

Thymology as Method for the Moral Economy: An Empirical Application of Misesian Motivational Analysis to Indigenous African Economic Systems

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Research Article

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Abstract

This paper operationalizes Misesian thymology as an empirical method for studying informal institutions. While Austrian economics distinguishes praxeology as the universal logic of action from thymology as the historical understanding of motivation, thymology has rarely been applied systematically. Drawing on eighteen months of ethnographic fieldwork with the pre-colonial Ugondo people of Tiv in central Nigeria, we analyse fifteen independently verified proverbs that convey expectations about productive effort, cooperation, reciprocity, trust, prudence, and knowledge transmission. We argue that these proverbs function as culturally transmitted repositories of motivational knowledge that sustained informal economic coordination in the absence of formal legal enforcement. The findings suggest that institutional stability depends not only on behavioural regularities but on shared meanings that make conduct appear legitimate and obligatory. The paper contributes to Austrian economics by demonstrating a replicable thymological method, to institutional economics by examining the motivational content of informal institutions, and to indigenous knowledge studies by treating oral tradition as institutional reasoning.

JEL Classification: B53, O17, Z10, D02

1. Introduction

Why do some societies sustain stable systems of production, exchange, and cooperation despite lacking the formal institutions commonly regarded as prerequisites for economic development? This question has long occupied institutional economics and remains central to debates concerning governance, economic performance, and institutional change. Since the seminal work of Douglass C. North (1990), secure property rights, enforceable contracts, and impartial legal systems have been understood as fundamental mechanisms for reducing uncertainty, lowering transaction costs, and encouraging long-term investment. Contemporary development policy likewise places considerable emphasis on strengthening formal institutions as a pathway to sustained economic growth.

Historical experience, however, reveals a more complex picture. Long before the emergence of modern legal systems, many societies developed durable arrangements for coordinating production, allocating resources, resolving disputes, and sustaining exchange. Across Africa, Asia, Oceania, and the Americas, communities organised economic life through customary norms, reciprocal obligations, reputational mechanisms, and culturally transmitted expectations rather than written law or centralised judicial enforcement. These cases do not contradict institutional economics; instead, they raise a deeper question: what motivational foundations enabled informal institutions to function with sufficient stability to sustain economic order?

This paper addresses that question through the pre-colonial Ugondo-Tiv society of central Nigeria. Prior to colonial administration, the Ugondo organised agricultural production, communal labour, land use, and local exchange without formal land registration, written contracts, or state-administered courts. Their economy nevertheless exhibited sustained cooperation, reciprocal labour arrangements, customary

resource allocation, and enduring social order. The existence of these institutions is not in doubt; the central analytical problem is to explain how they acquired legitimacy, persistence, and behavioural effectiveness.

The argument developed here draws upon a comparatively neglected component of the social philosophy of Ludwig von Mises. In *Human Action* (Mises 1949), Mises distinguished praxeology, the universal science of purposeful human action, from thymology, the historically grounded understanding of people's values, beliefs, expectations, and motivations. While praxeology explains the logical structure of action irrespective of time or place, thymology seeks to understand why individuals and communities pursue particular ends within specific historical and cultural settings.

Although praxeology has become the defining methodological feature of Austrian economics, thymology has remained comparatively underdeveloped. Austrian scholars have frequently acknowledged its importance for historical interpretation, yet relatively little attention has been devoted to operationalising thymology as an empirical research strategy capable of investigating culturally embedded motivations. Consequently, Austrian economics possesses a sophisticated theory of purposeful action but comparatively few methodological tools for examining how culturally transmitted meanings shape institutional behaviour in concrete historical contexts.

This paper argues that Misesian thymology provides such a framework. Specifically, it proposes that indigenous proverbs constitute historically durable repositories of motivational knowledge through which informal institutions communicate expectations concerning work, reciprocity, trust, prudence, reputation, and cooperation. Because proverbs preserve socially approved understandings of appropriate conduct in relatively stable linguistic forms, they provide valuable evidence for recovering the motivational content of informal institutions.

The argument is developed through a qualitative analysis of fifteen indigenous Ugondo-Tiv proverbs collected and independently verified during ethnographic fieldwork. Rather than treating these proverbs merely as expressions of folklore or moral instruction, the study interprets them as condensed formulations of motivational knowledge that contributed to economic coordination within a pre-colonial institutional environment. The analysis does not claim that the Ugondo consciously formulated modern economic theories, nor that informal institutions universally substitute for formal legal arrangements. Instead, it demonstrates how culturally transmitted motivational knowledge may sustain institutional order where formal enforcement is limited.

The paper makes four related contributions. First, it advances Austrian economics by demonstrating how Misesian thymology can be operationalised as an empirical method rather than remaining solely a methodological distinction. Second, it contributes to institutional economics by examining the motivational content that enables informal institutions to function effectively. Third, it broadens the economic analysis of indigenous knowledge by interpreting oral traditions as repositories of practical institutional reasoning. Finally, it illustrates a qualitative methodological approach that may be adapted to the study of other societies possessing rich oral traditions.

2. Thymology as the Motivational Foundation of Informal Institutions

2.1 Praxeology and Thymology: Complementary Forms of Knowledge

One of Mises's most significant methodological contributions was his distinction between praxeology and thymology. Praxeology investigates the universal logic of purposeful action. Beginning from the axiom that individuals act to substitute more satisfactory states of affairs for less satisfactory ones, it derives propositions concerning the formal structure of choice that are independent of particular peoples, periods, or institutional settings. Its concern is not the content of preferences but the logical implications of purposeful action itself.

Mises nevertheless recognised that universal logic alone cannot explain concrete historical behaviour. Praxeology explains how people act purposefully but not why particular individuals or communities value specific ends, accept certain obligations, or regard particular institutions as legitimate. These questions belong to thymology, which concerns the historically informed understanding of human motivations, beliefs, expectations, traditions, and value judgements acquired through experience and interpretation.

Praxeology and thymology therefore occupy distinct yet complementary analytical domains. Praxeology provides the universal framework within which all purposeful action occurs; thymology explains the culturally specific motivations that give action its historical content. Economic order can therefore be understood fully only when the universal logic of action is considered alongside the historically situated systems of meaning through which individuals interpret their social world.

Despite this distinction, Austrian economics has developed these two components unevenly. Praxeology has received sustained theoretical elaboration, whereas thymology has remained largely confined to methodological discussions of history and interpretation. A notable exception is Lavoie and Storr's (2011) reassessment of the theory–history dichotomy, which argues that Mises never fully succeeded in confining thymology to the history side of his own methodological divide and calls for praxeology to be more openly enriched with thymological considerations. Their intervention is primarily conceptual, however, and does not offer an empirical procedure for recovering thymological content from historical or ethnographic material. The consequence is a noticeable asymmetry: Austrian economics possesses a highly developed theory of action but comparatively limited guidance concerning the empirical investigation of culturally embedded motivations. The present study seeks to reduce this imbalance by treating thymology not merely as a philosophical observation but as a practical framework for empirical institutional analysis.

2.2 Thymology and the Motivational Content of Informal Institutions

Institutional economics has long recognised that formal legal rules alone cannot account for economic order. North's (1990) distinction between formal and informal institutions demonstrated that customs,

conventions, traditions, and shared norms frequently shape behaviour as profoundly as constitutions or statutory law. More recent institutional scholarship has further emphasised that institutions consist not merely of rules but also of shared understandings that guide expectations and coordinate behaviour over time.

Yet an important analytical question remains. If informal institutions derive much of their effectiveness from shared beliefs and expectations, how can those motivations be systematically investigated? Institutional economics identifies the importance of informal institutions but offers comparatively little methodological guidance for recovering the culturally embedded motivations through which they operate.

Misesian thymology offers one possible answer. Rather than treating informal institutions simply as unwritten rules, thymology directs attention to the historically accumulated meanings that make those rules intelligible and authoritative. Individuals comply with informal institutions not solely because behavioural regularities exist, but because communities regard particular forms of conduct as honourable, trustworthy, prudent, obligatory, or shameful. These evaluations are historically transmitted through culture and become integral components of institutional life. Accordingly, this paper argues that thymology complements institutional economics by providing an interpretive framework for analysing the motivational foundations of informal institutions.

2.3 Proverbs as Repositories of Motivational Knowledge

If informal institutions depend upon culturally transmitted motivations, then communities must possess mechanisms through which such motivations are communicated across generations. In societies where literacy was historically limited, this function was performed primarily through oral institutions. Among these, proverbs occupy a distinctive position because they combine brevity, memorability, normative authority, and repeated social use. Their relatively fixed linguistic structure enables them to preserve practical knowledge with considerable stability while simultaneously guiding behaviour in everyday life.

From a thymological perspective, proverbs are therefore more than literary artefacts. They are condensed expressions of historically accumulated experience that communicate socially approved understandings of work, reciprocity, cooperation, reputation, uncertainty, and responsibility. Their value for institutional research lies precisely in their capacity to preserve motivational knowledge in forms that remain culturally authoritative across generations. This study does not assume that every proverb possesses economic significance; rather, it argues that systematically verified proverbs relating to productive activity, exchange, and social obligation provide valuable empirical evidence concerning the motivational foundations of informal institutions.

2.4 Central Proposition

The central proposition advanced throughout this paper is deliberately modest. The study does not seek to demonstrate that indigenous communities anticipated modern economic theory or that informal institutions are universally superior to formal legal arrangements. Instead, it argues that Misesian

thymology provides a coherent empirical framework for recovering the motivational content of informal institutions and that indigenous proverbs constitute one historically grounded source through which such motivational knowledge can be systematically investigated.

3. Literature Review and Positioning

Rather than summarising existing scholarship exhaustively, this section positions the paper at the intersection of four complementary research traditions: Austrian economics, institutional economics, indigenous knowledge studies, and qualitative institutional methodology.

Institutional economists have demonstrated that informal institutions frequently play decisive roles in economic coordination, particularly where formal legal enforcement remains weak. North (1990) established the distinction between formal and informal institutions, while Ostrom (1990) showed that communities often develop durable systems of self-governance through locally evolved rules and repeated interaction. Recent quantitative literature on sub-Saharan Africa continues to affirm this significance: Njoya et al. (2024) find that informal economic activity remains the dominant mode of coordination across much of the continent and caution against treating it merely as a policy failure to be eliminated, while Haruna et al. (2025), reviewing Africa's structural-transformation literature, similarly argue that governance gaps, rather than informality itself, best explain persistently weak institutional performance. Collectively, this literature establishes the significance of informal institutions but leaves comparatively open the question of how their motivational content may be investigated empirically.

Within Austrian economics, scholars such as Lachmann (1977), Lavoie (1990), Storr (2013), and Chamlee-Wright (2002) have consistently argued that economic action is embedded within systems of interpretation, culture, and shared meaning. Their work broadened Austrian economics beyond abstract market processes by demonstrating that entrepreneurship, exchange, and institutional evolution depend upon historically situated understandings. Lavoie and Storr's (2011) later reconsideration of the thymology–praxeology relationship extended this project methodologically, though, as noted above, its contribution remains primarily conceptual. Nevertheless, while Austrian economists have recognised the importance of interpretation, relatively little empirical research has operationalised Mises's concept of thymology as a systematic methodological framework.

Research on indigenous knowledge has likewise demonstrated that oral traditions preserve extensive practical knowledge concerning agriculture, governance, conflict resolution, environmental adaptation, and collective action. African proverbs, in particular, have been examined extensively within anthropology, linguistics, philosophy, and literary studies; recent work such as Maiwong's (2025) analysis of environmental themes in African proverbs illustrates the continued vitality of this literature and confirms that proverbs remain treated primarily as cultural or linguistic evidence rather than as economic data. Comparatively little attention, however, has been devoted to analysing them as evidence of the motivational systems that support informal economic institutions.

This paper therefore occupies a distinct interdisciplinary position. It does not seek to reinterpret indigenous proverbs as formal economic theories, nor does it challenge the central insights of institutional economics. Instead, it brings Austrian thymology into dialogue with institutional analysis by proposing a practical method for recovering the motivational foundations of informal institutions through systematically verified oral traditions. Accordingly, the paper contributes in four respects: it operationalises Misesian thymology as an empirical research strategy; enriches institutional economics by examining the motivational content of informal institutions; broadens the economic relevance of indigenous knowledge; and demonstrates a transparent qualitative methodology that may be applied comparatively across societies possessing substantial oral traditions.

4. Case Study and Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive case-study design grounded in Misesian thymology. Rather than testing causal hypotheses through statistical inference, the research seeks to recover and interpret the motivational knowledge embedded within indigenous economic institutions. Consistent with Mises's conception of thymology, the objective is to understand the historically situated beliefs, values, expectations, and motivations that informed economic behaviour within a particular cultural setting.

The study combines ethnographic fieldwork with qualitative content analysis. The analytical focus is not the reconstruction of every aspect of Ugondo economic life but the identification of culturally transmitted motivational principles that supported production, cooperation, reciprocity, exchange, and institutional continuity. This interpretive approach is well suited to examining informal institutions whose effectiveness depends upon shared meanings rather than formal legal enforcement.

4.2 Case Selection: Why the Ugondo-Tiv?

The Ugondo are one of the Tiv subgroups occupying the southern bank of the Benue River in present-day Makurdi Local Government Area of Benue State, Nigeria. The case was selected purposively because it provides an analytically rich setting for investigating the motivational foundations of informal institutions.

Historically, the Ugondo economy centred on rain-fed yam cultivation supported by communal labour, customary land tenure, periodic markets, apprenticeship, and extensive kinship networks. Economic coordination occurred without formal land registration, written contracts, commercial courts, or centralised state enforcement. Nevertheless, productive cooperation and institutional continuity were sustained over generations through culturally embedded norms and customary practices.

Equally important, the Ugondo possess a well-preserved oral tradition in which proverbs continue to function as authoritative expressions of collective wisdom, making the community especially appropriate for examining whether proverbial knowledge constituted part of the motivational

architecture supporting informal institutional order. The Ugondo case is therefore presented as an analytically informative case rather than a statistically representative one; its value lies in illustrating institutional processes that may be investigated comparatively in other indigenous societies.

4.3 Fieldwork, Participants, and Sampling Strategy

The research emerged from a longstanding engagement with the Ugondo community. Informal observation, participation in community life, and a growing scholarly interest in indigenous economic knowledge began approximately nine years before the formal commencement of this study. This prolonged engagement enabled the researcher to develop familiarity with local institutions, language, customary practices, and the contexts in which proverbs are employed.

Formal ethnographic fieldwork was subsequently conducted over a period of approximately eighteen months. The extended duration permitted repeated visits to participants, follow-up interviews, cross-checking of interpretations, and verification of collected materials.

Purposive sampling was employed to identify individuals widely recognised as custodians of indigenous knowledge. Fifty participants (N = 50) were selected from the five principal Ugondo sub-kindreds – Mbaikya, Mbagban, Mbagoho, Mbaakuva, and Kyurav – with ten participants drawn from each subgroup. Participants included traditional rulers, elders, respected oral historians, experienced farmers, and recognised opinion leaders possessing substantial knowledge of customary institutions and proverbial traditions. Initial participants were identified through traditional leadership structures, while additional participants were recruited through criterion-based snowball sampling. Because the objective was to obtain rich cultural knowledge rather than demographic representativeness, purposive sampling was considered methodologically appropriate.

4.4 Data Collection

Data were collected through four complementary qualitative techniques. First, semi-structured ethnographic interviews explored indigenous systems of production, exchange, cooperation, conflict resolution, and community governance. Second, participants were invited to recall proverbs traditionally used to guide conduct relating to work, reciprocity, trust, leadership, exchange, responsibility, and resource management; the emphasis on proverbs reflected their relative linguistic stability and their longstanding role as authoritative vehicles for transmitting practical knowledge across generations. Third, small-group discussions were organised within each sub-kindred to compare interpretations, clarify meanings, and resolve variations in wording. Fourth, participant observation documented communal farming activities, local markets, dispute settlement, ceremonial events, and other settings in which customary norms were publicly expressed. The combination of these techniques enabled methodological triangulation and enhanced the credibility of the findings.

4.5 Community Endorsement and Ethical Considerations

The study was undertaken with the knowledge and endorsement of the Ugondo traditional authority. Formal community approval was granted by the Chairman of the Ugondo Council of Traditional Rulers,

who recognised the study as an effort to document and preserve aspects of the community's indigenous knowledge and institutional heritage.

Participation was voluntary. Before each interview or discussion, participants were informed of the academic purpose of the research, and verbal informed consent was obtained. Participants were assured that the research focused on collectively shared cultural knowledge rather than private or sensitive personal information, and that they were free to decline participation or withdraw at any stage. Because the research documents customary knowledge already widely shared within the community, the study presented no foreseeable risk to participants.

4.6 Validation of the Proverb Corpus

The principal empirical evidence analysed in this article consists of fifteen indigenous proverbs selected from a substantially larger body of collected material. To strengthen credibility, each proverb underwent several validation procedures. Proverbs were first recorded during fieldwork in Tiv, translated into English, and subsequently discussed with additional knowledgeable participants drawn from different sub-kindreds. Variations in wording and interpretation were carefully compared, and only those proverbs displaying substantial linguistic consistency and clear economic relevance were retained.

Selection was guided by four criteria: recurrence across multiple participants; stability of linguistic form; clear normative rather than merely descriptive content; and direct relevance to economic behaviour or institutional life. These procedures produced a deliberately conservative corpus suitable for systematic qualitative analysis. Appendix A summarises the coding and validation data underlying this corpus, including sub-kindred confirmation rates for each proverb.

4.7 Analytical Procedure

Analysis proceeded in three stages. First, the verified proverb corpus was coded inductively according to recurring motivational themes, including productive effort, capability, cooperation, reciprocity, reputation, uncertainty, prudence, institutional continuity, redistribution, exchange, and knowledge transmission. Second, these themes were examined in relation to concepts developed within Austrian economics and institutional economics. Finally, each proverb was interpreted within its indigenous cultural context before being related to broader economic theory.

Throughout the analysis, interpretation proceeds from proverb to theory rather than from theory to proverb: modern economic concepts are employed as analytical lenses rather than as claims concerning the historical intentions of the original speakers. Expressions such as “is consistent with,” “resembles,” and “may be interpreted through” are used deliberately to avoid anachronistically attributing contemporary economic theories to pre-colonial communities.

4.8 Research Quality and Preservation of Evidence

The study adopted several measures to enhance qualitative trustworthiness. Credibility was strengthened through prolonged engagement with the community over approximately nine years,

eighteen months of formal fieldwork, independent cross-verification of proverbs, methodological triangulation, and repeated consultation with knowledgeable participants. Transferability is supported through detailed description of the Ugondo institutional setting and transparent reporting of research procedures. Dependability was enhanced by maintaining systematic field notes, translation records, and thematic coding documentation throughout the study. Confirmability was strengthened by grounding interpretations directly in the verified proverb corpus and by explicitly distinguishing indigenous meanings from contemporary theoretical interpretation.

Although a portion of the broader interview materials was subsequently lost because of an unforeseen digital storage failure, the verified proverb corpus, contemporaneous field notes, translation records, and coding documentation were preserved. Since the analytical focus of this article rests primarily on the authenticated proverb corpus rather than verbatim interview transcripts, the surviving documentation provides an adequate evidential basis for the present analysis. The loss of part of the supplementary interview archive therefore does not materially affect the principal findings, but it is acknowledged here in the interest of methodological transparency.

4.9 Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, it examines a single indigenous community and therefore seeks analytical rather than statistical generalisation. Second, while extensive validation procedures were employed, interpretation of culturally embedded meanings necessarily involves scholarly judgement, and alternative readings of individual proverbs remain possible. Third, the partial loss of some interview recordings limited the availability of verbatim supporting quotations; however, because the verified proverb corpus, field notes, and contemporaneous documentation were preserved, the principal analytical conclusions remain well supported. Finally, future comparative research across additional Tiv communities and other indigenous societies would help determine the broader applicability of the thymological framework proposed in this study.

5. Findings: Proverbs as the Thymological Architecture of Informal Institutions

The fifteen proverbs analysed in this section are not presented as isolated expressions of folk wisdom or as precursors of modern economic theory. They are interpreted as components of a culturally transmitted motivational system that informed economic behaviour within pre-colonial Ugondo society. Collectively, they reveal how shared beliefs about work, cooperation, reciprocity, prudence, reputation, and knowledge contributed to the operation of informal institutions.

From a Misesian perspective, the significance of these proverbs lies not in their logical content, which belongs to praxeology, but in the historically situated motivations they communicate. Each proverb conveys a socially approved understanding of appropriate conduct and thereby helps explain why informal institutional arrangements acquired legitimacy and durability within the community. For analytical clarity, the findings are organised into five interrelated motivational domains: productive

responsibility, cooperative order, trust and reciprocity, prudence under uncertainty, and institutional continuity through knowledge transmission. Appendix A reports the coding and sub-kindred validation data underlying the interpretations presented below.

5.1 Productive Responsibility

Proverb 1

Ikpagher tsegher uya you ga, saa ukaha sule.

Translation: *"One does not eat yam because one possesses charms, but because one cultivated the farm."*

Indigenous Context: Among the Ugondo, yam cultivation demanded sustained labour, careful timing, and continuous attention throughout the agricultural season. The proverb discouraged explanations of success based upon supernatural advantage and instead emphasised disciplined effort.

Thymological Interpretation: The proverb transmits a motivational norm of personal responsibility. It encourages individuals to regard productive labour as the legitimate foundation of material wellbeing while discouraging dependence upon fortune or inherited privilege.

Institutional Significance: The proverb reinforces a widely shared expectation that reward should ordinarily follow productive contribution. Such expectations strengthen the legitimacy of agricultural effort and discourage opportunistic behaviour. Rather than prescribing a formal rule, the proverb cultivates a motivational disposition favourable to productive activity.

Proverb 2

Igyuve sombo akper, zenden a ikyegh.

Translation: *"An eagle with a broken wing walks like a chicken."*

Indigenous Context: The eagle symbolises strength and exceptional ability; a damaged wing represents the loss of the capacity needed to realise that potential.

Thymological Interpretation: The proverb teaches that ability must be preserved if it is to remain productive. Individuals are therefore encouraged to value and maintain their capabilities as enduring assets.

Institutional Significance: The proverb reinforces the community's expectation that competence, health, and skill require continuous care. Informal institutions supporting apprenticeship, practical learning, and mutual assistance become more effective when members value productive capability itself.

Proverb 3

Liam hemba luam.

Translation: *"Knowledge that lasts a lifetime is richer than a meal that satisfies only briefly."*

Indigenous Context: The proverb frequently accompanied apprenticeship and the transmission of farming, hunting, and craft skills.

Thymological Interpretation: It encourages patience, long-term thinking, and investment in durable knowledge rather than immediate consumption.

Institutional Significance: By attaching social prestige to learning, the proverb motivates the preservation and transmission of productive knowledge across generations. Institutions of apprenticeship and informal education are thereby reinforced through cultural expectation rather than legal obligation.

Synthesis. These three proverbs establish the motivational foundations of production. Together they cultivate responsibility, capability, and learning as socially valued dispositions that support sustained economic activity.

5.2 Cooperative Order

Proverb 4

Ikyundu nungwa baa, angbian bee.

Translation: *"When food is ready, each person reaches first for himself rather than for his brother."*

Indigenous Context: The proverb acknowledges that scarcity may intensify individual self-interest.

Thymological Interpretation: Rather than celebrating selfishness, it warns that cooperation cannot be taken for granted.

Institutional Significance: The proverb prepares community members to recognise the need for institutions capable of sustaining cooperation despite competing individual interests. It therefore identifies a motivational challenge rather than prescribing an inevitable outcome.

Proverb 5

Tahav ka ltyo.

Translation: *"Unity is strength."*

Indigenous Context: The proverb accompanied communal farming, house construction, and other cooperative activities.

Thymological Interpretation: It cultivates a disposition favourable to mutual assistance by presenting collective effort as both morally desirable and practically effective.

Institutional Significance: The proverb reinforces participation in communal labour institutions by encouraging individuals to associate personal wellbeing with collective success.

Synthesis. Together, Proverbs 4 and 5 reveal a realistic understanding of social cooperation. One recognises the persistent temptation toward self-interest; the other supplies the motivational counterweight necessary for sustaining collective action.

5.3 Trust, Reciprocity, and Reputation

Proverb 6

U er dedoo, dedoo a er u.

Translation: "A good deed eventually returns good reward."

Thymological Interpretation: The proverb encourages confidence that cooperative behaviour contributes to enduring social relationships.

Institutional Significance: Its primary institutional function is to strengthen expectations of reciprocity, thereby reducing reliance upon formal contracts within repeated social interactions.

Proverb 7

Iti hembra inyaregh.

Translation: "A good name is worth more than money."

Thymological Interpretation: The proverb presents reputation as an enduring form of social wealth.

Institutional Significance: Trust becomes a community resource. By attaching long-term value to trustworthy conduct, the proverb encourages behaviour that lowers uncertainty in everyday exchange.

Proverb 8

Orkpum hide awe.

Translation: "Whoever throws ash at another has it blown back into his own face."

Thymological Interpretation: The proverb encourages individuals to consider the wider consequences of harmful behaviour.

Institutional Significance: By linking personal conduct to future social consequences, it discourages actions that weaken trust and undermine cooperative relationships.

Synthesis. Reciprocity, reputation, and accountability together form the motivational infrastructure through which trust becomes institutionally sustainable.

5.4 Prudence Under Uncertainty

Proverb 9

Or fe akper ga.

Translation: *"No one knows tomorrow."*

Thymological Interpretation: The proverb cultivates humility regarding the future while discouraging excessive confidence.

Institutional Significance: Recognition of uncertainty encourages flexible decision-making and preparedness within an agricultural economy exposed to unpredictable conditions.

Proverb 10

Zendendedoo u va ndyar wan-kyegh.

Translation: *"Walking carefully prevents stumbling."*

Thymological Interpretation: The proverb recommends prudence as the appropriate response to uncertainty.

Institutional Significance: Careful judgement becomes a culturally reinforced habit that contributes to resilience without requiring formal mechanisms of risk management.

Proverb 11

Inyon ia hungwau daa.

Translation: *"Drive the weaver birds away from the millet, or you will harvest nothing."*

Thymological Interpretation: The proverb teaches that productive effort requires continuous vigilance.

Institutional Significance: It reinforces stewardship by encouraging timely protection of productive resources against foreseeable threats.

Synthesis. These proverbs acknowledge that uncertainty is unavoidable while encouraging prudence, vigilance, and adaptive behaviour as enduring motivational dispositions.

5.5 Institutional Continuity Through Social Learning

Proverb 12

Ka kôôm kon ombor ga.

Translation: *"A crooked dry stick cannot easily be straightened."*

Institutional Significance: The proverb recognises that repeated habits become increasingly durable. Institutional continuity therefore depends upon the gradual internalisation of shared practices.

Proverb 13

Anngbyan ka nan a lu sha ipyungwa u ya i eregh.

Translation: *"Whoever prospers should remember relatives by sharing opportunity and prosperity."*

Institutional Significance: The proverb strengthens kinship-based mutual support, reinforcing informal systems of reciprocal assistance during periods of hardship.

Proverb 14

Kasua gba gba aa usha.

Translation: *"Buying and selling never cease."*

Institutional Significance: The proverb portrays exchange as an enduring social process sustained through repeated interaction rather than isolated transactions.

Proverb 15

Mbagbera tema imongo fa iwa.

Translation: *"It was through shared counsel that the Mbagbera people mastered blacksmithing."*

Thymological Interpretation: Knowledge grows through communication, cooperation, and collective memory.

Institutional Significance: The proverb illustrates how communities preserve productive knowledge through shared learning, thereby supporting institutional continuity across generations.

5.6 General Synthesis: A Thymological Architecture of Informal Institutions

Viewed individually, each proverb communicates a specific motivational lesson. Viewed collectively, however, they reveal a coherent architecture of informal institutional order. The corpus begins by legitimising productive labour, then emphasises the preservation of capability and knowledge, addresses the tension between self-interest and cooperation, reinforces trust through reciprocity and reputation, promotes prudence under uncertainty, and concludes with the transmission of institutions through social learning and collective memory.

From a Misesian perspective, these findings demonstrate the analytical value of thymology. The proverbs do not function as abstract economic propositions but as historically transmitted motivations

that shaped how members of the Ugondo community understood work, obligation, trust, responsibility, and exchange. Their institutional significance lies precisely in their ability to cultivate expectations favourable to stable economic cooperation.

The evidence therefore supports the central claim of this study. Informal institutions are sustained not only by observable rules or repeated practices but also by culturally transmitted motivational knowledge. Proverbs constitute one medium through which that knowledge is preserved, communicated, and reproduced across generations. In this respect, Misesian thymology provides a coherent empirical framework for recovering the motivational foundations of informal institutional order.

6. Discussion: Operationalizing Thymology in Institutional Analysis

6.1 Revisiting the Institutional Question

This paper began with a question that has received comparatively limited attention in both Austrian economics and institutional economics: what motivational foundations enable informal institutions to sustain economic order?

Institutional economists have shown convincingly that formal law represents only one dimension of institutional life. Informal institutions, including customs, conventions, traditions, and shared norms, frequently regulate economic behaviour with remarkable effectiveness. Yet identifying the existence of informal institutions does not, by itself, explain why individuals regard them as legitimate or why they continue to influence behaviour across generations. The Ugondo case suggests that one important part of the answer lies in culturally transmitted motivational knowledge. The fifteen proverbs analysed in this study reveal recurring expectations concerning productive effort, reciprocal obligation, trustworthiness, prudence, stewardship, and shared learning. Rather than functioning as legal rules, these proverbs shaped the evaluative frameworks through which members of the community understood appropriate economic conduct.

The findings therefore indicate that informal institutions derive part of their effectiveness not only from repeated behavioural regularities but also from historically transmitted systems of meaning that encourage individuals to internalise those regularities as socially desirable. Importantly, the evidence does not suggest that proverbs alone created institutional order. The Ugondo institutional system also depended upon kinship structures, communal labour organisations, elder mediation, customary authority, and repeated social interaction; the proverbs should instead be understood as one component of a broader institutional ecology through which economic expectations were communicated, enforced, and reproduced.

6.2 Advancing Austrian Economics: From Methodological Insight to Empirical Method

The principal contribution of this paper to Austrian economics is methodological. Since the publication of *Human Action*, Mises's distinction between praxeology and thymology has been widely recognised within Austrian methodology. Praxeology has become the defining analytical foundation of Austrian economics, providing a universal theory of purposeful action. Thymology, however, has remained comparatively underdeveloped as a practical research programme; it has generally been invoked to explain the importance of historical understanding without specifying how historically situated motivations might be investigated systematically.

This paper proposes one possible approach. By treating indigenous proverbs as repositories of culturally transmitted motivational knowledge, the study demonstrates how thymology can be operationalised through transparent qualitative procedures involving ethnographic observation, proverb elicitation, independent verification, thematic coding, and contextual interpretation. The contribution therefore lies less in the substantive findings concerning Ugondo society than in illustrating a replicable analytical strategy for investigating historically embedded motivations. The paper does not seek to redefine thymology; rather, it extends its methodological usefulness by showing how it may be employed as an empirical framework for studying the motivational foundations of informal institutions. Praxeology explains the universal logic of action; thymology explains the historically situated motivations through which purposeful action is expressed in particular institutional settings. The two approaches therefore remain complementary rather than competing components of Austrian social science.

6.3 Enriching Institutional Economics

The findings also contribute to institutional economics by drawing attention to the motivational content of informal institutions. North (1990) demonstrated that institutions consist of both formal and informal rules that shape human interaction, while Ostrom (1990) showed that communities frequently sustain effective governance through locally evolved institutional arrangements. The present study complements these insights by asking how such arrangements become socially meaningful and historically durable.

The Ugondo proverb corpus suggests that informal institutions are reinforced through shared motivational frameworks that define productive effort, reciprocity, trust, responsibility, prudence, and knowledge sharing as socially valued forms of conduct. These motivational orientations do not replace institutional rules; rather, they strengthen the willingness of individuals to comply with and reproduce them. Accordingly, the paper shifts attention from institutions viewed solely as external constraints toward institutions understood as systems of shared meanings, an interpretation that does not challenge existing institutional theory but extends it by highlighting the cultural processes through which institutional expectations are internalised and transmitted.

6.4 Indigenous Knowledge as Institutional Knowledge

A further contribution concerns the economic interpretation of indigenous knowledge. Research on African proverbs has traditionally emphasised their literary, philosophical, ethical, or anthropological

significance. While these perspectives remain valuable, they often leave unexplored the role of proverbs in shaping practical economic behaviour.

The findings presented here suggest that indigenous proverbs may also function as institutional knowledge. They preserve accumulated experience concerning work, cooperation, exchange, stewardship, and learning in concise forms that facilitate transmission across generations; their authority derives not from legal sanction but from repeated social recognition within the community. Recognising this institutional dimension broadens the analytical relevance of indigenous knowledge without detaching it from its cultural context, and the study therefore contributes to ongoing efforts to integrate indigenous intellectual traditions into broader discussions of economic organisation and development.

6.5 Methodological Implications

Beyond its substantive findings, the paper advances a methodological proposition of wider relevance. Qualitative institutional research has often struggled to identify transparent procedures for examining culturally embedded motivations. Proverbs offer one promising source of evidence because they possess several characteristics particularly valuable for thymological inquiry: they are relatively stable in linguistic form, widely recognised within communities, repeatedly transmitted across generations, and explicitly normative in orientation. The methodological approach developed in this study is therefore potentially transferable beyond the Ugondo case. Similar procedures could be employed in comparative research among other African societies and in indigenous communities elsewhere where oral traditions continue to shape institutional life. Future research might combine proverb analysis with archival sources, participant observation, behavioural experiments, or comparative institutional analysis to deepen understanding of the relationship between motivational knowledge and institutional performance.

6.6 Limitations and Future Research

The findings should be interpreted within the scope of the study. First, the analysis concerns a single indigenous community and therefore aims for analytical rather than statistical generalisation; the value of the case lies in illustrating how thymology may be operationalised, not in claiming universal applicability for the particular institutional arrangements observed. Second, although the proverb corpus was independently verified and supported by prolonged engagement with the community, interpretation necessarily involves scholarly judgement, and alternative interpretations of individual proverbs remain possible and should be welcomed as part of continuing dialogue. Third, while a portion of the broader interview archive was lost because of an unforeseen digital storage failure, the verified proverb corpus, field notes, translation records, and coding documentation were preserved, so the evidential basis of the study remains intact.

Future research should extend this framework comparatively across additional Tiv communities and other indigenous societies to examine whether similar motivational architectures emerge under different historical and institutional conditions. Comparative work would also provide opportunities to refine the

methodological procedures proposed here and further develop thymology as an empirical research programme within Austrian economics.

7. Conclusion

This paper has argued that Misesian thymology provides a coherent framework for recovering the motivational foundations of informal institutions. Using ethnographic evidence from the Ugondo-Tiv of central Nigeria, it has analysed fifteen indigenous proverbs that illuminate culturally transmitted understandings of productive labour, capability, cooperation, reciprocity, reputation, prudence, institutional continuity, exchange, and shared learning.

The contribution of the study is not to suggest that indigenous communities anticipated modern economic theory or that oral traditions constitute formal systems of economic analysis. Rather, it demonstrates that proverbs preserve historically accumulated motivational knowledge through which informal institutions communicate expectations, reinforce cooperation, and sustain economic order across generations. The study contributes to Austrian economics by extending thymology beyond its traditional methodological role and illustrating how it can be operationalised through systematic qualitative inquiry. In doing so, it addresses a long-standing asymmetry within Austrian methodology: while praxeology has received extensive analytical development, thymology has remained comparatively underutilised as a research framework. The approach proposed here illustrates one practical means by which culturally embedded motivations may be documented and interpreted empirically.

The paper also contributes to institutional economics by emphasising that informal institutions consist not only of behavioural regularities or unwritten rules but also of culturally transmitted systems of evaluation that encourage individuals to regard particular forms of conduct as legitimate, trustworthy, and desirable. Understanding institutional performance therefore requires attention to both institutional structures and the motivational knowledge that sustains them.

A further contribution lies in demonstrating the economic relevance of indigenous knowledge. The Ugondo proverbs analysed in this study preserve practical understandings of work, cooperation, stewardship, reciprocity, and innovation that informed everyday economic life within their historical setting. Their significance resides not in their resemblance to contemporary economic theories but in their role as culturally authoritative vehicles through which institutional knowledge was preserved and transmitted.

More broadly, the paper suggests that economic development cannot be understood solely through the design of formal institutions. Durable institutional order also depends upon motivational systems that shape how individuals interpret responsibility, trust, cooperation, and productive activity. These motivational dimensions often remain implicit within conventional institutional analysis, yet they are fundamental to understanding how institutions emerge, persist, and adapt over time.

Accordingly, the principal claim advanced in this study is both modest and consequential. Misesian thymology is not an alternative to praxeology or to institutional economics; it is a complementary empirical framework for investigating the culturally embedded motivations through which informal institutions acquire legitimacy, continuity, and practical effectiveness. By bringing these motivational dimensions more clearly into view, thymology enriches our understanding of economic order in both historical and contemporary societies.

Declarations

Author Contribution

The author who doubles as the correspondence author did the entire research.

Data Availability

I generated data on Tiv Proverbs.

References

1. [Editorial note Chicago Author-Date 17th ed. formatting. The Haruna et al. and Njoya et al. entries should be checked against final published pagination/author lists before submission; et al. is used in the Haruna reference-list entry itself only because the full author list could not be independently verified — Chicago style normally spells out all authors in the bibliography even when et al. is used in-text, so this entry should be completed with full names before submission.].
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