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Ubuntu in Exile: Indigenous Notions of Community and Social Justice Among Adolescent Refugees in Northern Uganda

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Background: While much of the humanitarian response focuses on material needs and clinical trauma interventions, indigenous African philosophies like Ubuntu offer an underexplored but culturally rooted framework for resilience, social justice, and communal healing. This study investigates how the philosophy of Ubuntu which emphasizes interconnectedness, mutual aid, and collective dignity shapes social cohesion and adaptive coping among adolescent refugees in Northern Uganda.

Methods: A qualitative phenomenological study was conducted in Bidibidi refugee settlement in Northern Uganda. Data were collected through 5 focus group discussions with adolescent refugees (n=26, aged 13–18) and 6 key informant interviews with elders, community workers, and youth leaders. Participant observation was also employed to capture natural expressions of Ubuntu in everyday interactions. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring concepts aligned with Ubuntu values such as solidarity, restorative justice, and belonging.

Results: Three major themes emerged: (1) Ubuntu as Mutual Aid: adolescents demonstrated strong peer-based support systems rooted in shared identity and communal care; (2) Ubuntu and Restorative Justice: conflict resolution was often pursued through inclusive, dialogue-based methods rather than punishment; (3) Cultural Belonging and Resilience: traditional music, storytelling, and ceremonies played a central role in reinforcing identity and psychological well-being.

Conclusion: Ubuntu serves as a powerful indigenous framework for fostering resilience, social justice, and emotional well-being among adolescent refugees. Humanitarian programs should incorporate culturally grounded approaches by supporting peer-support structures, community-led restorative practices, and cultural preservation initiatives. Integrating Ubuntu-inspired frameworks into refugee programming can enhance relevance, dignity, and sustainability in psychosocial support interventions.

Keywords: Ubuntu, adolescent refugees, indigenous resilience, social justice, community-based healing, displacement, mutual aid, restorative practices

Biography

Amir Kabunga is a Ugandan psychiatrist and senior lecturer at the Department of Psychiatry, Faculty of Medicine, Lira University, Uganda. He holds a PhD in Psychology from Egerton University (Kenya) and has over a decade of experience in mental health counseling and research. As a prolific researcher, Kabunga has authored over 70 peer-reviewed journal articles, focusing especially on psychological wellbeing among adolescents, refugees, people living with HIV, and healthcare workers in conflict-affected and underserved communities