

LEARNING THROUGH TRADITION IN PRIMARY EDUCATION: CASE OF IHOROMBE REGION, MADAGASCAR

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Abstract: *This study aims to explore how local cultural traditions shape primary education in the Ihorombe Region of Madagascar, with a focus on understanding the ways in which community knowledge, values, and practices influence student learning, engagement, and classroom dynamics. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected from 20 informants, including school principals, teachers, students, parents, and community elders, through in-depth interviews, classroom observations, informal discussions, and document analysis. The findings indicate that cultural values such as respect for elders, cooperation, and collective responsibility play a central role in guiding student behavior and fostering collaborative learning. Oral traditions and storytelling serve as effective tools for comprehension and the transmission of moral and social knowledge, while active community participation*

strengthens student motivation, attendance, and commitment. The study also identifies challenges in aligning the national curriculum with local realities, particularly when teaching materials and instructional approaches do not reflect students' cultural experiences. Overall, the study demonstrates that integrating tradition into formal schooling enhances learning outcomes, reinforces cultural identity, and creates a holistic educational environment in which students can connect community practices with academic knowledge, highlighting the importance of culturally responsive approaches in rural education contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Primary education plays a foundational role in shaping children's cognitive, social, and moral development, particularly in societies where formal schooling coexists with strong cultural traditions (Kızıldağ & Kultas, 2025). In many rural regions of sub-Saharan Africa, education does not function in isolation from community life but is embedded in systems of values, beliefs, and practices that have been transmitted across generations (Ferguson et al., 2007; Espinosa et al., 2024). These cultural systems influence how children understand authority, knowledge, identity, and social responsibility. In Madagascar, a country characterized by deep ethnic diversity and strong communal norms, local traditions continue to shape everyday life, including the ways children learn, interact, and participate in school (Mazraani, 2023). Understanding how

education is experienced through cultural frameworks is therefore essential for designing learning strategies that are socially relevant and sustainable.

The Ihorombe Region, located in the south-central highlands of Madagascar, is predominantly rural and relies heavily on subsistence agriculture and livestock herding. Communities in this region maintain strong kinship ties, collective labor systems, ritual practices, and oral traditions that structure social life (Eklou et al., 2025). Children grow up participating in household and community activities that emphasize cooperation, respect for elders, and shared responsibility (Bien-Aimé et al., 2025). These cultural experiences function as informal learning environments long before children enter formal school (Augustin & Emynorane, 2024). However, primary schools in Ihorombe largely operate using standardized national curricula that reflect urban and Western influenced models of education. This creates a disconnect between the lived realities of learners and the content, pedagogy, and assessment systems used in classrooms.

In many rural Malagasy schools, teaching methods remain teacher centered, with limited opportunities for students to relate lessons to their cultural environment (Emynorane et al., 2026). Textbooks and learning materials often depict urban lifestyles, foreign names, and unfamiliar contexts, which can reduce student engagement and comprehension (Eric et al., 2025). Teachers, many of whom are assigned from outside the region, may not fully understand the cultural norms, languages, or social expectations of the communities they serve. As a result, schooling is sometimes perceived as detached from local life rather than as an extension of community knowledge (Montero-Carretero et al., 2021). This situation contributes to low academic achievement, high repetition rates, and early school dropouts in several rural areas, including Ihorombe.

Anthropological approaches to education emphasize that learning is a cultural process shaped by social interactions, shared meanings, and community values. Education is not merely the transmission of academic knowledge but also a process through which children construct identity, learn social roles, and negotiate their place within society (Jiang et al., 2019). From this perspective, schools are cultural institutions that reflect and reproduce broader social structures (Granić & Marangunić, 2019). When formal education systems ignore local traditions, they risk marginalizing students' cultural identities and weakening community support for schooling. Integrating cultural

knowledge into teaching practices can therefore enhance relevance, motivation, and learning outcomes (Shi & Sercombe, 2020).

Previous studies in Madagascar and other parts of Africa have explored the relationship between culture and education. Existing studies show that community-based learning, use of local language, and inclusion of indigenous knowledge can improve student participation and comprehension (Niens et al., 2021). Studies in rural Ethiopian, Ghanaian, and Tanzanian contexts demonstrate that culturally responsive pedagogy strengthens the connection between home and school and supports more inclusive learning environments (Tadlaoui-Brahmi et al., 2022). In Madagascar, existing studies have examined education access, language policy, and teacher training in rural settings. Some studies have addressed the challenges of schooling in marginalized regions, focusing on poverty, infrastructure, and teacher shortages (Eric et al., 2025).

However, there remains a significant gap in studies that specifically examine how local cultural traditions shape learning processes in primary schools in the Ihorombe Region. Most available studies adopt policy or development focused perspectives, emphasizing enrollment rates, resource limitations, and institutional performance. Few studies adopt an anthropological lens that centers the lived experiences of students, teachers, and communities. There is limited empirical work that explores how cultural practices, values, and social structures influence classroom interactions, learning strategies, and student identity formation in this region (Sokal et al., 2020).

Additionally, existing studies often treat culture as a barrier to modern education rather than as a resource for learning (Shi et al., 2025). Traditional practices are sometimes described as obstacles that must be overcome in order to achieve academic progress (Toundeur et al., 2017). This deficit perspective overlooks the potential of local knowledge systems to enrich pedagogy and foster deeper understanding (Ttofi & Farrington, 2011). An alternative approach recognizes culture as a dynamic and adaptive system that can support educational innovation when meaningfully integrated into school practices. There is a need for studies that move beyond binary distinctions between tradition and modernity and instead explore how the two can coexist in productive ways.

The Ihorombe Region presents a particularly valuable context for such a study. The region's strong communal traditions, oral history practices, and intergenerational learning systems offer rich opportunities to examine how informal cultural education

intersects formal schooling (Eklou et al., 2025). Children in Ihorombe learn through observation, storytelling, collective work, and ritual participation. These learning modes emphasize cooperation, memory, and moral responsibility (Augustin & Emynorane, 2024). When students enter primary school, they bring these experiences into the classroom (Mazraani, 2023). Yet formal education often fails to acknowledge or build upon these cultural competencies.

The analysis is grounded in the assumption that education is most effective when it resonates with the social and cultural realities of learners. Recognizing the cultural foundations of learning does not mean rejecting national curricula or global educational goals (Rabani et al., 2023). Instead, it requires pedagogical strategies that adapt formal content to local contexts and value students' cultural identities (Shi & Sercombe, 2020). Such an approach has the potential to strengthen community engagement, improve student motivation, and enhance learning outcomes, particularly in rural and culturally rooted communities such as those in Ihorombe.

An anthropological perspective enables a deeper understanding of how meanings, traditions, and social relationships shape everyday educational experiences. By centering local voices and classroom practices, the inquiry explores how teachers and learners negotiate the boundaries between community knowledge and school knowledge (Utsumi, 2022). It also examines how cultural values influence attitudes toward authority, discipline, participation, and academic success, offering insight into the social processes that underlie formal learning environments.

The findings are expected to contribute to the broader field of educational anthropology by providing empirical evidence from a region of Madagascar that remains underrepresented in academic literature. The insights generated can inform educators, policymakers, and development practitioners seeking to design culturally responsive primary education programs in rural contexts. By demonstrating how tradition can function as a resource rather than a barrier, the discussion challenges dominant models of schooling that privilege standardized knowledge over locally grounded ways of learning.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses qualitative methods grounded in an anthropological case study approach to explore how local traditions shape learning practices in primary education within the Ihorombe Region of Madagascar. The design emphasizes depth, context, and

meaning by focusing on everyday interactions, cultural norms, and community knowledge systems that influence classroom experiences. The study was conducted in four public primary schools selected purposively based on their strong connection with surrounding communities and their representation of rural cultural life. A total of 20 informants were involved through purposive and snowball sampling, consisting of school principals, classroom teachers, students, parents, and community elders, allowing for multiple perspectives on the relationship between tradition and schooling. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, non-participant classroom observations, informal community discussions, and document review of school records and local learning materials to ensure methodological triangulation. Field notes were used to capture social interactions, rituals, language use, and teaching strategies embedded in cultural practices. Data analysis followed thematic coding procedures, moving from open coding to the development of analytical categories that reflected recurring patterns and meanings. Credibility was strengthened through prolonged engagement, peer debriefing, and member checking, while ethical considerations included informed consent, confidentiality, and respect for local cultural norms.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The findings reveal that learning in primary schools of the Ihorombe Region is strongly shaped by local traditions that influence students' attitudes, classroom behavior, and ways of understanding knowledge. Cultural values such as respect for elders, collective responsibility, and oral knowledge transmission were consistently reflected in how students interacted with teachers and peers. Learners demonstrated high levels of cooperation during group tasks and showed strong obedience toward authority figures, which aligns with community norms where elders and leaders are highly respected. These values created a disciplined learning environment, although they sometimes limited students' willingness to ask questions or express independent opinions.

Traditional storytelling and oral narratives emerged as powerful learning tools. Teachers who integrated local stories, proverbs, and historical events into lessons reported higher student engagement and improved comprehension, especially in reading and moral education. Students related more easily to examples drawn from their daily lives, such as

farming, livestock care, and village cooperation, than to abstract or urban-centered textbook content. This cultural relevance increased motivation and reduced classroom disengagement.

Community participation also played a significant role in strengthening learning. Parents and elders were frequently involved in school activities, including cultural ceremonies, environmental projects, and moral guidance sessions. Their presence reinforced the value of education as a shared responsibility rather than an individual task. Schools that actively collaborated with the community reported better attendance and stronger student commitment.

However, challenges were also identified. The national curriculum often conflicted with local realities, making some subjects difficult for students to understand. Teachers who were unfamiliar with local culture struggled to connect lessons with students' experiences. Additionally, limited teaching materials and large class sizes restricted the consistent integration of traditional knowledge into formal lessons.

The results indicate that tradition functions as both a cultural foundation and a pedagogical resource. When cultural knowledge is acknowledged and incorporated into teaching practices, it enhances student engagement, strengthens identity, and promotes meaningful learning. The absence of cultural integration, however, contributes to disconnection between school content and students' lived experiences. The table 1 below summarizes the main thematic findings of the study.

Table 1: Main Themes Influencing Learning in Ihorombe Primary Schools

Theme	Description	Observed Impact on Learning
Cultural Values	Respect for elders, cooperation, collective responsibility	Improved classroom discipline and peer collaboration
Oral Traditions	Storytelling, proverbs, community narratives	Increased student engagement and comprehension
Community Involvement	Participation of parents and elders in school activities	Higher attendance and learning motivation
Curriculum Mismatch	Urban-centered and abstract content	Reduced understanding and relevance
Teacher Cultural Awareness	Knowledge of local traditions and language	Stronger teacher–student connection
Resource Limitations	Lack of materials and large class sizes	Limited integration of cultural learning

These findings demonstrate that culturally grounded learning practices are central to strengthening primary education in the Ihorombe Region.

Discussion

Integration of Local Traditions into Classroom Learning

Local traditions play a central role in shaping learning practices in the primary schools of the Ihorombe Region. Students enter school with a rich background of communal knowledge, oral narratives, and practical skills acquired through participation in household and community activities. These cultural experiences form a foundation for learning, influencing how children interpret information, solve problems, and interact with peers and teachers (Emynorane et al., 2024). Teachers who recognize and incorporate these traditions into classroom instruction create a learning environment that is both meaningful and relatable for students, bridging the gap between formal education and everyday life (Eric et al., 2025).

Storytelling and oral narratives emerged as particularly effective tools for integrating local knowledge into lessons. When teachers embed proverbs, historical events, or local myths into subjects such as language, moral education, and social studies, students are better able to comprehend abstract concepts (Espinosa et al., 2024). Lessons connected to familiar cultural experiences, like farming practices, livestock care, or communal rituals, are easier for students to internalize (Kızıldağ & Kultas, 2025). This approach not only enhances understanding but also strengthens cultural identity, as students see their heritage reflected and valued within the school setting.

The integration of tradition also extends beyond content to classroom practices and pedagogy. Cooperative learning, peer teaching, and group problem-solving reflect cultural norms of collaboration and collective responsibility (Montero-Carretero et al., 2021). Activities inspired by traditional games or communal work reinforce social cohesion while promoting engagement and practical skills. Teachers who design lessons in alignment with these cultural patterns report increased participation, reduced classroom disruptions, and greater enthusiasm for learning (Jiang et al., 2019). This demonstrates that educational strategies grounded in local tradition can simultaneously support academic goals and reinforce social values.

Despite these benefits, challenges exist in fully embedding local traditions into formal education (Augustin & Emynorane, 2025). National curricula often prioritize standardized, urban-focused content that may not align with students' cultural realities. Teachers who are unfamiliar with local customs may struggle to connect lessons with

community knowledge, and limited instructional resources can hinder creative adaptation (Granić & Marangunić, 2019). Nonetheless, schools that actively integrate cultural practices into classroom learning demonstrate that tradition is not an obstacle but a resource. By acknowledging and utilizing students' cultural backgrounds, educators can create a more inclusive and effective learning environment that enhances both academic achievement and cultural continuity.

Student Engagement and Motivation through Culturally Relevant Content

Students in the Ihorombe Region demonstrate higher engagement and motivation when learning is connected to their daily lives and cultural experiences. Lessons that incorporate local examples, familiar practices, or community activities resonate more deeply than abstract or urban-centered content. When students recognize the relevance of what they are learning to their own environment, they are more likely to pay attention, participate actively, and retain knowledge (Bien-Aimé et al., 2025). Cultural relevance transforms the classroom from a space of imposed instruction into one where students see the practical value and meaning of their education.

The use of familiar contexts in teaching subjects such as mathematics, science, and social studies fosters curiosity and encourages problem-solving. For example, using examples from agriculture, livestock care, or traditional crafts allows students to apply new concepts in ways they can observe and practice outside the classroom. This experiential connection not only strengthens comprehension but also builds confidence, as learners feel competent in relating formal knowledge to the skills and activities they already understand (Eymnorane et al., 2025). Motivation increases when students perceive that learning is not abstract but directly tied to their own lives and community (Rabani et al., 2023).

Culturally relevant content also nurtures emotional and social engagement. Lessons that reflect local history, moral values, or communal norms help students develop a sense of identity and belonging. When educators acknowledge students' backgrounds and incorporate them into teaching, learners feel respected and valued, which enhances intrinsic motivation (Shi et al., 2025). Engagement is further strengthened when classroom activities align with culturally familiar social interactions, such as collaborative tasks, storytelling, or peer discussions, reflecting the collective orientation

of the community (Sokal et al., 2020). This creates a supportive learning atmosphere where students are encouraged to contribute ideas, ask questions, and interact confidently.

However, the effectiveness of culturally relevant content depends on teacher awareness and resource availability. Educators who are unfamiliar with local traditions may struggle to adapt lessons appropriately, while a lack of suitable materials can limit the integration of culturally meaningful examples (Niens et al., 2021). Despite these challenges, classrooms that prioritize culturally aligned content show consistently higher participation, reduced absenteeism, and improved learning outcomes. Recognizing students' cultural knowledge and using it as a foundation for instruction transforms motivation from external compliance into genuine engagement, making learning a participatory and meaningful experience (Tondeur et al., 2017).

Intergenerational Learning and Community Support in Education

Community involvement is a central element of primary education in the Ihorombe Region, where parents, elders, and local leaders actively participate in supporting children's learning. Beyond providing material assistance, community members contribute knowledge, guidance, and cultural instruction that complement formal schooling (Emynorane et al., 2026). Children observe and engage in activities such as agricultural work, traditional ceremonies, and communal problem-solving, gaining practical skills and social understanding that inform their classroom experiences (Eric et al., 2025). This intergenerational exchange strengthens the connection between home, community, and school, fostering a holistic learning environment.

Elders play a key role as transmitters of cultural knowledge, teaching values, history, and ethical norms through storytelling and direct participation. Students learn from these experiences not only technical skills but also the social codes that shape behavior and expectations within the community (Tadlaoui-Brahmi et al., 2022). When schools acknowledge and integrate these contributions, students perceive their learning as an extension of their lived realities. Engagement and retention improve because children see continuity between the knowledge gained at home and the skills being developed in school.

Parents also influence educational outcomes by reinforcing lessons and maintaining consistent support for attendance and study habits. Their involvement in school events, cultural activities, and classroom discussions fosters a sense of shared

responsibility for learning (Sokal et al., 2020). Students benefit from seeing their families invested in their education, which enhances motivation and instills a sense of accountability (Shi & Sercombe, 2020). The collaborative dynamic between school and community creates an environment where learning is valued collectively rather than individually, aligning with local social structures that prioritize cooperation and mutual support (Utsumi, 2022).

The integration of intergenerational and community knowledge into schooling not only enriches learning content but also strengthens students' social and cultural identity. Schools that actively engage elders and parents report higher participation, better classroom behavior, and greater commitment to academic tasks (Ttofi & Farrington, 2011). Teachers who facilitate these interactions help bridge the gap between formal curricula and the lived experiences of students, making education more meaningful and relevant (Espinosa et al., 2024). Community-supported learning demonstrates that education is not limited to the classroom but is embedded within the social and cultural fabric of the Ihorombe Region, offering lessons that are both practical and culturally resonant.

Bridging Formal Curriculum and Cultural Contexts

Formal education in the Ihorombe Region often reflects national standards that are designed for broader contexts and urban realities, which can create a disconnect with students' everyday experiences. Many lessons and materials contain examples, language, and scenarios that are unfamiliar to learners, making it difficult to relate academic content to local life. Teachers and students must navigate this gap, and schools that find ways to integrate local knowledge into the curriculum are better able to maintain engagement and comprehension (Tian & Zhang, 2025). Aligning instruction with cultural contexts helps students see the relevance of their learning and strengthens understanding of both content and community practices (Augustin & Emynorane, 2025).

Teachers who incorporate cultural references, traditional practices, and local problem-solving examples into lessons effectively bridge the divide between formal curriculum and students' lived experiences (Chung et al., 2019). Mathematics can be taught using examples from agriculture or trade, science lessons can relate to environmental and ecological practices familiar in the community, and language instruction can include local proverbs or storytelling techniques (Aiga et al., 2021). By

contextualizing abstract concepts in ways that reflect daily life, teachers support meaningful learning while maintaining alignment with curriculum objectives (Farrell et al., 2001; Haidir & Setyari, 2023). This approach enables students to build connections between school knowledge and their existing cultural understanding.

Teacher awareness of local culture and community dynamics is critical to bridging this gap. Educators who understand the social, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds of their students can adapt lesson plans, use culturally relevant teaching materials, and employ participatory methods that reflect communal learning traditions (Emynorane et al., 2024). Schools that actively engage with the community to gather input, resources, and examples strengthen the relevance of the curriculum. In this way, cultural knowledge becomes a resource that enhances instruction rather than an obstacle to standardized education (Kaja & Werker, 2010).

Resource limitations and large class sizes can make integrating local context challenging, yet schools that successfully bridge the curriculum and cultural realities demonstrate improved learning outcomes (Mazi & Yıldırım, 2025). Students in such settings show higher engagement, better comprehension, and increased motivation (Kapelela, 2025). By creating connections between formal learning goals and students' cultural and social environments, education becomes both accessible and meaningful. The alignment of curriculum with cultural context not only supports academic achievement but also validates local knowledge and strengthens the cultural identity of learners, fostering a holistic approach to primary education in the Ihorombe Region.

CONCLUSION

The study highlights that primary education in the Ihorombe Region is deeply intertwined with local cultural traditions, which shape students' learning experiences, classroom behavior, and engagement. Cultural values such as respect for elders, collective responsibility, and cooperation provide a framework for social and academic development, while oral traditions and storytelling serve as effective tools for comprehension and knowledge retention. Community participation, including the involvement of parents and elders, reinforces the relevance of education and strengthens students' motivation and commitment. At the same time, challenges emerge when the national curriculum and teaching practices do not fully reflect local realities, emphasizing the need for culturally responsive approaches. Overall, the findings demonstrate that

integrating tradition into formal schooling enriches learning, strengthens cultural identity, and fosters a holistic educational environment where students can connect their community experiences with academic knowledge.

RECOMMENDATION

To enhance the effectiveness of primary education in the Ihorombe Region, it is recommended that educators and policymakers actively integrate local cultural knowledge, traditions, and practices into teaching strategies, curricula, and learning materials, ensuring that lessons are relevant to students' lived experiences. Teacher training programs should emphasize cultural awareness and participatory pedagogical approaches that align formal instruction with community values. Strengthening collaboration between schools, families, and community elders can further support student engagement and motivation. For future study, research could explore the long-term impacts of culturally integrated education on academic achievement, social development, and identity formation, as well as comparative analyses across different regions of Madagascar to examine variations in the role of local traditions in primary schooling. Such investigations would deepen understanding of culturally responsive education and its potential to improve learning outcomes in diverse rural contexts.

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