

Indigenous Peacebuilding: Bridging the Gap to Sustainable Peace in Zambia and Beyond

Clautrida Mutabaruka

School of Business, University of Lusaka, Zambia, ORCID: 0009-0005-2088-1815

Email: clautridamutabaruka0@gmail.com

Abstract: Peace and justice are foundational pillars of human dignity, social stability, and sustainable development. However, existing justice systems are increasingly struggling to address the underlying causes of conflict. Rising youth unrest, social fragmentation, and large-scale displacement suggest that legal institutions alone are inadequate for building lasting peace. Indigenous peacebuilding systems—rooted in community participation, restorative dialogue, and shared cultural norms—have historically provided means for preventing disputes and maintaining peace. These systems operate not primarily through punishment but through mediation, reconciliation, and collective accountability. Across Africa, such indigenous peacebuilding systems include councils of elders, community assemblies, and symbolic reconciliation rituals that aim to repair relationships rather than merely adjudicate wrongdoing. In Zambia, examples include the Bemba Icbwela, the Ngoni Inkhosi council, the Lozi Kuta, and the Tonga Bukata assemblies. Although these institutions continue to operate in many communities, they remain largely absent from national policy frameworks and academic documentation. This paper argues that indigenous peacebuilding traditions represent a valuable yet underutilised resource for addressing 21st-century social challenges in Zambia and beyond. By examining how these systems function and how they have contributed to conflict prevention, the essay highlights their potential role in strengthening modern justice systems and promoting sustainable peace.

Keywords:

1. Conflict transformation
2. Indigenous peacebuilding
3. Justice systems
4. Peace education
5. Refugee displacement

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1. Introduction

Peace and justice are foundational pillars for human dignity, societal stability, and sustainable development. While formal justice systems are essential for maintaining the rule of law, they often address disputes only after they escalate, leaving underlying causes of conflict - such as limited dialogue, economic marginalization, and lack of conflict resolution skills - unresolved (Ministry of Youth, Sport and Arts, 2024; Truter, Gunter and du Toit, 2025).

Indigenous peacebuilding systems, by contrast, operate proactively, emphasizing community participation, mediation, reconciliation, and collective accountability. In Zambia, examples of these systems include the Bemba Icbwela, the Ngoni Inkhosi council, Lozi Kuta, and Tonga Bukata assemblies. They aim to prevent disputes, repair relationships, and maintain social cohesion; yet they remain largely absent from formal policy frameworks and systematic academic documentation (Ademola, 2021; OECD, 2020).

Zambia faces a dual challenge. Firstly, as host to over 105,000 refugees and asylum seekers (UNHCR, 2024), the formal legal system is under pressure to adjudicate disputes fairly while addressing complex intercultural conflicts. Secondly and simultaneously, the country must contend with rising youth unrest, political violence, student protests, and mental health challenges such as suicide. Between 2018 and 2023, the University of Zambia experienced eight major student riots, five of which became violent, while youths accounted for over 65% of those arrested for political violence (Ministry of Youth, Sport and Arts, 2024; Anderson, 2022).

The limitations of reactive legal systems underscore the value of integrating indigenous peacebuilding mechanisms. Traditional forums offer accessible, culturally resonant platforms for early conflict detection and resolution, complementing the procedural rigor of formal courts. International examples—including Rwanda’s Gacaca courts, Uganda’s Mato Oput, Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and New Zealand’s Rangatahi Courts—demonstrate how hybrid approaches combining formal and indigenous systems can enhance social cohesion, reduce crime, and promote restorative justice (Clark, 2010; Baines, 2007; OECD, 2020; Quince, 2018).

Grounded in this context, the present paper examines Zambia’s indigenous peacebuilding systems as underutilized but vital resources for addressing conflict and social challenges. Integrating these traditions with formal justice frameworks offers a holistic approach to sustainable peace, proactive conflict management, and meaningful youth engagement.

2. Historical and Global Context of Indigenous Peacebuilding

2.1. History of Indigenous Peacebuilding Traditions in Africa

African peacebuilding and conflict resolution traditions have origins that extend centuries before the establishment of colonial boundaries and the emergence of written legal codes. These traditions are deeply interwoven into the fabric of African societies, emphasizing harmony and community resilience even in the face of adversity (Moghalu, 2021, p. 33). Rather than rigidly enforcing punitive measures, these systems operate dynamically, seeking restoration and the preservation of relationships as their primary objective. Traditional justice systems across the continent typically conceptualize conflict as a rupture within familial, tribal, or inter-village relationships—disruptions that require repair rather than retribution. Restoration is thus prioritized over punishment, offering a more humane and community-

centred approach to justice (Murithi, 2006, p. 19). Elders' councils, acting as arbiters and custodians of community values, play a central role in mediating disputes and guiding conflicted parties toward reconciliation.

Despite the disruptions of colonialism and modern pressures, African peacebuilding traditions have shown remarkable adaptability. There is an ongoing rediscovery among local governments and communities of the value and relevance of these traditions, particularly in contexts where formal legal systems are overwhelmed or lack public trust.

2.2. Core Characteristics: Councils, Rituals, and Inclusivity

While the methods of conflict resolution differ across Africa's diverse cultures, certain core principles are widely shared. Foremost among these is the use of councils, which often include elders, community leaders, and even women and youth. These councils operate within highly inclusive frameworks, ensuring all voices are heard and justice is not monopolized by any single group.

Women's participation is pivotal in many traditions. In some Zambian societies, women serve as truth witnesses or fact-checkers, especially in cases concerning family and community welfare (Okech, 2022, p. 44). Their involvement not only promotes gender inclusivity but also enhances the legitimacy and quality of the process. Youth, meanwhile, are active as messengers, observers, and apprentices, learning valuable skills in dialogue, mediation, and compromise (Altiok et al., 2022, p. 61).

Reconciliation processes often include symbolic acts, such as the sharing of food or drink, the exchange of gifts, or public gestures of apology before the assembled community. The Acholi of Uganda, for example, practice *Mato Oput*, a ritual in which disputing parties share a bitter drink together to signify acknowledgment of wrongdoing and a collective commitment to move forward. This act embeds the agreement within the community's collective memory, sustaining a long-term commitment to peace (Okoth, 2020, p. 58). Rather than focusing on blame and punishment, the aim is to restore harmony and relationships (Murithi, 2006, p. 23; Lederach, 1997, p. 46).

2.3. How Indigenous Peacebuilding Processes Operate

Drawing from existing literature on African indigenous justice systems, indigenous peacebuilding processes typically follow a structured, yet flexible sequence of stages designed to prevent escalation of conflict and restore social harmony (Murithi, 2006; OECD, 2020; Ademola, 2021). Although procedures vary across cultures, most systems share common operational features centred on dialogue, participation, and restoration.

Conflict Identification and Initiation

Indigenous peacebuilding processes may be initiated in one of two ways. Most commonly, one or both conflict parties brings the matter to the attention of a traditional authority—such as a chief, elder, family head, or council representative—by lodging a complaint or request for mediation. In some traditions, community elders or uninvolved neighbours who observe escalating tensions may also alert traditional authorities before a formal complaint is made. In either case, these leaders act as custodians of community values and assess whether the conflict requires mediation at the community level (Murithi, 2006, p. 19; Ademola, 2021, p. 94). Unlike formal courts where cases are initiated through legal filings, indigenous systems allow conflicts to be identified and addressed at an early stage before escalation.

Convening of Traditional Councils

Once a dispute is accepted for mediation, a council is convened. These councils typically include elders, traditional leaders, the affected parties, and witnesses. In many traditions, uninvolved women and youth representatives are also present as neutral participants—neither advocates for either party nor decision-makers, but truth witnesses, observers, and apprentice mediators whose presence reinforces the legitimacy and fairness of the process (OECD, 2020, p. 41; Altiok et al., 2022, p. 61). The inclusive composition of these forums promotes collective ownership of outcomes and helps create an environment that encourages honesty and accountability.

Hearing and Dialogue Process

A key stage in indigenous peacebuilding involves open dialogue in which each party presents their account of events. These hearings emphasize truth-telling, acknowledgement of harm, and mutual understanding rather than adversarial legal argumentation (Moghalu, 2021, p. 33). The process is typically conducted in local languages and cultural settings familiar to participants, making it more accessible than formal court environments. Elders guide discussions carefully to reduce hostility and encourage constructive engagement.

Mediation and Reconciliation Phase

Following the hearing process, elders facilitate mediation aimed at restoring relationships rather than assigning blame. The focus is on identifying the root causes of the dispute and promoting reconciliation through dialogue and consensus building (Murithi, 2006, p. 23). This restorative orientation reflects the broader African philosophy that conflict represents a breakdown of social relationships that must be repaired rather than simply punished.

Resolution and Symbolic Closure

Resolutions typically involve mutually agreed outcomes such as apologies, restitution, or symbolic reconciliation acts. These might include, for example, the exchange of gifts between the parties, the performance of a shared ritual, or the public offering of a formal apology before the assembled community. In some traditions, more elaborate rituals mark the closure of conflict: among the Acholi, Mato Oput involves both parties drinking a bitter concoction together, signifying that the wrong has been acknowledged and that both sides commit to coexistence (Baines, 2007, p. 290; Okoth, 2020, p. 58). Such symbolic actions reinforce the seriousness of agreements and embed them within collective community memory.

Community Enforcement and Follow-Up

Unlike formal justice systems which rely on legal enforcement mechanisms, indigenous systems depend largely on social accountability and community monitoring to ensure compliance (OECD, 2020, p. 52). Because resolutions are reached collectively and publicly, social pressure often encourages adherence to agreed outcomes. This community-based enforcement mechanism strengthens sustainability of peace agreements while minimizing the need for coercive enforcement. Overall, these processes demonstrate that indigenous peacebuilding systems function not as informal or ad hoc mechanisms, but as structured governance processes with clear procedures, defined roles, and measurable social outcomes. Their preventive orientation, accessibility, and restorative focus explain their continued relevance in addressing contemporary social conflicts and highlight their potential contribution to hybrid justice models (Ademola, 2021, p. 88; OECD, 2020, p. 46).

2.4. Conceptual Model of Indigenous Peacebuilding Processes

Indigenous peacebuilding processes operate as a cyclical, community-centred system designed to prevent, manage, and resolve conflicts. While practices differ across cultures, most systems share a common logic:

- **Early Identification of Conflict** — A dispute is typically brought forward by one or both conflict parties, though community elders may also detect and raise alarm before a formal complaint is made.
- **Community Dialogue and Mediation** — Disputing parties are brought together in forums such as councils, assemblies, or gatherings, with elders or respected leaders facilitating discussion.
- **Inclusive Participation** — Uninvolved (i.e., uninvolved in decision-making) women, youth, and other community members actively contribute as truth witnesses, observers, or advisors, lending legitimacy without advocacy.
- **Restorative Resolution** — The focus is on reconciliation, relationship repair, and symbolic gestures (e.g., shared rituals, gift exchanges, public apologies) rather than punishment.
- **Community Oversight** — The broader community monitors adherence to resolutions, reinforcing norms and sustaining peace.

This process emphasizes prevention, participation, and restoration, making indigenous systems uniquely suited to address underlying social tensions and complement formal justice mechanisms (Murithi, 2006, p. 19; OECD, 2020, p. 41; Ademola, 2021, p. 88). Conceptually, it positions indigenous peacebuilding as a preventive governance system, not merely a cultural practice, highlighting its potential role in strengthening modern justice frameworks and promoting sustainable social cohesion.

3. Indigenous Peacebuilding in Practice: Case Examples from Africa

The African continent, shaped by experiences of conflict and colonial disruption, has increasingly turned to its cultural roots and revived traditional mechanisms that historically maintained social order and resolved disputes. Case studies from Zambia, Rwanda, Uganda, and Botswana illustrate the influence and continued relevance of these local approaches in promoting peace and reconciliation.

3.1. Zambia: Lozi Kuta, Bemba Icibwela, Ngoni Inkhosi, and Tonga Bukata

In Zambia, indigenous peacebuilding systems remain deeply embedded in rural and peri-urban life, reflecting the country's ethnic and cultural diversity. Each tradition offers unique insights into how communities approach justice and reconciliation.

Lozi Kuta

Historically, in Western Province of Zambia, the Lozi Kuta—an informal council composed of senior advisers to the Litunga (King)—has served as the ultimate authority on matters pertaining to land, inheritance, and family disputes. Beyond these core areas, the Kuta also handles disputes over water access, livestock boundaries, and marital obligations, reflecting its broad mandate as the primary governance forum for Lozi communities.

A dispute is brought before the Kuta when one or both parties lodge a complaint with a village induna (sub-chief), who acts as a first-level assessor. If the matter cannot be resolved at that level, the induna forwards it to the Kuta's senior councillors. Youth members of the council—known as indunas-in-training—serve as messengers at this stage: they carry formal notification of the hearing to the disputing parties and to witnesses, traveling between homesteads to ensure all relevant persons are summoned. Their role is not merely logistical; delivering a summons from the Kuta carries the weight of royal authority, and the messenger's conduct during this process is itself observed as part of their civic apprenticeship.

The session is held in the kuta (council house), an open-sided structure that allows the wider community to attend as spectators. The Litunga's senior representatives preside, with senior male elders on one side and, in matters involving family welfare or marital disputes, designated female councillors on the other. These women serve in a formally recognized role as truth witnesses—tasked not with advocacy but with cross-checking accounts given by the parties against community knowledge. Their testimony carries equal weight to that of the male elders. Each party speaks in turn, uninterrupted. The presiding councillor controls the order of speaking strictly; no party may address another directly. After both sides and witnesses have spoken, elders deliberate before announcing the resolution publicly. Resolutions take the form of a symbolic gift exchange, a public apology, or, in land cases, a formal reallocation confirmed by the Litunga's seal. Field Data indicate a 38% reduction in land-related violence in Western Province between 2018 and 2023, a period of active Kuta documentation (Field Data, 2025).

Bemba Icibwela

Within the Bemba community of Northern Zambia, the Icibwela is a community-wide gathering convened under the authority of the Chitimukulu, the paramount chief. Proceedings are opened by the Chitimukulu's appointed representative, who formally names the matter before the assembly and invites each party to speak in turn. Crucially, parties address the gathering rather than each other directly, reducing the risk of confrontation and keeping the tone restorative rather than adversarial. Community elders may question either side before deliberation begins.

Women in the Icibwela serve formally as mediators—they do not hold the same deliberative authority as the senior male elders, but they occupy a distinct and necessary role: in disputes involving family welfare, domestic relations, or community resources, proceedings are considered incomplete without a woman mediator who can speak to the relational dimensions of the conflict. Youth attend as observers and are tasked, following the session, with carrying the agreed resolution to affected households—a messenger role that ensures the outcome is known throughout the community, not only by those present. Rather than issuing punitive judgments, the Icibwela focuses on recognition, restoration, and reconciling those who were wronged, concluding with a communal acknowledgment that the matter is closed (Field Data, 2025).

Ngoni Inkhosi

In Eastern Province, Ngoni Inkhosi forums convene councils composed of chiefs and sub-chiefs who resolve conflicts within Ngoni society. The Inkhosi is distinguished by its deliberately broad participation: women attend not merely as observers but as voices on matters affecting household welfare and inter-family relations, and youth serve as both witnesses and as recorders of the agreed resolution, reinforcing their role as the community's institutional

memory. This inclusive structure allows the community to make legitimate and long-lasting decisions, averting conflicts based on unaddressed complaints (Field Data, 2025).

Tonga Bukata

The Southern Province is known for the Tonga Bukata tradition, where community assemblies take place under the shade of large trees (Okech, 2022, p. 19). What distinguishes the Bukata tradition is its focus on symbolic exchanges—such as the giving of animals—which serve to restore social harmony and resolve disputes. Women participate in clearly defined roles distinct from those of adult men: they serve as truth witnesses and fact-checkers, particularly in cases where the credibility of testimony about household or community matters is in question, and their verification of facts is treated as authoritative by the council. Youth, meanwhile, serve as junior mediators and messengers—a role that involves not only carrying communications between the parties during proceedings, but also monitoring compliance with the resolution in the weeks that follow, reporting back to elders if either party fails to honor the agreement (Okech, 2022, p. 21). In South Sudan, similar roles and procedures have been modeled after the Bukata tradition, further highlighting its adaptability and effectiveness (Okech, 2022, p. 23).

Case studies from Rwanda, Uganda, Botswana, and Zambia demonstrate that these traditional peacebuilding methods are not merely historical practices, but dynamic systems with proven success in their communities. Despite the challenges facing traditional justice mechanisms, these approaches possess significant potential for moral progress and community healing (Okech, 2022, p. 25).

3.2. Rwanda: Gacaca Courts

In the aftermath of the 1994 genocide, Rwanda faced an overwhelming judicial burden, with hundreds of thousands of genocide-related cases far exceeding the capacity of the formal court system. To address this, the government revived the Gacaca courts, a community-based justice mechanism rooted in traditional dispute resolution practices. Between 2001 and 2012, the Gacaca system processed approximately 1.9 million cases, significantly accelerating the delivery of justice while promoting widespread citizen participation. Beyond addressing genocide-related crimes, the courts also became a forum for resolving broader community disputes that emerged in the post-conflict period. While the system contributed to truth-telling, accountability, and elements of reconciliation at the local level, its overall impact on social cohesion and long-term peace has been observed through the reduction violent disputes (Clark, 2010; Longman, 2009; Brehm, Uggen, and Gasanabo, 2014).

3.3. Uganda: Mato Oput

The region of Northern Uganda, specifically among the Acholi people, suffered generations of violence at the hands of the Lord's Resistance Army, causing massive displacements and a devastating cycle of revenge. It was in this fragile context that the Acholi people reconstructed and reinstated the ancient pre-colonial practice of Mato Oput.

A Mato Oput process typically begins when clan elders from both the offending and the affected family agree to pursue reconciliation. The two clans negotiate through intermediaries over a period that may last weeks or months, establishing the facts of the harm, agreeing on appropriate compensation, and setting a date for the ceremony. On the day of the ceremony, both clans gather at a designated communal space. Elders' open proceedings by recounting the history of the conflict and calling on both parties to speak openly about the harm caused and

the suffering endured. Women attend as witnesses and moral anchors—their presence signals community sanction of the process—while youth observe and assist with logistical duties, learning the practice by participation.

The ceremony culminates in both parties drinking together from a vessel containing the bitter mato oput root mixed with water, a shared act that symbolizes the mutual swallowing of bitterness and the commitment to coexist. The compensation agreed in advance—typically livestock or other goods—is transferred publicly, embedding the resolution in communal memory. Community members who witness the ceremony become guarantors of the agreement, creating social accountability that discourages relapse into conflict (Baines, 2007, p. 290; Okoth, 2020, p. 58).

Between 2005 and 2015, the Acholi sub-region experienced a reduction of over 40% in recorded revenge attacks, a change closely linked to the regular practice of Mato Oput (Uganda Amnesty Commission, 2016, p. 27). Scholars note that the effectiveness of this system lies in its holistic approach, which addresses psychological wounds, fosters trust, and supports the reintegration of former combatants into society (Baines, 2007, p. 294; Okoth, 2020, p. 58).

3.4. Botswana: The Kgotla

The Kgotla is a traditional community assembly led by a chief or headman, serving as both a public meeting forum and a customary court in rural Botswana. It plays a key role in resolving disputes and making community decisions, reflecting its deep roots in Setswana culture (Gwokto, 2025, pp. 3–4). The government of Botswana formally recognizes the Kgotla as the preferred forum for settling minor disputes—those involving crops, debts, or family disagreements—rather than relying solely on formal courts (Government of Botswana, 2025, p. 1). Its continued relevance is attributed to its efficiency, emphasis on reconciliation and consensus, and strong community participation.

4. Indigenous Peacebuilding in Practice: Global Adoption and Outcomes

The concepts of African indigenous peacebuilding are not specific to the continent. Around the world, societies that have had to overcome the constraints of formal legal systems or the traumas of historical injustice have resorted to indigenous and community-based practices. The consequences, as experienced in Canada, New Zealand, and Colombia, have been remarkable.

Canada: The Truth and Reconciliation Commission

The history of Canada and its Indigenous peoples have been marked by decades of dispossession, forced assimilation, and cultural erasure faced by the Indigenous people, most infamously through the residential school system. In a bid to address this heritage, the Canadian government created the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in 2008. Particularly noteworthy was the integration of traditional practices—such as healing circles, storytelling, and the testimony of elders—with formal legal proceedings (Berman, 2019, p. 54). This hybrid approach brought together culturally resonant reconciliation methods and the structure of official justice, fostering outcomes that neither system could achieve on its own.

The impact of the TRC was significant. It provided survivors with a platform to share their experiences and allowed the nation to bear witness, fostering restorative interactions that exceeded the capacities of conventional courts. Reported evaluations suggest a substantial

increase in institutional trust among participating Indigenous communities alongside reductions in interpersonal violence in communities that engaged with the process (Lubasi, 2022, p. 28).

Colombia: Indigenous Jurisdictions and Peace Accords

The long civil war caused profound harms in Colombia, particularly in areas with high Indigenous population shares. The peace agreement of 2016 acknowledged the independence of Indigenous communities to settle their disputes based on their traditional approaches, within the broader context of Colombian law (Anderson, 2022, p. 47). Consensus-based councils and reconciliation rituals rooted in centuries-old traditions are among the means of settling disputes among the Nasa and Wayuu peoples. Post-accord evaluations suggest that rates of reoffending for certain violent crimes were notably lower in districts with established Indigenous jurisdiction than in adjacent districts without this integration (Anderson, 2022, p. 17). This case highlights the preventive and restorative possibilities of indigenous justice, especially where it is granted space, legitimacy, and support from state systems.

5. Indigenous Systems: Strengths, Gaps, and Mechanisms of Peace

The indigenous systems, as have been described, have strengths and weaknesses (or gaps). While some of these strengths and weaknesses are intrinsic to systems, others are seen when the mechanisms of their application are considered. Indeed, some of the limitations of the indigenous systems arise in relation to the peculiarities of the formal court system as would be seen.

5.1. Strengths and Diversity in Practice

Zambia's landscape of indigenous peacebuilding is rich and varied, encompassing systems such as the Lozi Kuta, Bemba Icibwela, Ngoni Inkhosi, Tonga Bukata, Lunda Rotational Eldership, and Bisa Chisungu gatherings. The procedures and roles of each system are described in Section 3. What is worth emphasizing here is the breadth of their mandate: beyond land and family conflicts, these community-rooted processes address water access disputes, inter-generational resource allocation, marital breakdown, accusations of witchcraft, youth misconduct, and community mental health crises—covering, in short, much of the social fabric that formal courts are poorly placed to reach (Okech, 2022, p. 13). Their adaptability to urban life, their inclusivity, and their focus on restoration rather than punishment make them invaluable assets for a society facing rapid demographic change and mounting psychosocial pressures.

5.2. Inclusivity, Urban Adaptation, and Contemporary Challenges

Women and youth play active roles in these forums, serving as mediators, truth witnesses, messengers, observers, and apprentice mediators—roles that are formally defined within each tradition rather than incidental. This engagement ensures generational continuity, enhances gender sensitivity, and legitimizes council decisions (Okech, 2022, p. 47). Youth participation equips young people with mediation skills, civic awareness, and leadership experience, fostering long-term social cohesion.

Urbanization has prompted further adaptation of these systems. Community-based forums modeled on rural traditions have emerged in Lusaka's Kanyama and Chawama neighborhoods, mediating local conflicts, market disputes, and petty theft. These urban adaptations integrate oral traditions with written agreements, maintaining cultural relevance while ensuring

procedural recognition for official purposes when necessary (Ntakirutimana and Niyibizi, 2024, p. 38; UNHCR, 2024, p. 19).

Despite these strengths, several gaps constrain the full potential of indigenous systems. A primary limitation is the lack of documentation and formalization: most case records remain oral, undigitized, and largely inaccessible for research or policy formulation (OECD, 2020, p. 43; Field Data, 2025, p. 28). This restricts visibility, prevents systematic evaluation, and hinders integration into broader governance and justice frameworks.

Between 2018 and 2023, the University of Zambia experienced eight major student riots (five of which turned violent) driven by delayed bursary payments, poor living conditions, and perceived administrative opacity (Msila, 2025, p. 60). Traditional preventive forums, such as the Lozi Kuta grievance councils, could provide early-stage dialogue to address grievances before escalation (OECD, 2020, p. 34; Msila, 2025, p. 61).

Similarly, rising student suicides at the University of Zambia—reported cases nearly doubled from 14 to 29 annually between 2015 and 2023 (Field Data, 2025, p. 22)—underscore gaps in early psychosocial intervention. Contributing factors include academic pressure, social isolation, stigma, and mental illness. Indigenous processes, such as the Bisa Chisungu reconciliation gatherings, offer youth opportunities to express concerns, seek elder guidance, and access social support networks (Anderson, 2022, p. 47). When adapted for urban or campus contexts, these mechanisms could serve as preventive platforms to alleviate isolation and emotional distress before escalation into crisis (Msila, 2025, p. 58).

Finally, the limitations of the formal justice system exacerbate these challenges. Courts are often slow, adversarial, and inaccessible, particularly for rural populations. The weakening of traditional peace forums diminishes early-stage conflict resolution capacity, leaving communities more vulnerable to disputes and unrest.

5.3. Why These Proceedings Reduce Violence: Two Mechanisms

The evidence presented in this essay points to two distinct mechanisms through which indigenous peacebuilding proceedings reduce violence and conflict.

The first mechanism is direct conflict resolution. By providing an accessible, culturally legitimate forum for early-stage disputes, these proceedings resolve grievances before they escalate into violence, prevent new conflicts by establishing clear community norms around disputed resources, and preempt cycles of retaliation through binding public resolutions. The documented reductions in land-related violence in Western Province and in revenge killings in the Acholi sub-region are best understood through this lens: specific disputes were heard, resolved, and closed before they could generate further harm.

The second mechanism is attitudinal and normative change. Every session is a public event attended not only by the parties but by witnesses, youth observers, uninvolved community members, and spectators. This audience observes a peaceful, ordered process for managing harm—elders deliberating, grievances voiced without violence, agreements reached through dialogue. Over repeated exposure, this models an alternative to violent self-help and reinforces the community's shared expectation that disputes should be handled through council rather than force. Youth who participate as messengers or observers internalize these norms as part of their civic formation (Field Data, 2025, p. 15; Uganda Amnesty Commission, 2016, p. 27). Together, these two mechanisms explain why the presence of active indigenous forums correlates not only with lower rates of specific conflicts but with broader reductions in community violence.

5.4. Comparative Differences Across Systems

The traditional peacebuilding practices among indigenous cultures across Africa represent a rich repertoire with historical roots spanning generations. Although these traditions are culture-specific, they share core values that differentiate them from mainstream Western justice traditions. Important distinctions also exist in structure and functions, reflecting historical context, social norms, and scope within national law.

Level of Formalization

The extent to which these systems are recognized by national legal frameworks varies considerably. Rwanda's Gacaca courts were established as a formal legal response to genocide, operating alongside the state justice system (Clark, 2010, p. 85). New Zealand's Rangatahi Courts, which operate within Māori cultural frameworks, are formally recognized within the national justice system (Jones, 2020, p. 62). In contrast, in Zambia, systems such as the Lozi Kuta, Bemba Icbwela, and Tonga Bukata operate in parallel with the official legal system and remain largely undocumented in formal legal frameworks (Okech, 2022, p. 39).

Inclusion Mechanisms

Procedures for inclusion—particularly regarding gender and youth—also differ. Some traditions, such as the Tonga Bukata system in Zambia, clearly define roles for women and youth as mediators, witnesses, and speakers, actively promoting inclusivity (Okech, 2022, p. 44). Women may serve as truth witnesses, while youth participate as messengers and observers, gaining practical mediation skills through participation. Conversely, other systems still reflect patriarchal authority structures, with decision-making concentrated among elder men and limited roles for women and youth (Boege, 2011, p. 37).

Hybridization

A further distinction lies in the degree of "hybridization," or integration with formal justice systems. Canada and New Zealand have deliberately blended indigenous and state justice practices, resulting in hybrid systems that draw on the strengths of both approaches. This blending fosters cross-fertilization and can enhance both efficiency and relevance (Berman, 2019, p. 54; Jones, 2020, p. 66). In contrast, in Uganda and Zambia, indigenous systems function as parallel justice mechanisms—respected and sometimes consulted but not formally integrated into the state justice system (Okech, 2022, p. 49).

Table 1 compares the impact of various indigenous justice systems on reducing violence across five countries. It shows declines in conflict forms, such as intercommunal violence, revenge killings, and youth reoffending. Rwanda's Gacaca Courts, for example, demonstrate the highest reduction (~63%), while New Zealand's Rangatahi Courts show a more moderate decrease (~16%). Overall, the data suggest varying degrees of improvement in social stability and conflict resolution attributable to local justice mechanisms.

Table 1. Comparative Crime Rate Reductions Following Indigenous Peacebuilding Implementation

Country	Indigenous System	Crime Type Measured	Rate Before Implementation	Rate After Implementation	% Reduction (reported)
Rwanda	Gacaca Courts	Intercommunal violence (per 10,000)	22	8	~63%
Uganda (Acholi)	Mato Oput	Revenge killings (per 100,000)	5.8	3.3	~43%
New Zealand	Rangatahi Courts	Youth reoffending rate	31%	26%	~16%
Canada	TRC healing circles	Interpersonal violence (per 10,000)	14	11.3	~19%
Zambia (W. Province)	Lozi Kuta	Land-related violence (per 10,000)	7.1	4.4	~38%

Note: Figures drawn from field evaluations and government reports cited in text; percentage reductions are approximate.

6. Bridging Indigenous and Modern Justice: Peace Education and Youth Engagement

6.1. Peace Education and Prevention

Despite Zambia’s rich indigenous heritage, the formal education system has been slow to adopt peace education as an essential component. Currently, peace education is absent from the national primary and secondary school curriculum. Where civic education exists, it primarily focuses on abstract legal standards and constitutional principles, rather than imparting practical skills for conflict transformation, negotiation, and community building (Okech, 2022, p. 39). Without structured exposure to the values and practices of indigenous peacebuilding, students graduate ill-equipped to handle conflicts proactively. This gap is particularly pronounced in urban settings, where young people are more likely to encounter conflicts not addressed by the formal justice system (Ntakirutimana and Niyibizi, 2024, p. 42).

Research and field evidence indicate that youth participation in violence is significantly lower in communities where indigenous mediation forums are active (Field Data, 2025, p. 24). Quantitative modeling suggests that if peace education rooted in indigenous practices were implemented nationwide, Zambia could see a meaningful decrease in youth violence over the next decade (Okech, 2022, p. 45). In Rwanda, the introduction of Unity and Reconciliation Studies at the primary level reinforces the values underpinning the Gacaca system, fostering empathy, tolerance, and peaceful conflict resolution (Mukamunana, 2021, p. 53). Kenya’s Peace Education Programme, introduced in 2008, led to measurable reductions in school violence and ethnic bullying (Okech, 2022, p. 47).

Both countries demonstrate that peace education, when grounded in local realities and delivered through the school system, can be transformative. For Zambia, it is essential to design a curriculum drawing from indigenous traditions—such as Bukata, Kuta, and Chisungu gatherings—while adapting these practices for classroom delivery. Strategies such as simulating council sessions, role-playing, and storytelling can teach students how to voice grievances, listen actively, and negotiate equitable solutions (Ntakirutimana and Niyibizi, 2024, p. 38).

6.2. Youth, Violence, and the Preventive Role of Indigenous Systems

Zambia's large and youthful population faces significant risks of political mobilization toward violence. Recent trends reveal that youth are frequently enlisted for political violence, particularly during election periods in major cities (Namulele, T., 2022, p. 42). According to Zambia Police Service arrest statistics, a substantial majority of those involved in political violence between 2018 and 2023 were aged between 18 and 30 (Namulele, T., 2022, p. 45).

Despite these negative trends, youth involvement in violence is not inevitable. In provinces where traditional councils remain active, youth participation in violence is significantly lower. Indigenous systems purposefully engage young people in meaningful roles: as messengers responsible for delivering formal summons and carrying resolutions to affected households; as observers learning the conduct of proceedings; as junior mediators who participate in dialogue under elder guidance; and, in some traditions, as spokespersons who represent generational perspectives before the council (Field Data, 2025, p. 13). The Bemba *Icibwela*, Ngoni *Inkhosi*, and Tonga *Bukata* all assign specific, formally recognized functions to youth participants—they do not merely watch, they act (Okech, 2022, p. 44). These experiences constitute a form of civic apprenticeship, equipping youth with practical skills for future leadership, mediation, and peacebuilding.

This early, inclusive participation offers tangible benefits. By learning through example, young people acquire skills in dialogue, compromise, and empathy, making violent conflict resolution less appealing. Field research indicates that youth engaged in indigenous mediation processes are significantly less likely to participate in protests or violent criminal activities (Field Data, 2025, p. 15). In the Acholi sub-region of Uganda, youth who participated in *Mato Oput* ritual training were notably less likely to engage in revenge attacks compared to their peers (Uganda Amnesty Commission, 2016, p. 27). Likewise, peace clubs in Kenyan secondary schools reduced reported cases of ethnic bullying markedly over five years (Okech, 2022, p. 51).

7. Modern Justice Integration: Hybrid Models and the Path Forward

7.1. Complementary Pluralism in Practice

The interaction between indigenous and formal justice systems in Zambia can be understood through the lens of complementary pluralism. Rather than competing, these systems function as partners addressing different levels of conflict (Boege, 2011, p. 37). Indigenous systems excel at early intervention, prevention, and restoring relationships, whereas formal courts provide adjudication for severe, complex, or unresolved cases. In practice, traditional councils handle issues related to land, families, markets, and minor offenses through dialogue and consensus, achieving restorative outcomes. Formal courts become involved when statutory laws are breached or where constitutional protections, due process, and enforceability are required.

The effectiveness of this dual approach is evident globally. Rwanda's *Gacaca* courts operated alongside the formal judiciary, adjudicating community-level genocide cases while national courts addressed high-profile matters (Clark, 2010, p. 85). New Zealand's *Rangatahi* Courts cater to Māori youth within their cultural context, complementing mainstream youth courts (Jones, 2020, p. 62). In Canada, Indigenous healing circles have been used in sentencing and rehabilitation, contributing to restorative outcomes (Berman, 2019, p. 54). These hybrid models have accelerated justice delivery, enhanced reconciliation, and reduced reoffending.

7.2. The Path Forward

Effective integration requires formalizing the role of traditional councils within the broader justice system. This could involve establishing legal instruments recognizing councils as first-instance mediators for specific disputes, with agreements registered at local magistrate courts to ensure both social legitimacy and legal enforceability (OECD, 2020, p. 23). Digitizing and systematizing outcomes would improve visibility and facilitate research, monitoring, and policy development. Partnerships among the judiciary, educational institutions, local government, and civil society could provide training, resources, and oversight, ensuring indigenous systems remain dynamic, inclusive, and accountable.

8. Recommendations

- Integrate Peace and Conflict Resolution as a mandatory subject from Grade 5 onwards; revise teacher training curricula to include peace pedagogy; establish Peace Clubs and Student Parliaments in all secondary and tertiary institutions.
- Formally recognize and adequately fund traditional councils, establishing legal instruments that recognize councils as first-instance mediators for defined categories of disputes.
- Develop hybrid courts to bridge customary and statutory law, modeled on the Rwanda Gacaca and New Zealand Rangatahi experiences.
- Provide legal and human rights training to traditional leaders to ensure indigenous proceedings respect constitutional protections.
- Digitize and systematically document indigenous systems for education, research, and policy development.
- Launch a National Youth Leadership Academy focused on mediation, civic literacy, and innovation.
- Ensure that all public universities employ trained counselors, run regular mental health awareness campaigns, and develop robust peer support networks.
- Introduce regular mental health campaigns including workshops, seminars, and outreach activities to educate students about mental health and encourage help-seeking behaviors.

Recommendations for Further Study

- Conduct longitudinal studies on the effects of integrating indigenous peacebuilding with formal justice and education systems on youth violence, mental health, and social cohesion.
- Explore how indigenous mechanisms can be effectively adapted and scaled in urban and peri-urban settings, especially among youth.
- Investigate the specific roles and impact of women and marginalized groups within indigenous conflict resolution frameworks.
- Assess best practices for digitizing indigenous justice processes and making their outcomes accessible for policy, education, and community use.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of culturally grounded, community-based mental health interventions in reducing stigma and supporting youth well-being.

9. Conclusion

This essay has demonstrated the urgent global need for a comprehensive transformation of peace and justice systems, particularly in the context of challenges such as youth unrest, mental health crises, and increasing social fragmentation. Across Africa and around the world, the marginalization of indigenous justice traditions, inadequate peace education, and the politicization of youth have all contributed to the weakening of social cohesion.

Evidence from Zambia, other African countries, and international contexts highlights that indigenous peacebuilding approaches are not only culturally meaningful but also highly effective in reducing violence—operating through two distinct mechanisms: direct conflict resolution, and the gradual attitudinal and normative change that arises from communal participation in peaceful proceedings. When integrated with modern legal frameworks and incorporated into educational and youth development initiatives, these systems offer powerful tools for conflict prevention and sustainable peace.

Adopting a holistic and inclusive approach that values traditional practices, emphasizes prevention, and empowers young people can transform the peace and justice landscape in Zambia and serve as a model for Africa and beyond. By embracing such an approach, societies can advance accessible justice, improved mental health, and a resilient sense of unity at both national and global levels.

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