

Ubuntu and the Igbo Traditional Justice System a Comparative Study of Communal Ethics and Consensus in African Conflict Resolution

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary conflict resolution scholarship has been significantly shaped by Western legal traditions that emphasize adversarial procedures, individual responsibility, and punitive justice. However, such approaches often give limited attention to indigenous African justice systems that prioritize communal responsibility, moral restoration, dialogue, and reconciliation. This study comparatively examines Ubuntu philosophy and the Igbo Traditional Justice System as indigenous African frameworks for conflict resolution and restorative justice. Drawing on qualitative research methods through philosophical inquiry, documentary analysis, and comparative interpretation, the study explores the ethical foundations, justice mechanisms, and contemporary relevance of both traditions. Findings reveal that although Ubuntu and Igbo justice systems emerge from different cultural and geographical contexts, they share a common philosophical foundation based on relational personhood, collective responsibility, consensus-building, and the restoration of social harmony. Ubuntu's principle that human identity is realized through relationships corresponds with Igbo concepts such as Omenala, Ofo na Ogu, Umunna, and Oha-na-Eze, which emphasize truth, moral accountability, communal participation, and reconciliation. The study argues that these indigenous systems challenge the dominance of punitive justice models by presenting alternative approaches where justice seeks not only to address wrongdoing but also to repair damaged relationships and reintegrate individuals into the community. While acknowledging challenges relating to gender inclusion, individual rights, and adaptation within modern state structures, the study maintains that Ubuntu and Igbo restorative traditions remain valuable resources for contemporary peace building, transitional justice, and the decolonization of Conflict Studies. It concludes that African communal ethics provides sophisticated theoretical and practical contributions to global conversations on sustainable conflict resolution.

KEYWORDS

Ubuntu, Igbo Traditional Justice System, communal ethics, consensus-building, restorative justice, indigenous peace building, conflict resolution, decolonisation

I. INTRODUCTION

Conflict remains an unavoidable aspect of human interaction and social organization. However, societies differ significantly in their understanding of justice and the mechanisms through which conflicts are resolved. Dominant Western legal traditions have historically emphasized adversarial procedures, individual responsibility, formal adjudication, and

punishment as mechanisms for addressing wrongdoing. While these approaches have contributed to the development of modern judicial systems, they often provide limited attention to the relational, communal, and restorative dimensions of justice that characterize many indigenous African societies.

Prior to colonial intervention, African communities developed sophisticated systems of conflict resolution grounded in moral responsibility, collective participation, dialogue, reconciliation, and the restoration of social harmony. These indigenous justice systems were not merely informal practices but represented coherent philosophical traditions shaped by particular understandings of personhood, community, morality, and social order. Unlike punitive approaches that focus primarily on determining guilt and administering sanctions, many African systems interpret conflict as a disruption of relationships that requires healing, accountability, and the rebuilding of communal bonds.

Ubuntu represents one of the most influential expressions of African communal philosophy. Originating among Bantu-speaking societies of southern Africa, Ubuntu is commonly expressed through the principle *Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, meaning that a person becomes a person through other persons. This philosophy emphasizes that human identity is relational and that individual wellbeing is inseparable from the wellbeing of the wider community. Ubuntu therefore promotes values such as compassion, mutual responsibility, forgiveness, dialogue, and reconciliation as essential foundations for social harmony.

Within the context of conflict resolution, Ubuntu challenges adversarial understandings of justice by emphasizing restoration rather than punishment. Wrongdoing is viewed not only as a violation against an individual but as damage to the moral and relational fabric of the community. Consequently, justice involves acknowledging harm, restoring relationships, reintegrating offenders, and rebuilding communal trust. This approach aligns closely with restorative justice principles, which prioritize repairing harm and involving affected communities in the resolution process.

Similarly, the Igbo Traditional Justice System of south eastern Nigeria represents a highly developed indigenous framework for managing disputes and maintaining social order. Rooted in concepts such as *Omenala* (customary law and moral order), *Ofo na Ogu* (truth, justice, and righteousness), *Umunna* (kinship-based mediation), and *Udo* (peace and harmony), Igbo justice emphasizes consensus-building, accountability, restitution, and reconciliation. The objective of justice is not the exclusion of offenders but their moral transformation and reintegration into the community.

Although Ubuntu and the Igbo Traditional Justice System developed within different geographical and cultural contexts, they demonstrate significant philosophical similarities. Both traditions understand personhood as relational, view conflict as a communal concern, and regard justice as a process of restoring balance rather than imposing punishment. They also emphasize dialogue, consensus, and collective responsibility as essential pathways to sustainable peace. These similarities reveal a broader African philosophy of justice in which harmony and reconciliation remain central to social existence.

Despite increasing scholarly interest in indigenous African approaches to conflict resolution,

existing studies often examine Ubuntu and Igbo justice traditions separately. Ubuntu scholarship has largely focused on southern African contexts, particularly its influence on transitional justice processes such as South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, while Igbo justice studies have mainly emerged within Nigerian customary law and anthropological literature. Limited attention has been given to a comparative philosophical analysis that examines the shared ethical foundations and contributions of both systems to contemporary conflict resolution theory.

This study addresses this gap by comparatively examining Ubuntu and the Igbo Traditional Justice System as complementary African frameworks of communal ethics and restorative justice. It argues that these traditions constitute sophisticated indigenous knowledge systems that challenge the dominance of adversarial and punitive justice models. By bringing Ubuntu and Igbo justice into dialogue, the study contributes to ongoing discussions on restorative justice, indigenous peace building, and the decolonization of Conflict Studies by demonstrating the continuing relevance of African philosophies in building sustainable peace.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Existing scholarship on indigenous African conflict resolution increasingly recognizes African justice traditions as sophisticated systems of knowledge grounded in communal ethics, reconciliation, and restorative approaches. Earlier colonial interpretations frequently portrayed African customary justice systems as informal and lacking theoretical foundations. However, contemporary African philosophical and peace building scholarship has challenged these assumptions by demonstrating that indigenous African societies developed coherent moral frameworks for managing conflicts, regulating behavior, and preserving social harmony.

A. *Ubuntu and African Communitarian Philosophy*

Ubuntu has attracted significant scholarly attention as one of the most influential concepts within African moral and political philosophy. The concept, widely expressed through the phrase *Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* ("a person is a person through other persons"), presents a relational understanding of human existence in which identity, morality, and wellbeing are shaped through relationships with others (Ramose, 1999). Unlike individualistic perspectives that emphasize personal autonomy as the foundation of social life, Ubuntu argues that personhood develops through participation in community and fulfilment of obligations toward others.

Shutte (1993) argues that Ubuntu represents an African philosophy of human interdependence that places relationships, compassion, and collective wellbeing at the centre of moral reasoning. Similarly, Metz (2007) explains Ubuntu as a systematic ethical theory based on harmonious relationships, shared identity, and solidarity. These perspectives demonstrate that Ubuntu is not merely a cultural expression but a philosophical framework that provides guidance for social organization and conflict resolution.

Within conflict management, Ubuntu emphasizes dialogue, forgiveness, reconciliation, and restoration of relationships. Tutu (1999), reflecting on South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, presents Ubuntu as a moral foundation for transitional justice because it seeks healing rather than revenge. This restorative orientation has influenced contemporary debates on peace building by demonstrating the relevance of African indigenous ethics to societies recovering from violence and social fragmentation.

B. Igbo Traditional Justice and Indigenous Conflict Resolution

The Igbo Traditional Justice System represents another significant African framework for resolving disputes through communal participation and restorative principles. Scholars have demonstrated that Igbo justice is embedded within social institutions and philosophical concepts such as Omenala, Ofo na Ogu, Umunna, and Udo, which collectively regulate moral behavior and maintain harmony within society. Omenala functions as the body of customary laws, values, and ancestral principles that guide social conduct, while Ofo na Ogu represents truth, justice, innocence, and moral authority. These concepts establish the ethical foundations upon which disputes are resolved. Unlike adversarial systems that emphasize punishment, Igbo justice seeks to restore relationships through truth-telling, apology, compensation, forgiveness, and reintegration.

Elechi (2006) argues that Igbo indigenous justice practices represent a form of restorative justice because they involve victims, offenders, families, and the wider community in resolving disputes. Institutions such as the council of elders, age grades, and Umuada provide platforms where conflicts are addressed through dialogue and consensus-building rather than coercive punishment. These mechanisms illustrate the communal nature of Igbo approaches to peace building.

C. African Restorative Justice and Consensus-Building

A major theme linking Ubuntu and Igbo justice traditions is their commitment to restorative justice. Restorative justice theory challenges punitive models by arguing that justice should focus on repairing harm, addressing the needs of victims, encouraging offender accountability, and restoring damaged relationships. Although restorative justice gained formal recognition within contemporary legal scholarship, many of its principles existed within African indigenous societies long before their development in modern justice systems. Ubuntu practices such as community dialogue and reconciliation ceremonies, as well as Igbo mechanisms involving elders, Umunna, and Ofo na Ogu, demonstrate longstanding African traditions of restorative conflict management. These traditions also emphasize consensus-building as a pathway to sustainable peace. Rather than producing winners and losers, indigenous African systems aim to achieve resolutions accepted by all parties. This reflects the belief that justice must preserve the future relationship between disputants and maintain the wellbeing of the wider community.

D. Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Decolonizing Conflict Studies

The study of Ubuntu and Igbo justice traditions contributes to broader debates on the decolonization of Conflict Studies. Colonial systems often displaced indigenous African

justice mechanisms by privileging Western legal institutions and portraying African approaches as inferior. This contributed to the marginalization of African epistemologies within mainstream peace and conflict scholarship. African scholars have argued for the recognition of indigenous knowledge systems as legitimate sources of theory and practice. Ramose (1999) maintains that African philosophies provide alternative ways of understanding humanity, justice, and social relationships. Similarly, Wiredu (1996) and Jegede & Afatakpa (2021) emphasizes the need to recover African intellectual traditions and engage them as contributors to global philosophical debates.

From this perspective, Ubuntu and Igbo justice traditions represent forms of epistemic resistance because they challenge assumptions that valid theories of justice must emerge from Western experiences. Their emphasis on relational personhood, communal responsibility, and restorative reconciliation provides valuable contributions to contemporary discussions on peace building and conflict transformation.

E. Gap in Existing Literature

Although significant scholarship exists on Ubuntu and Igbo traditional justice, most studies examine these systems separately. Ubuntu scholarship has largely concentrated on southern African contexts, particularly its role in transitional justice and reconciliation, while studies on Igbo justice have mainly focused on customary law, anthropology, and local dispute resolution. Limited scholarly attention has been given to a comparative philosophical analysis that explores Ubuntu and the Igbo Traditional Justice System as complementary African frameworks of communal ethics and restorative justice. Furthermore, existing research often focuses on institutional practices without adequately examining the deeper philosophical principles connecting both systems.

This study addresses these gaps by comparing Ubuntu and Igbo justice traditions through the themes of relational personhood, communal responsibility, consensus-building, and restorative reconciliation. It argues that these traditions constitute sophisticated African knowledge systems capable of enriching contemporary conflict resolution theory and contributing to the decolonization of Peace and Conflict Studies.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored on three complementary theoretical perspectives: African Communitarian Theory, Restorative Justice Theory, and Conflict Transformation Theory. These theories provide the analytical framework for examining Ubuntu and the Igbo Traditional Justice System as indigenous African approaches to conflict resolution. Together, they explain the significance of relational personhood, communal responsibility, dialogue, consensus-building, reconciliation, and the restoration of social harmony.

A. African Communitarian Theory

African Communitarian Theory provides the philosophical foundation for understanding the communal orientation of Ubuntu and Igbo traditional justice. The theory emphasizes that human identity is formed within networks of social relationships and that individuals achieve full personhood through participation in communal life. Unlike individualistic frameworks

that prioritize personal autonomy, African communitarianism stresses interdependence, collective responsibility, mutual care, and the pursuit of communal wellbeing.

Ubuntu reflects this philosophy through the principle *Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, which maintains that a person becomes human through relationships with others. Similarly, Igbo concepts such as *Oha-na-Eze*, *Umunna*, and *Omenala* demonstrate that justice and moral responsibility are located within the wider community rather than isolated individuals. From this perspective, conflict represents a disruption of social relationships that requires collective intervention and restoration. African Communitarian Theory is therefore relevant to this study because it explains why Ubuntu and Igbo justice traditions prioritize dialogue, consensus, and communal harmony over adversarial competition. Both systems are grounded in the belief that sustainable peace depends on the wellbeing of the entire community.

B. Restorative Justice Theory

Restorative Justice Theory provides a framework for analysing how Ubuntu and Igbo justice systems respond to wrongdoing and social conflict. The theory challenges punitive models of justice by arguing that conflict resolution should focus on repairing harm, restoring relationships, encouraging offender accountability, and addressing the needs of victims and communities (Braithwaite, 2002; Zehr, 2015). Unlike retributive approaches that emphasize punishment, restorative justice views wrongdoing as damage to human relationships. Justice is therefore achieved when affected parties participate in processes that promote truth-telling, apology, restitution, forgiveness, and reconciliation. This closely reflects the principles embedded in African indigenous conflict resolution systems. Ubuntu embodies restorative justice through its emphasis on forgiveness, dialogue, and reintegration of offenders into the community. Similarly, Igbo justice traditions employ mechanisms such as *Ofo na Ogu*, *Umunna* mediation, compensation, and reconciliation rituals to restore social balance rather than permanently exclude offenders. Restorative Justice Theory therefore provides an important lens for demonstrating that African indigenous societies developed sophisticated restorative practices long before their recognition within contemporary justice scholarship.

C. Conflict Transformation Theory

Conflict Transformation Theory, associated with Lederach (1997), argues that sustainable peace requires more than the settlement of immediate disputes. It focuses on transforming damaged relationships, rebuilding trust, addressing underlying causes of conflict, and creating conditions for long-term peaceful coexistence. This perspective aligns strongly with Ubuntu and Igbo justice traditions because both systems understand conflict as a breakdown of relationships rather than merely a violation of rules. The objective of conflict resolution is therefore not only to stop disagreement but to restore harmony among individuals, families, and the wider community.

Ubuntu achieves conflict transformation through collective dialogue, recognition of shared humanity, and rebuilding relationships. Similarly, the Igbo Traditional Justice System transforms conflict through communal deliberation, elder mediation, reconciliation practices, and restoration of *Udo* (peace and harmony). These processes seek to heal the social damage caused by conflict while preventing future disputes. Together, African Communitarian Theory, Restorative Justice Theory, and Conflict Transformation Theory provide a comprehensive framework for analysing Ubuntu and the Igbo Traditional Justice

System. They demonstrate that these indigenous African traditions are not merely cultural practices but coherent systems of knowledge that contribute significantly to contemporary peace building, restorative justice, and the decolonization of Conflict Studies.

IV. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design based on philosophical inquiry, documentary analysis, and comparative interpretation. The qualitative approach is appropriate because the study examines the ethical foundations, philosophical assumptions, and conflict resolution principles embedded within Ubuntu and the Igbo Traditional Justice System. Data for the study were derived from secondary sources, including scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, ethnographic studies, and relevant publications on African philosophy, indigenous justice systems, restorative justice, and peace building. The study critically examined literature on Ubuntu concepts of relational personhood and communal ethics alongside Igbo principles such as Omenala, Ofo na Ogu, Umunna, and Udo. The collected materials were analysed through thematic and comparative approaches. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring ideas such as communal responsibility, consensus-building, dialogue, reconciliation, and restoration of social harmony. Comparative analysis enabled the study to examine the similarities and differences between Ubuntu and Igbo justice traditions while highlighting their shared contributions to indigenous African conflict resolution. This methodological approach provides a framework for demonstrating how Ubuntu and the Igbo Traditional Justice System function as sophisticated African knowledge systems capable of contributing to contemporary debates on restorative justice, peace building, and the decolonization of Conflict Studies.

V. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

A. Relational Personhood and Communal Responsibility as Foundations of Justice

The findings reveal that Ubuntu and the Igbo Traditional Justice System are both founded on a relational understanding of human existence, where the individual is understood as part of a wider network of social relationships. Unlike individualistic approaches that treat conflict primarily as a dispute between separate persons, both African traditions perceive conflict as a disruption of communal balance that affects the entire society.

Within Ubuntu philosophy, the principle *Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* emphasizes that personhood is achieved through relationships with others. Human identity is therefore defined by participation in community, mutual recognition, compassion, and responsibility toward others (Ramose, 1999; Metz, 2007). This philosophy establishes the foundation for conflict resolution because the wellbeing of one individual is considered inseparable from the wellbeing of the larger community.

Similarly, the Igbo Traditional Justice System reflects a communal understanding of personhood through institutions and principles such as *Oha-na-Eze*, *Umunna*, and *Omenala*. Justice is not regarded as the responsibility of isolated individuals or formal authorities alone but as a collective process involving families, elders, and the wider community. The involvement of communal institutions ensures that conflict resolution strengthens social relationships rather than creating permanent divisions.

These findings demonstrate that both traditions challenge highly individualistic models of justice by presenting conflict resolution as a collective responsibility aimed at restoring relationships and preserving social harmony.

B. Dialogue and Consensus-Building as Conflict Resolution Mechanisms

Another major finding is that Ubuntu and Igbo justice traditions prioritize dialogue and consensus-building over adversarial confrontation. The goal of dispute resolution is not simply to determine winners and losers but to create agreements that restore peace among all parties involved.

Ubuntu-based conflict resolution emphasizes inclusive dialogue, where affected individuals and community members participate in deliberations aimed at achieving mutual understanding. Traditional forums such as community councils provide spaces where grievances are expressed, responsibility is acknowledged, and solutions are collectively negotiated.

The Igbo Traditional Justice System demonstrates a similar commitment through the mediation roles of elders, Umunna, age-grade associations, and other customary institutions. These structures encourage open discussion, examination of evidence, and collective decision-making based on the principles of fairness and reconciliation. The concept of Ofo na Ogu further reinforces the expectation that justice must be guided by truth, moral integrity, and fairness.

This finding indicates that consensus-building is not merely a procedural method but an expression of African communal ethics. Decisions gain legitimacy because they emerge from participation, acceptance, and shared commitment to restoring peace.

C. Restoration of Harmony over Punitive Justice

The study further finds that Ubuntu and Igbo traditional justice systems prioritize restoration rather than punishment. While many formal legal systems emphasize sanctions against offenders, these indigenous traditions focus on repairing harm, rebuilding relationships, and reintegrating individuals into the community.

Ubuntu's restorative orientation is based on the belief that wrongdoing damages relationships and that justice must seek healing. The offender remains a member of the community whose transformation and reintegration are necessary for sustainable peace. Therefore, forgiveness, accountability, and reconciliation become central aspects of justice. Similarly, Igbo justice traditions emphasize restitution, apology, compensation, and reconciliation. Through institutions such as Umunna and principles such as Omenala and Ofo na Ogu, offenders are encouraged to accept responsibility and repair the harm caused by their actions.

These findings align with Restorative Justice Theory, which argues that effective justice should involve victims, offenders, and communities in processes that repair harm and rebuild relationships. They also demonstrate that restorative justice existed within African societies long before its formal development in contemporary legal scholarship.

D. Indigenous Justice Systems as Epistemic Resistance

The findings also reveal that Ubuntu and the Igbo Traditional Justice System function as forms of epistemic resistance against colonial interpretations that portrayed African justice

systems as primitive, informal, or lacking philosophical foundations. Both traditions demonstrate that African societies possessed sophisticated approaches to justice based on ethical reasoning, social responsibility, and reconciliation.

Colonial legal systems often marginalized indigenous institutions by privileging Western models of law and governance. However, Ubuntu concepts of relational humanity and Igbo principles such as Omenala, Ofo na Ogu, and Udo illustrate that African communities developed complex systems for regulating behaviour and resolving disputes. Recognizing these traditions contributes to the decolonization of Conflict Studies by repositioning African knowledge systems as legitimate theoretical frameworks rather than merely cultural practices. Ubuntu and Igbo justice traditions therefore expand global understanding of justice beyond punitive and state-centred models.

E. Contemporary Relevance to Peace building and Restorative Justice

The study further establishes that Ubuntu and the Igbo Traditional Justice System remain relevant to contemporary peace building, transitional justice, and alternative dispute resolution. Modern justice systems continue to face challenges such as prolonged litigation, high costs, prison overcrowding, and limited attention to reconciliation. Indigenous African approaches provide complementary models that emphasize accessibility, participation, and social healing. Ubuntu's influence on reconciliation processes, particularly in post-conflict societies, demonstrates the continuing value of African communal ethics in rebuilding divided communities (Tutu, 1999). Likewise, Igbo customary justice institutions continue to provide culturally meaningful mechanisms for resolving family, land, and communal disputes through dialogue and mediation.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that Ubuntu and the Igbo Traditional Justice System are not outdated traditions but dynamic knowledge systems with significant contributions to contemporary conflict resolution. Their emphasis on relational personhood, communal responsibility, consensus-building, and restorative justice offers valuable insights for developing more inclusive and culturally grounded approaches to sustainable peace building.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study has comparatively examined Ubuntu and the Igbo Traditional Justice System as indigenous African frameworks of conflict resolution grounded in communal ethics, consensus-building, and restorative justice. Although both traditions emerged from different cultural and geographical contexts, the analysis demonstrates that they share a common philosophical foundation that prioritizes relational personhood, collective responsibility, dialogue, reconciliation, and the restoration of social harmony. These principles challenge approaches to justice that focus primarily on punishment by emphasizing the repair of damaged relationships and the reintegration of individuals into the community.

The findings establish that Ubuntu's understanding of humanity through the principle of Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu aligns closely with Igbo concepts such as Omenala, Ofo na Ogu, Umunna, and Udo. Both traditions recognize that conflict affects not only individuals directly involved in disputes but also the wider community. Consequently, justice is viewed as a collective process requiring participation, moral accountability, truth-telling, forgiveness, restitution, and reconciliation. This demonstrates that African societies

developed sophisticated mechanisms for conflict management long before the emergence of contemporary restorative justice frameworks.

The study further reveals that Ubuntu and Igbo justice traditions represent important indigenous knowledge systems that contribute to the decolonisation of Conflict Studies. By challenging colonial assumptions that African justice mechanisms were informal or philosophically inadequate, these traditions demonstrate that African societies possessed coherent theories of justice based on ethical responsibility, communal participation, and social restoration. Their recognition therefore promotes epistemic justice by positioning African philosophies as valuable contributors to global debates on peace building and conflict transformation.

In contemporary societies where, formal justice systems often struggle with accessibility, prolonged legal processes, and limited capacity for relational healing, Ubuntu and Igbo restorative approaches offer useful insights for alternative dispute resolution and sustainable peace building. Their emphasis on dialogue, community participation, accountability, and reconciliation provide culturally grounded pathways for addressing conflicts while preserving human dignity and social cohesion.

The study concludes that Ubuntu and the Igbo Traditional Justice System should not be viewed merely as historical customs but as living intellectual traditions with continuing relevance. Their shared commitment to communal harmony and restorative justice provides an important foundation for developing inclusive, humane, and culturally responsive models of conflict resolution in Africa and beyond.

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