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HEALING BORDERS: UBUNTU PHILOSOPHY AS A FRAMEWORK FOR REFUGEE IDENTITY AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN UGANDA

Abstract

This paper presents a comprehensive literature review examining the application and relevance of Ubuntu philosophy to conflict resolution among refugees in Uganda, specifically focusing on its profound implications for refugee and migration contexts and the accompanying transformation of African identities. The review aimed to evaluate the application of Ubuntu in conflict resolution within Ugandan refugee settings, benchmark Ubuntu-influenced integration programmes, identify implementation challenges and opportunities, deconstruct Ubuntu's role in social justice and reconciliation and compare indigenous approaches with global refugee frameworks. Amidst the ongoing refugee crisis and diverse internal conflicts, the paper explores how the intrinsic values of communal harmony, interconnectedness and shared humanity inherent in Ubuntu inform both traditional and contemporary approaches to conflict resolution across various Ugandan settings, including prominent refugee settlements. By synthesising existing scholarly works, this review argues that Ubuntu principles provide a powerful indigenous framework for reconciliation; their efficacy is contingent upon navigating the profound tensions between communal ethics and the material realities of displacement. By positioning Ubuntu as a framework for relational identity formation, the review concludes that a critical application of Ubuntu is essential for transforming refugee identities from passive recipients of aid into active agents of peace and social cohesion. This, therefore, contributes to discourses on Africa's agency in transnational humanitarian governance beyond Uganda.

Keywords: Ubuntu philosophy, identity transformation, refugees, conflict resolution

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INTRODUCTION

“I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am” is an African proverb that embraces the idea that humans cannot exist in isolation; hence the need of each other for survival (Mligo, 2022). The proverb is rooted in the philosophy of Ubuntu, which captures the interconnection of people. Despite African continent displaying diversity cultural background, it still holds similarities in terms of character and beliefs. These traits have therefore, embraced the Ubuntu way of life. The belief that a “person is a person through another” is a way of identity recognition.

In the heart of Africa, where conflicts, wars and other interferences shape the lives of people, the Ubuntu proverb provides the basis for healing through transformative ways of shared responsibility. Understanding Ubuntu is paramount. The word is believed to have originated from the Nguni languages (Zulu, Xhosa) in Southern Africa, signifying “humanity to others”, and has spread throughout the Bantu language families in the sub-Saharan region, primarily among Bantu-speaking communities. The Ubuntu concept was popularised in the mid-20th century by scholars such as J.S. Mbiti (1967), who linked philosophy with religion and concluded that Ubuntu is a way of life. M. Ramose (1999) and M. Shutte (1993) further believe that Ubuntu is connected to human nature. The Zulu phrase for Ubuntu, *Umuntu, ngumuntu, ngabantu*, is literally translated as “a person is a person through another person” and embodies a central concept of humanity and consideration for others. The principles of sharing, caring and solidarity were practices effectively used for reconciliation among the communities in the Great Lakes and South African regions during the aftermath of the genocide and apartheid conflicts (Ntakarutimana, 2008; Kiyala, 2024). Ubuntu serves as a foundation for identity formation in many African countries through family ties, communities and ancestors (Shambare, 2022). Adopting the Ubuntu philosophy for conflict resolution and refugee identity in Uganda signifies that humanity goes beyond borders and all humans exist because of others – hence the “cobweb thread syndrome”. These principles transcend borders. Although borders are meant to separate people into different political zones, hold and maintain resources and allow those within borders to move freely while denying access to those outside the territory, all of this hinders coexistence – especially with refugees. “What if borders instead of divisions became bridges and not barrier lines, drawn to heal, not to harm, foster connection and

renewal, not to punish?” That is what the Ubuntu philosophy advocates for. The African continent continues to face a refugee crisis due to factors related to persistent conflicts, political instability, ethnic wars and climate-related challenges, forcing millions into displacement (Mlambo, 2024; Dung & Avwunudiogba, 2021; Refugee, 2023). Adopting the use of Ubuntu philosophy for borders to be used for healing rather than political lines drawn for separation would be a good idea for migrants and refugees. Refugees and migration, on the other hand, have gathered significant attention in academic circles – particularly in the context of conflict resolution (Jurasz, 2016; Fitzgerald & Arar, 2018). In Uganda, a country that hosts a higher number of refugees (approximately over 1.8 million), most of whom come from Bantu-speaking countries such as South Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Somalia, Burundi and Rwanda, the Ubuntu philosophy appears as a critical framework for understanding identity transformation and relational dynamics among refugees (Ebale & Mulemi, 2023). The core values of Ubuntu, as understood by many African communities, promote inclusion among members, mutual dialogue, interdependence and communitarianism – which are important for identity transformation (Masuku & Makhanya, 2023; Marovah & Mutanga, 2023). The philosophy forms part of many African moral and social traditions and has been instrumental in post-conflict reconciliation processes in countries like South Africa and Rwanda. However, its role in conflict resolution and refugee identity-related concerns in Uganda remains underexplored. This literature review aims to clarify the role of Ubuntu in conflict resolution and refugee identity in Uganda, addressing the central research question: *How can Ubuntu philosophy be used as a framework for conflict resolution and refugee identity in Uganda?* The review suggests that Ubuntu fosters a sense of communal identity and relationality that mitigates conflict and enhances coexistence among refugees and host community members.

This review suggests a mechanism for conflict resolution by grounding it in the principles of shared humanity and interconnectedness found in Ubuntu, which facilitates restorative justice rather than punitive measures. This process of reconciliation, in turn, actively repairs social bonds and fosters a positive transformation of identity, shifting the refugee’s sense of self from one defined by loss and displacement to one grounded in resilience and belonging within a new community. Therefore, we argue that this final step – the transformation of identity – is the ultimate measure of sustainable peace.

BACKGROUND

Although the Government of Uganda has maintained an “open-door” policy and is being applauded as one of the most progressive refugee policies in Africa, the country faces the challenge of managing a higher number of refugees while failing to provide adequate support. (Grzeškowiak, 2023; UNHCR, 2019; Ahimbisibwe, 2019). By the close of 2024, the global report indicated that Uganda was the fourth-largest refugee-hosting country in the world, following Iran (3.4 million), Turkey (3 million) and Germany (2.7 million). It was also the largest in Africa, hosting over 1.7 million refugees (UNHCR, 2024). Following Uganda’s model of open-door refugee policy, informed by notions of hospitality, solidarity and respect, the model reflects Ubuntu aspects, thus treating refugees not as burdens but as embedded within the local social and economic environment (Türk & Garlick, 2016). The Government of Uganda enacted the policy of self-sufficiency and integration, which aimed to settle refugees without any difficulties (Ahimbisibwe, 2019). However, despite the hospitality and the welcome, the country faces challenges that come with migration – such as resource competition and economic frictions, cultural and social distance factors, institutional gaps and distrust and inadequate funding – which have left many wondering about the effectiveness of the policy (Grzeškowiak, 2023). Consequently, refugees and host community members continue to clash over limited resources such as land for agriculture, water resources and firewood collection (Ahimbisibwe & Edwards, 2011). There is also employment mistrust, where refugees are perceived as a threat to the employment environment that comes with discrimination (Vala & Pereira, 2020). On the other hand, refugees retain cultural practices, which sometimes create insecure social networks (for example, the marriage practice among the Congolese refugees, where child marriage is rampant). The prevailing circumstances of refugees, such as extreme poverty and lack of sufficient humanitarian aid, force some parents to marry off their children at a young age (UNHCR, 2018). “Life has stolen my childhood. I shouldn’t be married now.” This statement indicates the challenges of early marriage among Congolese refugees that have led to a feeling of exclusion among local community members.

When it comes to institutional gaps, formal justice systems are often mistrusted due to corruption and delays, which hinder refugees’ registration – hence interfering with their identity and transformation. Identity

occurs through the exploration of different options, choices and commitments. For refugees to understand and negotiate their sense of belonging in a new environment, processes such as social categorisation, integration, separation and assimilation must be understood. In other words, a holistic view is needed. However, these processes are often hindered by socio-cultural and political factors, which impact personal views of identity. “To be human is to affirm one’s humanity by recognising the humanity of others in its infinite variety of content and form” (Van der Merwe, 1996, p. 1; cf. also Ramose, 1999, p. 193). Institutional gaps and mistrust in formal justice systems, caused by corruption and delays, hinder the ability of refugees – particularly stateless persons – to secure identity documentation. This lack of documentation complicates access to protection and rights, ultimately leading to conflicts. It is noteworthy that local conflict resolution processes are most likely to foster mistrust, which poses a challenge to justice for all (Sharp, 2017). With these challenges, there is a need for a culturally transformative conflict resolution approach in which the Ubuntu philosophy acts as a tool.

In this paper, we define and use the subsequent terms as follows: ***Migration*** refers to the movement of individuals or groups from one geographical location to another to establish a new, often permanent, residence. This definition encompasses various forms of movement, ranging from voluntary economic migration to forced displacement. ***Mobility*** describes the broader perspective of human movements, including daily commutes, temporary displacements and longer-term migrations. Mobility emphasises movements that are shaped by prevailing social, economic, environmental and political factors. ***Identity transformation*** is described as a continuous process through which an individual’s or group’s sense of self, belonging and social categorisation changes over time. A ***refugee*** is someone who flees their country for fear of being persecuted due to reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group and is granted protection under international law. A ***migrant*** is someone who **chooses to move**, either **within their country or across borders**, usually to improve their living conditions, find work, reunite with family or pursue education. In this paper, we shall use “refugee” to refer to all those who have settled in Uganda, whether voluntarily or involuntarily. ***Conflict*** is defined as a disagreement arising from opposing ideas, needs and goals between people.

This **review paper** is divided into **five sections** for further discussion.

Following the introduction, Section 2 outlines the theoretical framework in line with Paul Gilroy's conception of the *Black Atlantic* as a dynamic network of cultural exchange and the Ubuntu theory. Section 3 explains the methodology employed for this literature review, detailing the approach to selecting and synthesising relevant academic and grey literature. Section 4 presents the results and discussion of Ubuntu philosophy, exploring its origins, core principles and established applications in conflict resolution across Africa, highlighting how these principles form a basis for collective identity. Later, this section presents the key findings from the literature specifically pertaining to Ubuntu's role in conflict resolution within Uganda, including its manifestations in traditional mechanisms and its direct relevance to refugee settlements, critically examining how these interactions shape and transform African identities, interpreting their broader implications for current practices – especially concerning identity adaptation and integration – and identifying significant gaps for future research. Finally, Section 5 gives the conclusion of the paper by summarising the key insights and reiterating the transformative potential of Ubuntu for fostering peaceful coexistence and shaping African identity in Uganda's diverse refugee conflict environment.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The paper presents the theoretical framework on Ubuntu, an African philosophical concept, emphasising interconnectedness, community and mutual respect. According to Letseka (2013), "I am because we are" encapsulates the essence of Ubuntu, highlighting the importance of communal relationships in shaping individual identities. This philosophy is particularly relevant in migration contexts, where individuals often struggle with issues of belonging and identity amidst displacement. In Uganda, a country marked by ethnic diversity with more than 56 ethnic groups and historical tensions that range from the Kabaka War in 1966 to the present, ongoing political confrontations and clashes between security forces and political opposition during election periods raise fears of recurring violence (Golooba, 2008). The land and resource disputes, which are often perceived alongside identity lines, contribute to ongoing community tension, notwithstanding the refugee influx of more than 1.8 million (UNHCR, 2025). In this context, Ubuntu offers a framework for unity and cooperation among

different groups and populations (Kandel, 2017). Its principles of relational humanity and shared responsibility make it a compelling approach for conflict resolution, fostering dialogue and mutual understanding across divided groups (Mamdani, 1996). Ubuntu's emphasis on *relational humanity* aligns with Paul Gilroy's conception of the *Black Atlantic* as a dynamic network of cultural exchange (Gilroy, 1993) and Édouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation*, where identity emerges through transnational connections. Paul Gilroy's conception of the *Black Atlantic* is a transformative framework that reimagines the African diaspora as a dynamic network of cultural exchange, challenging traditional notions of culture, nation and identity. This concept positions the *Black Atlantic* as a transnational cultural formation characterised by uncertainty and the continuous construction and deconstruction of black cultures. It critiques the essentialist views of black cultures and emphasises the interconnectedness and mobility of the African diaspora across the Atlantic, which has been a site of cultural and historical crisscrossing since the slave trade era (Gilroy, 2007). This positions Ubuntu not merely as a local philosophy, but as a broader concept for shaping African identities across diasporic spaces (Selasi, 2013). The interaction between Ubuntu and Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* is relatively deep. Gilroy conceptualises the *Black Atlantic* as a "counterculture of modernity", where identities are forged in the interaction of movement, displacement and cultural exchange. Similarly, a refugee settlement in Uganda can be seen as modern-day place for interaction, a compressed space of intense cultural crisscrossing and relational negotiation. Ubuntu, in this context, does not function as a static, traditionalist philosophy. Instead, it acts as an ethical toolkit for navigating the "uncertainty" Gilroy describes. It provides the philosophical language of interconnectedness, resilience and shared humanity through which new, hybrid and transnational African identities can be articulated and sustained, much like the cultural forms that traverse the *Black Atlantic*. To this end, and critically, by framing Ubuntu as a decolonial tool challenging Eurocentric conflict-resolution frameworks that emphasise individual human rights more than shared rights, Molefe (2024) describes the Eurocentric or westernised approach to conflicts as being more individual, self-centred and independent, allowing competition, individual ownership and individual rights. This differs from the African Ubuntu policies of shared responsibility, interdependence, cooperation and harmony and group assurance. Ubuntu looks at community engagement and shared responsibility – which, therefore, forms a basis for Ubuntu as a theoretical

framework for conflict resolution and identity transformation among migrants and refugees in Uganda.

METHODOLOGY

This literature review employs a narrative qualitative approach to identify, evaluate and provide a comprehensive overview of the existing scholarly and grey literature pertinent to Ubuntu philosophy and conflict resolution in Uganda. The primary source material for this review was derived from the comprehensive bibliography initially compiled for my doctoral thesis, encompassing a wide range of academic journals, books, documents, institutional reports and relevant foundational texts on African philosophy, conflict resolution and studies pertaining to migration and identity. Specific focus was on refugee and migration contexts, Ubuntu philosophy and the transformation of African identities in relation to refugees. This approach was used because it is less structured and allows for highlighting the different aspects of the study, pointing out the knowledge gap. This broader scope was vital for providing a holistic overview of the study related to Ubuntu philosophy, refugee identity and conflict resolution in refugee settlements in Uganda. Finally, Uganda was selected as a strategic research site due to its progressive refugee policies and ethnic diversity, offering critical insights into Ubuntu's adaptability in contexts of forced migration (Vemuru et al., 2016). While not exhaustive, this focus enables a deep analysis of identity transformation mechanisms transferable to similar African contexts.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

ORIGINS AND FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLES OF UBUNTU

This paper provides literature on the origins and foundational principles of Ubuntu, characterising it as a profound African philosophy that extends beyond mere tradition to a holistic perspective that recognises interconnectedness and communal accountability. Understanding these principles is essential for recognising how Ubuntu influences and reshapes African identities, particularly in contexts characterised by significant migration, identity, mobility and conflict transformations.

As noted in the introduction, Ubuntu is a complex term that embodies an ancient African worldview, emphasising community and interconnectedness. Ubuntu's conceptual foundations are rooted in the Nguni-speaking communities of Southern Africa, where it signifies a fundamental comprehension of African identity and the interrelatedness of individuals (Mangena, 2016; Dolama, 2014; Dju & Muraro, 2022). It functions as an all-encompassing moral framework that emphasises humanity, a communitarian ethic and a basis for justice and fairness (Mangena, 2016; Moe-ketsi, 2014; Banda, 2020). The central belief of Ubuntu suggests that an individual's humanity is intricately linked to their relationships with others, thereby fostering a sense of collective responsibility, social cohesion and mutual recognition of dignity (Ncube, 2010; Munung et al., 2021). This philosophy prioritises the communal "We" over the individual "I", encouraging unity, interdependence, reconciliation and collaborative conflict resolution (Ngubane & Makua, 2021; Tendayi et al., 2023). Consequently, this communal focus fundamentally shapes identity – defining individuals not solely by their personal characteristics, but by their integration within a network of relationships. In essence, identity within the framework of Ubuntu is dynamic and dependent, continually negotiated through social interactions (family gatherings) and community engagement (community meetings and traditional ceremonies).

The global understanding of Ubuntu was significantly reinforced by its application in post-apartheid South Africa, notably by figures such as Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu (Mandela, 2002; Tutu, 1999, 2004). Tutu, as the chairperson of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), championed Ubuntu principles to address the profound injustices of apartheid by promoting truth-telling, reconciliation and healing rather than solely punitive justice (Krog, 2017; White & Ntlopo, 2022). This institutional application showcased Ubuntu's capacity to facilitate healing and restore human dignity on a societal scale, which allowed for a renegotiation of national and collective identities in a post-apartheid nation. Beyond conflict resolution, Ubuntu's influence extends to economic thought, advocating for practices that strengthen communities and prioritise collective needs to overcome economic inequalities (Nnodim & Okigbo, 2020), fostering an economic identity rooted in shared prosperity. While Ubuntu's global prominence grew through South Africa's TRC, its circulation in *Black Atlantic* mutual aid societies (Gilroy, 1993) and digital activism (Ubuntu Nation) demonstrates its role

in sustaining transnational identity change. The philosophy's universal appeal and adaptability are evident in its expansion beyond Southern Africa, inspiring discussions on human rights, social justice and global ethics (Ramose, 2020; Kuvoro, 2019; Rankopo & Diraditsile, 2020; Tlou, 2022), demonstrating its ongoing role in the transformation of African identities in a globalised world. For example, the Caribbean community justice models (Glissant, 1997) and pan-African digital activism (Ubuntu Nation) demonstrate its role in sustaining transnational African identities, akin to the *Black Atlantic's* "counterculture of modernity". Through the principle of shared humanity embedded in Ubuntu, the identities of displaced individuals are being rebuilt beyond borders, hence creating a sense of belonging. To this end, Ubuntu is linked to *Black Atlantic* networks through shared ethics of communal resilience in African/diaspora spaces (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015).

As a framework for conflict resolution and identity adaptation in African contexts, the Ubuntu philosophy is widely acknowledged in the literature as a powerful indigenous framework for conflict resolution, primarily due to its emphasis on compassion, empathy, respect and cooperation (Adeoye, 2018; Mwendu Twikirize et al., 2023). It facilitates open dialogue and communication, which are vital for understanding the underlying causes of conflict and achieving resolution, consistently prioritising reconciliation over retribution (Emily & Corey, 2023). This restorative approach is crucial for identity transformation, as it aims to mend broken relationships and integrate individuals back into the community, thereby reaffirming their social identity and sense of belonging. As Mbiti (1969) notes, society plays a role in shaping individuals into social beings through communal upbringing. Ubuntu guides individuals towards ethical conduct that ultimately benefits the broader society (Devi, 2023), reinforcing collective identity.

Several forms of Ubuntu's application in conflict resolution across Africa manifest themselves in three distinct ways – firstly, through traditional mechanisms, which allow elders and traditional leaders to play critical roles as mediators and arbiters in conflict resolution (Moser & Mbaku, 2016; Tasew, 2016). Their wisdom, experience and adherence to customary justice principles enable them to facilitate dialogues, ascertain blame, determine reparations and, ultimately, reconcile parties (Francis, 2015; Brenda et al., 2019). These processes are not just about

resolving disputes, but about reaffirming communal norms and identities. Noteworthy examples include the *mato oput* reconciliation ceremony among the Acholi of Northern Uganda (Longmore, 2013; Dennis, 1998; Britannica, 2024), which helps individuals reconcile with their past and reintegrate into the collective, thereby transforming their post-conflict identity. Similarly, the Turkana peace conferences (Osamba, 1998) and Liberia's "palaver" system (Diallo, 2002) consistently focus on restorative justice, aiming to mend damaged social ties and reintegrate individuals into the community rather than solely punishing offenders (Arce & Sneddon, 2013). This reintegration is fundamentally an act of identity transformation, where a fractured individual or group identity is restored within the communal fold.

The second form is governance and policy – the Kgotla system in Botswana exemplifies how traditional beliefs, deeply rooted in Ubuntu, can guide leadership and community engagement in contemporary governance (Tlou, 2005; Vale, 2008). This system promotes open participation, consensus-based decision-making and accountability, reflecting the Ubuntu principle of *pula di tshwaragano* (wisdom lies in consultation). Such governance structures foster a collective identity around shared decision-making and responsibility. Ubuntu's influence extends to the foundational principles of the African Union, with core values like integrity, peace and unity guiding its vision and goals (Motsamai, 2019; Mazrui, 1964), articulating a pan-African identity based on solidarity.

The third form is the integration with conflict theory – conceptually, Ubuntu aligns well with middle-range theories that bridge empirical phenomena and analytical understanding in specific contexts, offering a nuanced perspective on conflict and cooperation (Bureš, 2007). It resonates strongly with conflict transformation theory, which prioritises long-term social, political, psycho-social and cultural changes, focusing on dismantling structural injustices and building capacities for conflict resolution (Lederach, 1995, 2002; Wani et al., 2013). This perspective acknowledges that conflict can be a catalyst for identity transformation. Neo-institutional theory further aids in understanding how institutions, including cultural practices and norms, shape behaviour and legitimise actions within society, underscoring Ubuntu's potential for integration into formal conflict management frameworks that can influence how identities are collectively constructed and adapted (Alvesson & Spicer, 2019; Hwang, 2023).

UBUNTU'S ROLE IN CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND IDENTITY TRANSFORMATION IN UGANDA'S REFUGEE AND MIGRATION CONTEXTS

Various conflict reconciliation approaches in Uganda, such as restorative justice, community healing and dialogues, are centred around the principles of Ubuntu. These dialogues include traditional mechanisms that involve elders, community leaders and traditional leaders coming together for discussions, even though they are not explicitly documented. This also extends to the identities of refugees. It is in these contexts that African identities are transformed, as individuals and communities find new ways of coexisting in new environments.

In terms of traditional and community-based approaches and identity adaptation, Uganda's diverse ethnic composition and history of both internal and cross-border conflicts have fostered a reliance on deeply ingrained traditional mechanisms for dispute resolution, many of which inherently reflect Ubuntu principles (Nabudeere, 2005; Komuhangi, 2006). For instance, the enduring *mato uput* ceremony among the Acholi of Northern Uganda stands as a powerful testament to an indigenous practice designed to address profound grievances and facilitate reconciliation after periods of intense violence (Longmore, 2013; Dennis, 1998). This ritual, involving symbolic acts aimed at restoring relationships, strongly aligns with the Ubuntu emphasis on reintegrating individuals into the community and prioritising harmonious social order over punitive justice (Arce & Sneddon, 2013). Such processes are critical for the post-conflict identity of individuals, moving them from a state of victimhood or perpetrator status towards a reintegrated communal identity. Similarly, across various regions, local councils and community-based peace committees actively engage in mediation and arbitration, drawing heavily on customary laws and social norms that value dialogue, empathy and collective problem-solving (Okumu, 2011). These informal mechanisms demonstrate how the Ubuntu ethos of community, shared responsibility and mutual respect is practically applied to mend the social fabric and foster a sense of belonging among disputing parties (Ssenyonjo, 2018), thereby facilitating an adaptive transformation of communal identity amidst change.

As inferred earlier, in terms of Ubuntu in refugee and migration contexts and identity transformation, Uganda's approach to refugee management is often cited as one of the most progressive globally, notably through its 'Self-Reliance Strategy'. This policy allows refugees access to

land for cultivation, the right to work and freedom of movement, promoting self-sufficiency and integration into host communities (Nyeko, 2012; ILO, 2023). While not explicitly framed in Ubuntu terminology, this approach fundamentally embodies its principles of compassion, shared responsibility and interconnectedness. By enabling refugees to contribute economically and socially, it fosters interdependence between displaced and host populations, aiming to minimise resource-based tensions and promote peaceful co-existence (Kristo & Roos, 2024; Vancluysen & Inge-laere, 2020). This pragmatic integration, rather than isolation, aligns with the Ubuntu principle of “a person is a person through other persons”, actively supporting the transformation of refugee identities from mere recipients of aid to active community members. This approach allows refugees to maintain a sense of agency and dignity, which is vital for positive identity reconstruction (Simeon, 2023). While Uganda’s ‘Self-Reliance Strategy’ implicitly embodies the Ubuntu principle of shared humanity, its practical application reveals a critical tension. The philosophy’s communal ethics are severely tested by the material realities of resource competition over land, water and employment, which can fuel friction rather than foster harmony. This friction is not a failure of Ubuntu; rather, it reveals the conditions under which its principles are most strained. The central challenge for policy-makers and humanitarian actors, therefore, is not simply to invoke Ubuntu, but to create the material and institutional conditions, such as equitable resource management and trusted justice systems, that allow its relational ethics to flourish.

In specific refugee settlements, such as Bidibidi and Nakivale in northern and western Uganda, the practical manifestations of Ubuntu are observed through the resilience and self-organising capacities of communities. Despite the profound disruption of traditional social structures due to displacement, the necessity of collective survival often compels refugees and host communities to adopt informal, Ubuntu-inspired approaches to conflict resolution. This includes reliance on community elders, religious leaders and self-help groups to mediate disputes, provide psychosocial support and build mutual support networks (Nyika, 2011; Paulo et al., 2022). The shared experience of adversity often reinforces a sense of shared humanity, fostering empathy and collaboration in addressing common challenges, which are central tenets of Ubuntu (Jacob et al., 2023). Forced proximity catalyses hybrid identity formation across ethnic lines, rooted in mutual aid. Specifically, forced proximity and shared struggle lead to

a natural, albeit challenging, transformation of identities, where new bonds and affiliations form across ethnic and national lines, creating collective African identities grounded in resilience and mutual aid. These new identities are forged through daily interactions and shared efforts towards collective well-being, transcending the confines of pre-displacement identities.

Finally, while Uganda's liberal refugee policies implicitly reflect Ubuntu (even though not all are documented), the scant literature also points to persistent challenges in fully integrating indigenous approaches and their identity-affirming potential into formal humanitarian and governance frameworks (Quinn, 2006). There can be a disconnect between the lived realities of community-based Ubuntu practices and the often top-down nature of some policy interventions. This gap suggests a need for greater intentionality in acknowledging local traditional authorities, promoting restorative justice practices and fostering community-led initiatives that explicitly align with the Ubuntu ethos of collective well-being (Jean-Claude et al., 2023; Josiah, 2021). Doing so would not only enhance the cultural appropriateness and effectiveness of interventions, but also empower local communities and refugees to collectively negotiate and co-create new, inclusive identities within these dynamic spaces (Clark, 2022). The effective application of Ubuntu in diverse Ugandan contexts requires a detailed understanding of local power dynamics and cultural variations, ensuring that implementation is genuinely participatory and empowering, rather than merely symbolic. Furthermore, given the diverse origins of refugees in Uganda, extending the principles of Ubuntu to foster inter-ethnic harmony within settlements is an ongoing area of practical application and academic inquiry. This directly impacts the formation of new, inclusive African identities in a mobile context (Jeater, 2009; Ekoh et al., 2022). Policies that support cultural exchange and the nature of identity could further enhance integration and reduce identity-based conflicts. As these systems prioritise restorative justice, focusing on healing rather than punishment, by involving the community in the resolution process, the Ubuntu principle of communal responsibility would be appropriate, allowing for a more holistic approach to conflict resolution.

INTERACTIONS AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF MIGRATION/REFUGEE IDENTITY

It is imperative to note that as individuals and communities navigate conflicts, their identities are influenced by both their experiences and the

collective memory of their communities. For refugees and migrants, particularly those displaced by conflict, Ubuntu offers a framework for understanding their identity within the context of their new communities. The principles of interconnectedness and communal responsibility have helped migrants to forge new relationships and develop a sense of belonging in unfamiliar environments. For example, in Bidibidi refugee settlement in Uganda, the influx of South Sudanese refugees has presented opportunities for integration, with host communities exploring their identities by sharing their cultures through intermarriage (Nambuya et al., 2018). However, in most cases, refugees tend to maintain strong ties to their cultural heritage and familiar networks, which has led to a feeling of dislocation that creates identity crises. This occurs because the new environment cannot provide the cultural context, leading to a state of being in between home and host countries, hence the loss of identity (Barua & Maheshwari, 2025). This feeling of dislocation and identity crisis represents a fundamental breakdown of the Ubuntu social contract. Ubuntu suggests that identity is affirmed through community relations (“a person is a person through other persons”). When a refugee is unable to connect with the cultural context of the host environment or maintain meaningful ties to their heritage, this relational basis for identity is severed. The result is not merely sadness, but a profound ontological challenge. Resolving this requires more than material aid; it necessitates interventions that actively rebuild the “cobweb” of social and cultural connections that Ubuntu identifies as the very essence of being human.

Taking an interdisciplinary approach from a cultural studies perspective, Ubuntu in African literature and film depicting migration ties Ubuntu to digital futures. As a key ensuing policy recommendation, Ubuntu’s communal ethics could inform AI-driven humanitarian technology (for example, *U-Report*, a free SMS-based platform developed in 2022, is used to empower youth voices and improve citizen engagement). This platform allows users to report on issues, receive information and participate in polls related to social development, health education and protection (or refugee community-building), resisting algorithmic bias. This could, therefore, be another way of reinforcing identity and cultural transformation among refugees and migrants.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This literature review, while comprehensive within its defined scope, is subject to certain limitations. Firstly, it is primarily based on an interpretive narrative qualitative synthesis of existing literature, predominantly drawn from a pre-compiled bibliography. This means it does not present new empirical data or primary research findings. Secondly, while efforts were made to cover relevant literature on Uganda, the review's depth regarding specific regional or ethnic variations within Uganda's conflict and migration contexts may be limited by the availability and accessibility of published academic and grey literature. Thirdly, the interpretation of "identity transformation" is primarily conceptual and derived from the reviewed sources, rather than based on direct empirical observation of identity shifts among individuals. Finally, while Ubuntu is a widely recognised African philosophy, the practical details of its application can vary significantly across different ethnic groups and regions; this review may not capture all such specific variations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Considering the above limitations, while this review offers a novel theoretical integration of Ubuntu and migration studies, its reliance on secondary sources prioritises conceptual depth over evidence-based details. This approach is justified given the exploratory aim to map transnational relationality (Scotland, 2012), but future mixed-methods research should test how identity remixing manifests in day-to-day practice. Regional variations in Ubuntu's application, though beyond this paper's scope, remain vital for contextualising its adaptive resilience in future studies.

Secondly, there is a need for comparative studies examining the efficacy of Ubuntu-inspired conflict resolution across different refugee-hosting nations in Africa, exploring how diverse cultural contexts influence the manifestation and effectiveness of these principles. Thirdly, research could explore practical frameworks and policy guidelines for systematically integrating Ubuntu-based approaches into formal humanitarian aid, governance structures and peacebuilding initiatives in Uganda, paying close attention to power dynamics and ensuring genuine community participation. Finally, further interdisciplinary research is encouraged to explore the

psychological and sociocultural dimensions of identity transformation in contexts of forced migration, drawing on African philosophical insights like Ubuntu to develop more holistic and culturally sensitive interventions that support positive identity outcomes.

CONCLUSION

This literature review demonstrates the profound relevance and transformative potential of Ubuntu philosophy for fostering harmony and resolving disputes within refugee settlements in Uganda. By emphasising interconnectedness, compassion, reconciliation and communal responsibility, Ubuntu offers a practical framework for dealing with the complexities of diverse environments marked by shared adversity and evolving identities. The review reveals a crucial opportunity for conflict resolution; while the principles of Ubuntu are often at play informally, their explicit and systematic integration into formal humanitarian and governmental conflict resolution frameworks in Uganda remains essential for inclusive refugee management.

Ultimately, this review argues for a shift in perspective: from viewing refugees as a “problem” to be managed, to seeing refugee settlements as dynamic sites of African identity formation. By centring Ubuntu, we not only access a culturally resonant tool for conflict resolution, but also reclaim Africa’s agency in shaping a more humane and just system of transnational governance. Healing borders, then, is not about erasing lines on a map, but about weaving the threads of shared humanity across them, creating a tapestry of resilient and interconnected communities.

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