects (VO, 2023).

Together, these supports, legal recognition, market-sensitive capacity-building, education integration, and community-led documentation, form an interconnected architecture that enables traditions to persist, adapt, and contribute materially and morally to contemporary life. Policymakers should prioritize interventions that amplify community agency, ensure equitable economic returns, and integrate tradition into public institutions in ways that respect both cultural continuity and individual rights.

Preserving and adapting traditional culture amid modernization faces a cluster of interlocking obstacles that are both historical and contemporary. First, colonial legacies continue to shape institutional arrangements in many Global South countries. Colonial legal and educational systems frequently marginalized indigenous authorities and knowledge, embedding biases that still disadvantage customary institutions and languages. Reversing these effects requires more than symbolic recognition: it demands targeted policy corrections, legal pluralism that genuinely empowers customary systems, curricular reform that validates indigenous epistemologies, and resource reallocation to repair structural imbalances (Onyango Ouma, 2025; Nwobodo, 2021).

Second, commodification and tourism can erode cultural meaning when market logics dominate how traditions are presented. Unmediated commodification often reduces rich ritual, craft, or performance practices to consumable spectacles, redirecting economic benefits to external intermediaries and weakening the social functions those practices once served. Without community governance and equitable benefit-sharing mechanisms, cultural tourism risks hollowing out practices even as it generates revenue (VO, 2023).

Third, rapid urbanization and generational change accelerate cultural discontinuities. Young people moving to cities are exposed to global media and urban lifestyles that can delegitimize local norms; meanwhile, language attrition and the loss of craft skills occur when apprenticeship and community contexts are interrupted. Policy must therefore move beyond rural preservationist models to include urban diasporic communities, supporting platforms where migrant populations can practice, teach, and reconfigure traditions in city settings (Njeru et al., 2017).

Fourth, prevailing development paradigms, especially neoliberal models favoring extractive industries, pose existential threats to cultural landscapes and traditional livelihoods. Large-scale resource extraction, commercial agriculture, and infrastructure projects can displace communities,

fragment social networks, and destroy the ecological bases of customary practices. Integrative development strategies that balance economic objectives with cultural and environmental stewardship are needed to prevent irreversible losses (Amilcar, 2025; Wobo & Orji, 2021).

Finally, media influences and shifting normative frames exert subtle but powerful pressure on identity. Transnational media and homogenizing consumption patterns can stigmatize local customs and aesthetic preferences, provoking identity dilemmas among youth and encouraging cultural mimicry. Countervailing measures, support for culturally plural media content, public broadcasting of indigenous languages, and investment in local creative industries, can help rebalance cultural visibility and valorise local forms (VO, 2023; Angkasawati, 2024).

Together, these obstacles point to the limits of piecemeal policy. Effective responses must be systemic, combining legal reform, culturally sensitive economic policy, urban-inclusive cultural programming, and media strategies that amplify local voices. Critically, interventions should prioritize community agency: policies are most legitimate and durable when they enable communities to set terms for heritage use, negotiate market relations, and govern access to cultural knowledge. Only by addressing structural legacies and current market and media pressures in tandem can cultural policy prevent erosion and foster adaptive, community-led cultural continuity.

Illustrative examples and lessons

Empirical research on indigenous agricultural and pastoral systems in sub-Saharan Africa reveals deeply embedded, context-specific knowledge that underpins resilience. Traditional cropping calendars, seed-saving techniques, intercropping strategies and mobile pastoralist practices are not relics but adaptive systems evolved to cope with variable climates, pest pressures and complex landscape mosaics (Smith, 2019). Where policy frameworks recognise and strengthen these practices, through measures such as seed-sovereignty initiatives, community-managed pasture regimes, and locally tailored extension services, communities experience improved food security and greater ecological sustainability (Matemba & Sulu, 2024). Crucially, these interventions succeed when they treat indigenous knowledge as empirical expertise rather than folklore to be replaced; they work best when communities lead design and implementation so that policy supports existing adaptive logics instead of imposing one-size-fits-all technical fixes.

The modernization of traditional products offers a complementary set of lessons about value creation without cultural erasure. Case studies of how traditional food and beverage processes were industrially adapted demonstrate that technical innovation, quality control, and regulatory alignment can allow culturally rooted goods to reach wider markets while retaining distinctive identity markers (Mitchell, 2016). Transferring this model to Global South settings requires more than technology transfer: it demands institution-building (cooperatives, producer associations), access to finance, training in product standards and packaging, and protections for geographical indications or other forms of intellectual property that secure community benefits. When these elements are combined with marketing strategies that foreground cultural provenance, producers can capture higher value while maintaining social meaning around production practices.

Comparative insight underscores that modernization is neither unilinear nor uniform. Large-scale value surveys and cross-national analyses show that some societies modernize ‘retentively’, adapting institutions and technologies while preserving strong family-oriented norms and communal practices (Inglehart & Baker, 2000; Korotayev et al., 2019). East Asian examples

illustrate how longstanding moral economies and institutional forms can be reconfigured rather than discarded during rapid economic change. By contrast, many African societies bear the imprint of colonial disruption, which altered legal pluralism, education, and land relations, producing distinctive constraints and opportunities for cultural adaptation (Onyango Ouma, 2025; Nwobodo, 2021). These comparative patterns imply that policy prescriptions must be historically informed and sensitive to institutional legacies; borrowing models without attention to local trajectories risks producing superficial or harmful outcomes.

From these examples several practical lessons emerge. First, treat indigenous systems as knowledge assets and co-design interventions with local actors. Second, pair technical modernization with institutional supports, collectives, IP protection, market access, to ensure equitable value capture. Third, tailor policy to historical and institutional contexts rather than pursuing universal templates. Together, these approaches increase the likelihood that tradition and market-oriented modernization will reinforce, rather than undermine, each other.

Policy recommendations for cultural policy practitioners

Effective cultural policy must move beyond ad hoc protections and toward an integrated strategy that recognizes traditional culture as both a living common and a resource for sustainable development. First, legal recognition and rights-sensitive frameworks are essential. Statutes that formally acknowledge intangible cultural heritage and customary institutions can create secure spaces for practice and negotiation, but they must be designed with safeguards to protect individual rights, especially those of women, children, and marginalized groups, so that recognition does not become a license for harmful practices (Onyango Ouma, 2025). Legal pluralism that empowers communities while connecting them to national rights regimes helps reconcile communal custodianship with universal protections.

Second, community governance and ownership should sit at the centre of any intervention. Community trusts, cooperatives, and cultural councils that govern documentation, access, and benefit-sharing limit external capture and preserve the social meaning of cultural forms (Bull & Banik, 2025). Such institutions are also better placed to negotiate partnerships with private-sector actors, ensuring that revenues from tourism or cultural markets return to local custodians rather than leaking to intermediaries.

Third, market integration must be paired with capacity-building and fair value capture. Technical assistance in quality control, product standards, branding, and access to finance enables producers to scale culturally rooted goods for contemporary markets without eroding identity markers. Intellectual property regimes and geographic indications tailored to communal forms can protect provenance and secure collective benefits, while producer cooperatives can ensure equitable distribution of gains (Mitchell, 2016; Lee & Herold, 2018).

Fourth, education is a strategic lever for intergenerational transmission. Embedding indigenous knowledge, local languages, arts, and practical skills into formal curricula, and complementing classroom learning with community apprenticeships and experiential projects, strengthens cultural continuity and increases the relevance of schooling for local communities (Matemba & Sulu, 2024). Such curricular reforms signal respect for local epistemologies and create institutionalized pathways for transmission.

Fifth, policy must address urban diasporas and media ecosystems. Rapid urbanization disperses cultural practices into new settings; urban-inclusive cultural programmes, community centres, and digital platforms can sustain practice among migrant populations (Njeru et al., 2017). At the same time, public and community media initiatives that promote multilingual, culturally plural content can counteract homogenizing global media pressures and support local creative industries (VO, 2023; Angkasawati, 2024).

Sixth, development planning should integrate cultural and ecological stewardship. Cultural-impact assessments for infrastructure and extractive projects and incentives for place-based development help preserve cultural landscapes and livelihoods vulnerable to displacement (Amilcar, 2025; Wobo & Orji, 2021). Finally, participatory documentation, ethical archiving, and longitudinal research are necessary to monitor outcomes, evaluate interventions, and refine policy over time; such efforts must be community-led and consent-based to avoid commodification (Bull & Banik, 2025; Korotayev et al., 2019).

A coherent policy architecture, legal recognition, community governance, market supports, curricular integration, urban and media strategies, environmentally sensitive planning, and sustained research, can enable traditions to adapt and contribute to inclusive modernization. Crucially, these measures succeed only when communities hold decision-making power and when policy design is historically informed, context-sensitive, and committed to equitable benefit sharing.

Conclusion

Traditional culture offers functional resources, social cohesion, governance capacity, livelihood knowledge, and cultural goods, that remain relevant during modernization. Whether traditions are preserved, transformed, or eroded depends on institutional choices, market incentives, and community agency. Cultural policy that foregrounds community rights, supports cultural industries, integrates indigenous knowledge into education, and aligns with sustainable development can enable traditions to contribute meaningfully to inclusive modernity in the Global South.

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