

Restorative Justice, Ubuntu, and Reconciliation: Comparing South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and Tigrayan Justice Demands in the Post-Pretoria Era

Girmay Gebrehiwot

girmaygebrehiwot50@gmail.com

Mekelle University

Article

Keywords: Restorative justice, Ubuntu, Truth and Reconciliation Commission, TRC, Tigray conflict, Pretoria Agreement, transitional justice, Ethiopia, South Africa

Posted Date: October 29th, 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-9565852/v1>

License:  This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

[Read Full License](#)

Additional Declarations: No competing interests reported.

Abstract

This article examines Ubuntu as an African ethical framework for rethinking justice in post-conflict settings. Drawing on South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) as a model of restorative justice and the ongoing justice debates in Tigray, Ethiopia, following the 2022 Pretoria Agreement, it advocates for a hybrid approach that integrates moral repair, community-led reconciliation, and formal legal accountability. This synthesis aims not only to address wrongdoing but also to rebuild social trust, repair relationships, and foster sustainable peace grounded in shared humanity. The analysis highlights both the potential and limitations of Ubuntu-inspired processes in fractured societies.

1. Introduction

Violent conflicts leave societies with profound wounds: mass atrocities, widespread displacement, destroyed infrastructure, and deeply fractured social trust. Traditional retributive justice systems, which focus primarily on punishment and individual accountability through courts, often prove insufficient for healing collective trauma or rebuilding communal relationships in post-conflict settings. In response, **restorative justice** has gained global prominence as an alternative or complementary approach. It prioritizes healing, truth-telling, accountability without vengeance, forgiveness where possible, and the reintegration of both victims and perpetrators into society.

This shift toward restorative models reflects a broader recognition that sustainable peace requires not only stopping violence but also addressing the relational and psychosocial dimensions of harm. In Africa, such approaches frequently draw on indigenous philosophies that emphasize community, humanity, and interconnectedness.

The **Tigray region** of Ethiopia offers a critical and urgent case. The two-year war (2020–2022) between the Ethiopian federal government, allied forces, and Tigrayan forces caused hundreds of thousands of deaths, millions of displacements, widespread sexual violence, and massive humanitarian suffering. Although the Pretoria Agreement of November 2022 formally ended large-scale hostilities, implementation has been incomplete and highly fragile. As of 2026, persistent challenges, including territorial disputes (especially Western Tigray), political exclusion, stalled disarmament and reintegration processes, unaddressed transitional justice, economic restrictions, and recurring armed incidents, have kept the region in a state of “paused” rather than resolved conflict. The threat of renewed instability remains real, underscoring the urgent need for effective justice mechanisms that can address deep trauma, restore fractured social bonds, prevent impunity, and support lasting reconciliation.

This article explores the African philosophy of **Ubuntu** “a person is a person through other persons” (Tutu, 1999) as a guiding ethical and practical lens for post-conflict reconciliation in Tigray. Ubuntu stresses human interdependence, compassion, restorative harmony, and the idea that harming others ultimately diminishes the self and the community. It offers a culturally resonant framework for moving beyond purely punitive responses toward relational repair.

A key reference point is South Africa's **Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)**, which prominently incorporated Ubuntu-inspired principles under Archbishop Desmond Tutu. The TRC combined public truth-telling, conditional amnesty for perpetrators who fully disclosed their crimes, victim-centered processes, and a focus on national healing rather than retribution. While not without limitations and criticisms, the TRC remains one of the most prominent examples of large-scale restorative justice in Africa and offers valuable lessons on both possibilities and pitfalls.

This study compares the South African TRC experience with the justice demands emerging from Tigrayan communities and survivors. It proposes a **hybrid transitional justice model** tailored to the Tigrayan context one that integrates formal legal accountability (where feasible) with community-based restorative processes grounded in Ubuntu principles. Such a model would aim to establish truth about atrocities, ensure meaningful accountability, facilitate healing and reparations, promote forgiveness where victims choose it, and support the reintegration of individuals and groups into a cohesive society.

By doing so, this article contributes to both theory and practice in post-conflict peacebuilding. Theoretically, it bridges global restorative justice literature with African philosophical resources and context-specific application. Practically, it offers policy-relevant insights for Ethiopian stakeholders, African Union mediators, and international actors involved in Tigray's fragile peace process. Ultimately, the goal is to help restore trust, strengthen social cohesion, and lay foundations for durable peace in a region still hovering between recovery and relapse.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews relevant literature on restorative justice and Ubuntu; Section 3 details the Tigray context and justice needs; Section 4 analyzes the South African TRC experience; Section 5 proposes the hybrid model with implementation considerations; and the conclusion discusses broader implications.

2. Contextual Background

2.1 Historical and Structural Roots of the Tigray Conflict

The Tigray conflict is rooted in a complex interplay of historical grievances, ethnic politics, power struggles, and structural contradictions embedded in Ethiopia's system of governance. Far from being a sudden eruption, the war that began in November 2020 represented the violent culmination of long-standing tensions over identity, resource distribution, political power, and the very nature of the Ethiopian state in a deeply multi-ethnic society.

Tigray's political identity has long been shaped by cycles of marginalization and resistance. During the imperial era under Emperor Haile Selassie (1930–1974), Tigrayans experienced relative peripheralization. The central government, dominated by Amhara elites and promoting a largely Amhara-centric national narrative and language policy, often treated Tigray as a peripheral region. Economic neglect, limited investment in infrastructure, and cultural-linguistic suppression contributed to widespread discontent. This historical context fueled the emergence of Tigrayan nationalist sentiments

and the formation of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) in 1975. The TPLF emerged as one of several ethnic-based insurgent movements fighting against the Derg military regime, a Marxist-Leninist junta that had overthrown Haile Selassie in 1974 and imposed brutal repression, including the Red Terror.

The TPLF played a pivotal and ultimately decisive role in the armed struggle. Through effective guerrilla warfare, strategic alliances, and disciplined organization, it became the dominant force within the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), a coalition of ethnic-based fronts. In 1991, the EPRDF forces overthrew the Derg regime, ending 17 years of military dictatorship and bringing the TPLF to the center of national power. For nearly three decades (1991–2018), the TPLF effectively controlled the EPRDF-led government. Prominent Tigrayan leaders, most notably Meles Zenawi (Prime Minister 1995–2012), steered the country's political and economic direction. This period witnessed notable achievements: double-digit economic growth for much of the 2000s and 2010s, massive infrastructure development (roads, dams, telecommunications), expansion of primary education and healthcare, and increased international engagement and foreign investment. Ethiopia was often hailed as one of Africa's fastest-growing economies and a key regional stabilizer.

However, this era was also marked by significant drawbacks. Authoritarian governance, suppression of dissent, electoral manipulation, and human rights abuses were widespread. There were strong and persistent perceptions—across many parts of the country of Tigrayan dominance in key political, military, security, and economic institutions (including state-owned enterprises), despite Tigrayans comprising only about 6% of Ethiopia's population. These dynamics generated deep resentment among other ethnic groups, particularly the Oromo (the largest group) and Amhara. Grievances included alleged favoritism in appointments, land deals, and resource allocation, which fueled narratives of "Tigrayan hegemony." While some of these perceptions were exaggerated or exploited for political mobilization, they reflected real imbalances that undermined the legitimacy of the EPRDF regime.

A cornerstone of the post-1991 order was the introduction of ethnic federalism through the 1995 Constitution. This system fundamentally restructured Ethiopia from a highly centralized unitary state into a federation of ethnically defined regional states (*kilils*), each with substantial formal autonomy, including the controversial right to secession (Article 39). Designed to accommodate Ethiopia's extraordinary ethnic and linguistic diversity over 80 ethnic groups and numerous languages—and to prevent future centralized oppression of the kind experienced under previous regimes, ethnic federalism instead institutionalized ethnicity as the primary organizing principle of politics, administration, and even citizenship in some respects. While it granted formal self-rule to various groups and allowed cultural and linguistic expression that had been suppressed earlier, critics argue it entrenched ethnic competition, weakened national cohesion, promoted "ethno-nationalist" elites, and enabled manipulation under the guise of "divide and rule." Scholars such as Lovise Aalen (2011) and Jon Abbink (2006) have highlighted how the system, while addressing certain historical injustices, also risked creating new ones by prioritizing group rights over individual rights and fostering zero-sum ethnic politics.

Tensions escalated dramatically after Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed assumed power in April 2018 amid widespread anti-government protests (primarily Oromo and Amhara-led). Abiy, an Oromo-Ethiopian insider within the EPRDF, initiated sweeping reforms: opening political space, releasing thousands of political prisoners, pursuing peace with Eritrea (earning him the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize), liberalizing the economy, and launching an anti-corruption drive. In December 2019, he dissolved the EPRDF and established the Prosperity Party as a unified, ostensibly pan-Ethiopian movement that sought to transcend ethnic divisions. The TPLF leadership refused to join this new party, viewing it as a direct assault on the ethnic federal framework that had empowered Tigrayan political elites for decades. Many Tigrayans saw Abiy's centralizing tendencies, peace deal with Eritrea (a historical adversary of the TPLF), and rhetoric of national unity as existential threats to Tigray's autonomy and security.

Underlying these events was a fundamental contest over the future character of the Ethiopian state: whether it would remain a loose federation emphasizing ethnic autonomy, self-rule, and the political primacy of ethnic parties, or move toward greater centralization, institutional reform, and a stronger pan-Ethiopian nationalism that downplays ethnicity in favor of shared citizenship. These structural contradictions between ethnic federalism and centralizing reforms, between competing visions of power-sharing, and between different historical narratives of oppression and entitlement created the conditions for the outbreak of war in November 2020.

What began as a political dispute between the federal government and the Tigray Regional State (which held its own regional elections in defiance of a federal postponement due to COVID-19) rapidly escalated into a full-scale armed conflict. This reflected deeper, unresolved issues of identity, power distribution, historical memory, elite competition, and state-building in multi-ethnic Ethiopia. The conflict quickly drew in regional actors (Eritrea, Amhara forces) and became one of the deadliest wars of the 21st century, with massive humanitarian consequences, atrocities on multiple sides, and profound long-term implications for Ethiopia's stability and the viability of its federal experiment.

2.2 Post-Pretoria Realities in Tigray (as of 2026)

The Pretoria Agreement, signed in November 2022 between the Ethiopian federal government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), successfully ended large-scale hostilities after two years of devastating war. However, more than three years later, the peace remains extremely fragile. The agreement has largely postponed rather than resolved the core drivers of the conflict, leaving a complex web of unresolved political, security, humanitarian, and territorial issues.

Key provisions of the agreement including the full withdrawal of external forces, the return of internally displaced persons (IDPs), the restoration of Tigray's pre-war territorial integrity (particularly Western Tigray), comprehensive disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) of Tigray Defense Forces (TDF) fighters, and accountability for war crimes have seen only partial or stalled implementation. While Eritrean forces largely withdrew from most of Tigray's heartland, they maintained influence in border areas. Amhara forces vacated much of the region but continue to control Western Tigray (also known as Welkait), leaving tens of thousands of Tigrayan IDPs unable to return to their homes. This territorial

dispute has led to severe humanitarian consequences, including reported starvation deaths in IDP camps such as Hitsats in late 2025.

Internally, the TPLF has experienced a deep and debilitating split that has paralyzed regional governance and undermined the peace process. The factional divide pits the wartime chairman Debretsion Gebremichael and his hardline supporters against a more pragmatic faction previously associated with Getachew Reda, who served as president of the Tigray Interim Regional Administration (TIRA) established under the Pretoria Agreement. Getachew Reda was removed from power in a de facto coup in March 2025 and later aligned with the federal government. Lieutenant General Tadesse Werede was subsequently appointed to lead the interim administration, but power struggles have persisted.

This internal fragmentation has had direct security implications. The once-unified Tigray Defense Forces have splintered, with some elements rebranding or operating under different commands. A notable development has been the emergence of the **Tigray Peace Force (TPF)**, a breakaway group composed of former TDF fighters dissatisfied with TPLF leadership. Reportedly tacitly supported by federal authorities and operating from the Afar region, the TPF has engaged in clashes with TPLF-aligned forces, exacerbating intra-Tigrayan violence.

Adding to the complexity are rumors and reports of informal alliances between certain TPLF factions (particularly Debretsion's group) and Eritrean actors, often referred to locally as the "**Tsimdo**" (or Ximdo) alignment. While this rapprochement has facilitated some people-to-people interactions along the border, it has raised serious concerns in Addis Ababa about potential realignment against federal interests.

Politically, the situation remains highly unstable. The National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) cancelled the TPLF's registration in May 2025, effectively barring the party from participating in the planned 2026 national elections. In response, the TPLF has moved to restore pre-war governance structures. In April–May 2026, it reinstated the pre-war regional legislative council and elected Debretsion Gebremichael as regional president, creating parallel and competing authorities with the federally backed interim administration. This bold move has further strained relations with the federal government and raised fears of renewed conflict.

Opposition parties such as Third Woyane and the Tigray Independence Party remain largely marginalized, while the blurred lines between the TPLF as a political party and regional state institutions persist. The combination of stalled DDR processes (with only a fraction of fighters fully demobilized), persistent mistrust, economic hardship, and unresolved transitional justice issues has left Tigray in a state of precarious limbo where large-scale war has ended, but sustainable peace remains elusive.

These post-Pretoria realities underscore the urgent need for genuine reconciliation, inclusive dialogue, and a balanced approach to justice that addresses both accountability and social healing in the region..

2.3 Indicators of Need for Healing and Social Cohesion

The two-year war in Tigray (2020–2022) has left profound and lasting scars on the region's social fabric, far beyond the physical destruction of infrastructure and loss of life. Widespread violence, mass displacement, sexual violence, and prolonged humanitarian blockade have severely damaged family ties, intergenerational trust, and community bonds that once formed the backbone of Tigrayan society.

One of the most visible impacts is the high prevalence of trauma and mental health challenges. Studies conducted among internally displaced persons (IDPs) reveal alarming rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), with approximately 57.7% of community-hosted IDPs showing symptoms. Many households continue to grapple with grief, anxiety, depression, and chronic stress resulting from loss of loved ones, sexual violence, and prolonged uncertainty. Three years after the Pretoria Agreement, over 760,000 people remain displaced in overcrowded camps with limited access to basic services, exacerbating psychological distress. Reports from 2025 also highlight a disturbing rise in youth suicides, reflecting deep despair among younger generations.

The war has particularly strained intergenerational relationships. Traditional authority structures and conflict-resolution mechanisms, such as elders' councils (*shimagle*), have been significantly weakened by political factionalism, displacement, and the militarization of youth. Many young people who fought in the Tigray Defense Forces or experienced the war as children now view elders and traditional institutions with skepticism, while elders struggle to reconnect with a generation marked by trauma and radicalization. This erosion of trust has diminished the effectiveness of indigenous peacebuilding practices that historically helped maintain social harmony in Tigrayan communities.

Community bonds have also frayed. The conflict disrupted longstanding social institutions such as *Eddir* (funeral associations) and *Equb* (rotating savings groups), which traditionally provided mutual support. Forced displacement, family separation, and competing political loyalties have fostered suspicion and reduced collective resilience. Stigma surrounding survivors of sexual violence one of the most horrific features of the war has further isolated victims and complicated community reintegration.

Survivors and affected communities express strong and multifaceted demands for justice. These include public acknowledgment of suffering, meaningful reparations, accountability for war crimes and crimes against humanity (including widespread sexual and gender-based violence), and institutional reforms to prevent recurrence. This has resulted in a dual demand for justice:

- **Endogenous (local, restorative)** approaches such as community dialogues, elders-mediated reconciliation, trauma-healing circles, and traditional ceremonies that focus on repairing relationships and restoring social harmony.
- **Exogenous (formal, retributive)** mechanisms, including national courts, hybrid tribunals, and international processes (e.g., potential ICC involvement), to ensure accountability and deter future atrocities.

The tension between these two approaches remains unresolved. While many Tigrayans recognize the importance of local healing for social cohesion, there is widespread skepticism toward purely domestic

processes perceived as politically compromised. Without credible transitional justice that combines truth-telling, accountability, and reparations, mistrust persists both within Tigray and between Tigrayans and other Ethiopian communities.

These indicators collectively demonstrate an urgent need for comprehensive healing and social cohesion initiatives. Addressing trauma, rebuilding trust across generations and factions, restoring traditional mechanisms, and responding to justice demands are not optional but essential for preventing a return to violence and laying the foundation for sustainable peace in the region.

3. Theoretical Framework: Ubuntu and Restorative Justice

3.1 Ubuntu Paradigm: Ontological and Ethical Foundations

Ubuntu is one of the most prominent concepts in African philosophy and ethics, originating from the Bantu languages of southern Africa. Literally translated as “humanness” or “personhood,” its most famous articulation is the Nguni proverb: “Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu” “a person is a person through other persons” (Tutu, 1999, p. 24). This statement captures the ontological foundation of Ubuntu: human identity is fundamentally relational and interdependent rather than individualistic.

At its core, Ubuntu rejects the Cartesian “I think, therefore I am” of Western philosophy in favor of a communal ontology: “I am because we are.” It posits that a person’s humanity is constituted through their relationships with others. One’s moral worth, dignity, and very existence are inseparable from the community. This ontological interdependence implies that harming others ultimately diminishes one’s own humanity, while promoting the well-being of others enhances it (Ramose, 1999; Shutte, 2001).

Ethically, Ubuntu emphasizes several interconnected values:

- Mutual respect and dignity
- Empathy and compassion
- Reciprocity and solidarity
- Harmony and social cohesion
- Moral responsibility toward the community

Unlike retributive justice systems that focus primarily on punishment and individual guilt, Ubuntu views justice as the restoration of broken relationships and the rebalancing of social harmony. Wrongdoing is understood not merely as a violation of rules, but as a rupture in the social fabric that affects the entire community. Therefore, the primary goal of justice is **moral repair**, healing the victim, holding the perpetrator accountable in a way that restores their humanity, and reintegrating both into a reconciled community (Zehr, 2002; Metz, 2011).

Desmond Tutu, who popularized Ubuntu globally through his leadership of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, described it as the essence of being human. He argued that Ubuntu calls for

forgiveness and reconciliation not as weakness, but as the highest expression of moral strength. According to Tutu, there is “no future without forgiveness” because resentment and vengeance only perpetuate cycles of violence (Tutu, 1999).

Thaddeus Metz (2011), a leading philosopher on Ubuntu, further systematized it into a moral theory: an action is right insofar as it promotes the sharing of a relationship of mutual care and respect, and wrong insofar as it involves disrespect or ill-will toward others’ capacity for such relationships. This framework provides a robust ethical basis for transitional justice processes that prioritize truth-telling, remorse, reparation, and reintegration over pure retribution.

In the context of post-conflict societies like Tigray, Ubuntu offers a culturally grounded alternative to purely Western legalistic approaches. It provides both a philosophical lens and a practical ethic for addressing deep societal fractures by focusing on relational restoration, communal healing, and the reaffirmation of shared humanity. However, Ubuntu is not without critique; some scholars argue it can be romanticized or misused to pressure victims into premature forgiveness, potentially undermining accountability.

3.2 The South African TRC Model: Strengths and Limitations

South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), established in 1995 and operational from 1996 to 2002, remains one of the most ambitious and widely studied experiments in restorative justice globally. Chaired by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the TRC was explicitly inspired by the philosophy of Ubuntu and sought to address the legacy of apartheid through a restorative rather than purely retributive lens. Its mandate focused on uncovering the truth about gross human rights violations committed between 1960 and 1994, providing a platform for victims to share their stories, and offering conditional amnesty to perpetrators who made full disclosure of politically motivated crimes (Tutu, 1999; TRC Final Report, 1998).

The Key strengths of the TRC included its innovative approach to public truth-telling. Unlike traditional courts, the Commission held public hearings where both victims and perpetrators could testify, creating a national space for acknowledgment and catharsis. This process helped break the silence surrounding decades of systemic violence, produced an extensive historical record of apartheid-era atrocities, and promoted national dialogue. The conditional amnesty mechanism amnesty in exchange for full truth, encouraged thousands of perpetrators to come forward, revealing information that would likely never have emerged through conventional prosecutions. Many analysts credit the TRC with helping to prevent large-scale revenge violence and facilitating South Africa’s relatively peaceful transition to democracy (Britannica, 2026; Wilson, 2001).

By framing justice in restorative terms, emphasizing healing, forgiveness, and the restoration of relationships, the TRC embodied Ubuntu principles. It prioritized the reintegration of offenders into society and the moral repair of the national community rather than vengeance. This approach gained

international acclaim and influenced transitional justice processes in countries such as Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Timor-Leste.

Despite these achievements, the TRC faced substantial criticism. One major limitation was its narrow mandate, which focused primarily on individual acts of gross human rights violations (killings, torture, abduction, and severe ill-treatment) while largely sidelining the systemic and structural violence of apartheid, including forced removals, pass laws, economic exploitation, and racialized inequality. This individualization of responsibility allowed many beneficiaries of the apartheid system to escape scrutiny (Britannica, 2026).

The reparations program was another significant shortcoming. While the TRC recommended comprehensive reparations, the post-apartheid government implemented only modest one-off payments (R30,000) to a limited number of victims, far below what the Commission had proposed. Many victims felt that the process prioritized national reconciliation over their material and symbolic needs, leading to widespread disillusionment (Wilson, 2001; TRC Report).

Accountability remained contentious. Although the TRC granted amnesty to 849 applicants out of over 7,000, thousands of perpetrators who did not apply or were denied amnesty were never prosecuted. High-level political and military leaders often evaded full responsibility, reinforcing perceptions of impunity. Critics also argued that the strong emphasis on forgiveness sometimes placed undue pressure on victims to reconcile prematurely, potentially undermining their agency and healing (Verdoolaege, 2009).

Furthermore, the TRC has been critiqued for insufficient attention to gender-based violence and the structural economic legacies of apartheid. Its long-term impact on social cohesion has been mixed; while it helped stabilize the political transition, deep racial and economic inequalities persist in South Africa more than three decades later, raising questions about the sustainability of its reconciliation project.

In summary, the South African TRC demonstrated both the transformative potential and the inherent tensions of Ubuntu-inspired restorative justice. It succeeded in creating a shared public narrative and preventing immediate catastrophe, yet its limitations highlight the challenges of balancing truth, justice, reparation, and reconciliation in deeply divided societies. These lessons are highly relevant for contexts like post-conflict Tigray, where similar trade-offs between peace and accountability must be carefully navigated.

4. Application to Tigray: Towards a Hybrid Ubuntu-Informed Approach

4.1 Integrating Endogenous and Exogenous Justice

A sustainable and legitimate justice process in post-Pretoria Tigray must navigate the complex interplay between **endogenous** (internally driven, culturally rooted) and **exogenous** (externally driven, formal-legal) approaches to justice. Relying exclusively on one at the expense of the other risks either impunity or social alienation, both of which could undermine long-term peace.

Endogenous justice refers to traditional, community-based mechanisms that have historically governed social relations in Tigray. These include elders' mediation (*shimagle*), customary reconciliation ceremonies, family-level dialogues, and community truth-telling forums. These approaches prioritize relational repair, restoration of social harmony, acknowledgment of harm, and the reintegration of offenders into the community. They are culturally resonant, accessible to ordinary people, and emphasize collective healing over individual punishment. In Tigray, such mechanisms have long helped resolve land disputes, family conflicts, and inter-clan tensions. However, political factionalism, displacement, and the scale of wartime atrocities have weakened these traditional systems, limiting their capacity to address grave violations such as mass killings, widespread sexual violence, and ethnic cleansing.

Exogenous justice, by contrast, involves formal, state-centered, and international legal mechanisms. These include prosecutions in national courts, potential cases at the International Criminal Court (ICC), independent investigations into war crimes, institutional reforms, and vetting processes for public officials. Exogenous approaches are essential for establishing accountability for gross human rights violations, combating impunity, and upholding the rule of law. Survivors and diaspora communities in Tigray have repeatedly called for international involvement to ensure credible investigations into atrocities committed by all parties — Ethiopian federal forces, Eritrean troops, Amhara militias, and Tigrayan forces. Yet, purely exogenous processes risk being perceived as externally imposed, politically manipulated, or culturally insensitive, potentially deepening mistrust and undermining local ownership of the peace process.

The tension between these two paradigms is evident in contemporary Tigray. While many victims demand formal justice and reparations through national or international bodies, others stress the need for community-level healing to restore fractured family ties and prevent intra-Tigrayan violence amid TPLF factionalism and the emergence of splinter groups such as the Tigray Peace Force.

Ubuntu offers a powerful philosophical and ethical bridge between endogenous and exogenous justice. Grounded in the principle of interdependence ("I am because we are"), Ubuntu recognizes that true justice must simultaneously address individual moral responsibility and communal relationships. It supports formal accountability for serious crimes while insisting that justice should ultimately serve the restoration of social harmony and human dignity (Metz, 2011; Tutu, 1999). Rather than viewing restorative and retributive justice as mutually exclusive, an Ubuntu-informed approach sees them as complementary: legal accountability provides the foundation of truth and deterrence, while traditional mechanisms facilitate emotional healing, forgiveness (where possible), and reintegration.

This hybrid model allows for a tiered justice system in Tigray, serious international crimes (e.g., sexual violence, genocide-level acts) handled through formal mechanisms, while lower-level offenses and community reconciliation are addressed through strengthened traditional structures. Such integration can enhance the legitimacy of the justice process, increase public participation, and reduce the risk that formal trials become tools of political revenge or that traditional processes enable powerful actors to evade responsibility.

Ultimately, integrating endogenous and exogenous justice under an Ubuntu framework offers Tigray a culturally legitimate pathway to address the profound moral, social, and political wounds left by the war.

4.2 Ubuntu-Informed Pathways for Healing, Reintegration, and Governance

Translating Ubuntu philosophy into practical action requires concrete, multi-level interventions that address the psychological, social, political, and institutional wounds in post-Pretoria Tigray. An Ubuntu-informed approach emphasizes relational repair, mutual responsibility, and the restoration of communal harmony. The following pathways offer a comprehensive framework for healing, reintegration, and governance stabilization.

First, intergenerational dialogue forums are essential for rebuilding trust between elders and the younger generation, whose relationship was severely damaged during the war. Many young people were radicalized, fought as part of the Tigray Defense Forces (TDF), or experienced trauma as displaced children. These forums would bring together elders, youth, ex-combatants, and women in safe, facilitated spaces to share experiences, acknowledge pain, and reconstruct shared identity. Rooted in Ubuntu's emphasis on community and mutual respect, such dialogues can restore traditional authority while giving voice to youth, reducing the risk of generational conflict and radicalization.

Second, community reconciliation ceremonies grounded in Tigrayan cultural traditions can facilitate collective healing. These may include *shimagle* (elders-mediated) processes, purification rituals, public truth-telling sessions, and symbolic acts of forgiveness and reintegration. Such ceremonies allow communities to confront harms inflicted not only by external forces but also by intra-Tigrayan violence resulting from TPLF factionalism. By prioritizing acknowledgment, remorse, and restoration of relationships over punishment, these practices embody Ubuntu's focus on repairing the social fabric.

Third, comprehensive psychosocial support and reintegration programs for former combatants are critical. Thousands of TDF fighters, many of them young, face challenges transitioning to civilian life amid economic hardship and factional divisions. Ubuntu-inspired programs would combine trauma counseling, vocational training, education opportunities, and community service initiatives. Rather than treating ex-combatants solely as security threats, these programs recognize their humanity while holding them accountable for past actions. Successful reintegration reduces the risk of them being recruited into splinter groups such as the Tigray Peace Force and helps rebuild social cohesion.

Fourth, the establishment of inclusive multi-stakeholder governance committees at regional and local levels can address the current crisis of legitimacy and elite capture. These committees should include representatives from all TPLF factions, opposition parties (such as Third Woyane and the Tigray Independence Party), elders, women's groups, youth, civil society, and religious leaders. Operating on Ubuntu principles of reciprocity and shared responsibility, such bodies can facilitate local dispute resolution, oversee aspects of the Pretoria Agreement implementation, monitor reintegration efforts, and promote transparent governance. This inclusive approach helps break down the blurred lines between party and government institutions and rebuild public trust.

Finally, a hybrid transitional justice mechanism represents the cornerstone of an Ubuntu-informed strategy. This would combine selective prosecutions for the most serious crimes (e.g., command responsibility for mass atrocities and sexual violence) through national or international courts with a TRC-style truth and reconciliation commission. The commission could document violations, provide a platform for victim testimonies, recommend reparations, and facilitate public acknowledgment. Reparations, both material and symbolic (memorials, apologies, and community development projects), would demonstrate tangible commitment to justice. By blending retributive and restorative elements, this hybrid model aligns with Ubuntu's dual emphasis on accountability and communal healing.

These pathways are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Psychosocial support strengthens community dialogues, while inclusive governance structures provide the institutional backing needed for sustainable reconciliation. When guided by Ubuntu, they move beyond short-term ceasefires toward a deeper transformation based on shared humanity, moral repair, and collective responsibility.

Implementing these measures will require coordinated efforts among Tigrayan leaders, the federal government, civil society, and international partners. While challenging in a context of ongoing political fragmentation, such Ubuntu-informed initiatives offer the best hope for mending Tigray's fractured society and building resilient, inclusive governance.

5. Conclusion

Ubuntu, with its profound emphasis on interdependence, shared humanity, and moral repair, offers a culturally resonant and ethically grounded framework for addressing the complex challenges of transitional justice in post-conflict Tigray. By affirming that "a person is a person through other persons," Ubuntu moves beyond narrow legalistic responses to conflict and calls for a deeper restoration of relationships, dignity, and communal harmony. In Tigray, where the war has torn apart families, eroded trust between generations, and fragmented political and social structures, this philosophy provides both a moral compass and a practical pathway forward.

The experience of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) offers valuable lessons for Tigray. While the TRC demonstrated the power of truth-telling, public acknowledgment, and conditional amnesty to facilitate peaceful political transition and national healing, it also revealed the limitations of restorative justice when it fails to deliver meaningful accountability, adequate reparations, or structural

transformation. These successes and shortcomings underscore that neither purely retributive nor exclusively restorative approaches are sufficient on their own in deeply divided societies emerging from mass violence.

For Tigray, a carefully designed **hybrid transitional justice model**, one that integrates endogenous (local, traditional) mechanisms with exogenous (formal, legal) processes, represents the most promising route to sustainable peace. Such a model would combine selective prosecutions for the gravest atrocities, a credible truth-telling commission, comprehensive reparations programs, psychosocial support, community reconciliation ceremonies, and inclusive governance reforms. Guided by Ubuntu principles, this approach recognizes that justice must serve both individual accountability and collective healing. It acknowledges the suffering of victims while creating opportunities for remorse, reintegration, and the rebuilding of social trust.

Ultimately, lasting peace in Tigray will not be achieved through military victory or political dominance alone, but through a genuine transformation in how individuals and communities relate to one another. This requires addressing not only the immediate wounds of war, trauma, displacement, and factionalism, but also the deeper structural issues of ethnic federalism, power-sharing, and historical grievances that fueled the conflict.

By embracing Ubuntu as philosophy and practice, Tigrayan leaders, civil society, elders, youth, and the federal government can work toward a future defined by mutual recognition, shared responsibility, and restored social cohesion. The path ahead is undoubtedly difficult, especially amid ongoing political fragmentation and unresolved territorial disputes. However, by weaving together accountability and forgiveness, truth and reconciliation, and local wisdom with formal justice, Tigray can move beyond cycles of violence toward a more inclusive, resilient, and peaceful society.

The central message of this article is clear: true reconciliation is not the absence of justice, but the presence of restored relationships grounded in our shared humanity. Ubuntu reminds us that the future of Tigray, and Ethiopia, depends on our ability to see ourselves in one another.

Declarations

Ethical Approval This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

Informed Consent This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

Data Availability Data sharing is not applicable to this research as no data were generated or analysed.

References

1. Assefa L (2023) The Pretoria agreement: Reflections on its essence, implementation status, and the way forward. *J Afr Conflicts Peace Stud*, 6(1)
2. Broodryk J (2002) *Ubuntu: Life coping skills from Africa*. Knowres Publishing
3. Gidey M (2026) Ending the specter of war. *The Reporter Ethiopia*
4. Letseka M (2012) In defense of Ubuntu. *Stud Philos Educ* 31(1):47–60
5. Metz T (2011) Ubuntu as a moral theory and human rights in South Africa. *Afr Hum Rights Law J* 11(2):532–559
6. Tutu D (1999) *No future without forgiveness*. Random House. Wilson, R. A. (2001). *The politics of truth and reconciliation in South Africa*. Cambridge University Press
7. Zehr H (2002) *The little book of restorative justice*. Good Books (Add any additional references required J style)