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The Role of Traditional Institutions in Peacebuilding: Lessons from Rwanda's Gacaca Courts

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the role of traditional institutions, indigenous governance structures, customary law systems, and community-based conflict resolution mechanisms in fostering sustainable peace. Through a detailed case study of Rwanda's Gacaca courts, which processed over one million genocide cases between 2001 and 2012, this research illuminates both the transformative potential and inherent limitations of traditional mechanisms in post-conflict reconciliation. The study employed a qualitative case study approach, drawing on secondary literature, policy documents, and scholarly analyses to examine how Rwanda adapted pre-colonial community justice practices to address mass atrocities. The study found that traditional institutions have unique strengths: cultural legitimacy from indigenous practices, high accessibility for marginalized groups, a focus on restorative relational repair rather than punishment, and the ability to foster community healing through collective engagement. Gacaca's achievement in delivering justice on an unprecedented scale while fostering grassroots reconciliation demonstrates these advantages. The research exposed limitations; gender exclusion, vulnerability to political manipulation, tensions with international human rights standards, and risks of romanticisation complicate traditional institution engagement in peacebuilding. Gacaca's exclusion of gender-based violence, governmental control over proceedings, and limited procedural protections illustrate these challenges. The study concludes by advocating for sophisticated hybrid approaches that transcend false binaries between local and international, traditional and modern approaches. As the limitations of liberal peacebuilding models become increasingly apparent, understanding how to responsibly engage traditional institutions becomes essential for practitioners, policymakers, and scholars committed to building peace that proves both just and durable.

Key words: Conflict resolution, customary law, Gacaca courts, hybrid justice, post-conflict reconstruction, traditional institutions, transitional justice.



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INTRODUCTION

In the aftermath of the 1994 Rwandan genocide, the formal justice system faced an insurmountable challenge: over 120,000 suspects awaited trial in a judicial system with fewer than 50 judges and a completely devastated infrastructure. At the existing pace, it would have taken more than a century to prosecute all genocide suspects through conventional courts. This stark reality forced Rwanda to look beyond imported models of justice and peacebuilding, ultimately reviving and adapting *Gacaca*, a traditional community-based justice mechanism (Nagy, 2008). This pivot from formal to traditional institutions exemplifies a broader pattern emerging across post-conflict societies worldwide, where communities increasingly turn to indigenous mechanisms to rebuild social fabric torn apart by violence (Paris, 2010).

The global peacebuilding enterprise, however, continues to grapple with a fundamental paradox. Despite billions of dollars invested in formal peace processes, international tribunals, and state-building initiatives, sustainable peace remains elusive in many post-conflict contexts (Avruch & Vejarano, 2001). International interventions, often designed in distant capitals and implemented through top-down frameworks, frequently fail to resonate with local populations or address the deep-rooted social fractures that fuel conflict. This disconnect between formal peacebuilding mechanisms and grassroots realities has prompted scholars and practitioners to re-examine the potential role of traditional institutions, indigenous governance structures, customary law systems, and community-based conflict resolution practices in fostering lasting peace (Millar, 2011).

Traditional institutions, embedded within local cultural contexts and wielding considerable legitimacy among communities, offer distinct advantages: they are accessible, culturally resonant, and often focus on restoration rather than retribution. Yet their role remains contested and complex. Critics point to concerns about gender exclusion, compatibility with international human rights standards, and potential manipulation by political elites (Ginty & Richmond, 2013). This tension raises critical questions: Under what conditions can traditional institutions contribute meaningfully to peacebuilding? How can they be

integrated with formal mechanisms without compromising their legitimacy or sacrificing universal human rights principles? This paper argues that traditional institutions play a critical yet complex role in sustainable peacebuilding, serving as vital complements rather than replacements to formal peace mechanisms. Through a detailed examination of Rwanda's *Gacaca* courts, this study illuminates both the transformative potential and inherent limitations of traditional institutions in post-conflict reconciliation and justice (Longman et al., 2004). The significance of this research extends beyond academic discourse; as the international community increasingly recognises the limits of liberal peacebuilding models, understanding how to effectively harness indigenous mechanisms becomes essential for practitioners, policymakers, and local actors working toward durable peace (Ginty, 2008).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Traditional institutions refer to indigenous governance structures, customary law systems, and conflict resolution mechanisms that predate colonial or modern state formations and continue to operate within communities based on cultural norms and practices. These institutions encompass a diverse array of organisational forms, including councils of elders, customary courts, clan-based assemblies, and community mediation forums (Longman, 2009). Unlike formal state institutions that derive legitimacy from constitutional-legal frameworks, traditional institutions draw their authority from cultural heritage, ancestral practices, and community recognition. Indigenous governance structures represent the organisational architecture through which traditional authority is exercised. These may include chieftaincy systems in West Africa, elder councils in East Africa, or tribal *jirgas* in Afghanistan and Pakistan (Lemarchand, 2009). Such structures typically embody hierarchical or consensus-based decision-making processes rooted in cultural values and historical precedent. Customary law systems constitute the normative frameworks governing social relations, property rights, marriage, inheritance, and dispute resolution within traditional contexts (Lederach, 2005). These unwritten or orally transmitted legal codes reflect community values and adapt gradually through practice and interpretation by recognised authorities.

Traditional conflict resolution mechanisms specifically address disputes and violence through processes emphasising restoration, reconciliation, and community healing rather than punishment alone. These mechanisms often involve public deliberation, acknowledgement of harm, compensation, ritual purification, and reintegration ceremonies (Lederach, 1997). Examples include the Mato Oput reconciliation ceremonies among the Acholi people of northern Uganda, the Bashingantahe system in Burundi, and the Xeer customary law practised by Somali clans. Critically, these institutions operate with varying degrees of formalisation and state recognition, existing sometimes in parallel, sometimes in tension, and occasionally in partnership with official legal systems (Lambourne, 2009).

Peacebuilding represents a comprehensive, long-term process aimed not merely at ending violence but at addressing root causes of conflict, transforming relationships, and building sustainable peace architecture (Kiss, 2000). This conceptualisation distinguishes peacebuilding from narrower notions of conflict resolution. While conflict resolution focuses primarily on settling specific disputes or negotiating ceasefires between warring parties, peacebuilding encompasses the broader reconstruction of political, economic, and social systems necessary to prevent conflict recurrence (Kerr & Mobekk, 2007). Peacebuilding involves creating conditions where justice, equity, and inclusive governance can flourish, thereby removing structural drivers of violence.

Effective peacebuilding operates simultaneously across multiple interconnected levels. At the individual level, peacebuilding addresses trauma healing, psychosocial support, and personal reconciliation between perpetrators and victims (Baines, 2007). This entails fostering environments for recognition, regret, reconciliation, and the reinstatement of human dignity. At the community level, peacebuilding focuses on rebuilding social cohesion, repairing fractured relationships between groups, and re-establishing trust and cooperation necessary for collective life (Kent, 2012). This includes economic reintegration, shared community projects, and inter-group dialogue initiatives. At the societal level, peacebuilding entails institutional

reform, constitutional negotiations, transitional justice mechanisms, security sector transformation, and the establishment of inclusive political systems that address grievances and prevent marginalisation. These levels are deeply interdependent (Kelsall, 2005). Individual healing contributes to community reconciliation, which in turn creates foundations for societal transformation. Conversely, societal-level reforms that promote justice and equity facilitate community healing and individual recovery. Traditional institutions often excel at the individual and community levels, where their cultural legitimacy, accessibility, and restorative orientations prove particularly effective (Joireman, 2011). However, their capacity to address systemic, societal-level transformations remains contested, raising questions about how traditional and formal mechanisms can complement each other across these multiple dimensions of peacebuilding (Ingelaere, 2016).

This study engages with two key theoretical debates shaping contemporary peacebuilding scholarship. First, the liberal versus local peacebuilding debate questions whether externally driven, liberal peace models emphasising democratisation, market economics, and rule of law effectively foster sustainable peace, or whether locally owned, culturally grounded approaches prove more durable (Ingelaere, 2009). Critics of liberal peacebuilding argue it imposes Western templates that ignore local contexts, while proponents contend that universal principles of human rights and democratic governance provide essential foundations for lasting peace (Ingelaere, 2008). Second, hybridity theory offers a productive framework for transcending this binary. Hybridity recognises that peacebuilding inevitably involves encounters between international and local actors, formal and informal institutions, and universal and particular norms (Huyse & Salter, 2008). Rather than viewing traditional and modern mechanisms as incompatible, hybridity theory examines how they interact, adapt, and combine in practice, creating context-specific peace architectures that draw on multiple sources of legitimacy and authority (Hayner, 2011).

Traditional institutions have historically served as primary mechanisms for managing conflicts across diverse societies, particularly in contexts where

state presence remained limited or non-existent (Harlacher et al., 2006). Anthropological and historical research documents extensive traditions of indigenous conflict resolution spanning African, Asian, Pacific, and Latin American contexts. In pre-colonial Africa, institutions such as the Abunzi mediation committees in Rwanda, the Nahe Biti in Timor-Leste, and various forms of restorative justice practices managed disputes ranging from land conflicts to interpersonal violence, maintaining social harmony through culturally resonant processes (Gahima, 2013). These institutions exhibit several distinctive characteristics that explain their enduring relevance and effectiveness.

First, they possess deep legitimacy rooted in cultural tradition and community recognition. Unlike externally imposed mechanisms, traditional institutions reflect indigenous understandings of justice, social order, and proper conduct, making their decisions more readily accepted by community members (Fafchamps, 2004).

Second, they offer exceptional accessibility compared to formal legal systems. Traditional mechanisms typically operate at the village or community level, require no legal representation, use local languages, and involve minimal costs, removing barriers that exclude marginalised populations from formal justice (Baker & Scheye, 2007).

Third, they demonstrate strong cultural resonance, employing familiar symbols, rituals, and narratives that connect contemporary conflict resolution to ancestral wisdom and collective identity. Additionally, traditional institutions often prioritise relational restoration over individual punishment. Rather than determining guilt and imposing sentences in adversarial proceedings, many traditional mechanisms emphasise dialogue, acknowledgement of harm, compensation, and reconciliation between parties who must continue coexisting within the same community (Enslin & Tjiattas, 2004). This restorative orientation addresses not only the immediate dispute but also the underlying relationships and social fabric damaged by conflict, making traditional institutions particularly valuable in post-conflict contexts where communities must rebuild trust and cooperation across former dividing lines (Eltringham, 2004).

Despite their strengths, traditional institutions face substantial critiques that complicate their role in contemporary peacebuilding. Gender exclusion represents perhaps the most significant concern. Many traditional mechanisms systematically exclude women from decision-making roles, with elder councils and customary courts dominated by male authorities (Drumbl, 2007). Furthermore, customary laws often perpetuate discriminatory practices regarding marriage, inheritance, property rights, and gender-based violence (Doughty, 2016). Women's testimonies may carry less weight, and restorative processes can pressure female victims to reconcile with abusers in the name of family or community harmony, subordinating individual rights to collective cohesion. Power imbalances and elite capture constitute another critical limitation.

Traditional institutions do not operate in egalitarian vacuums but reflect existing social hierarchies. Elites may manipulate customary processes to consolidate authority, settle personal scores, or protect their interests at the expense of marginalised groups (Desrosiers & Thomson, 2011). In post-conflict settings, traditional leaders may have been complicit in violence or may represent one faction, compromising their impartiality. Additionally, some traditional practices involving collective punishment or exclusion may violate principles of individual responsibility and due process (de Greiff, 2012).

The tension between customary practices and international human rights standards poses fundamental normative challenges. While cultural relativism cautions against imposing external values, universal human rights frameworks establish minimum standards protecting individual dignity and equality that some traditional practices violate (Daly, 2002). This creates dilemmas for peacebuilders: Should traditional institutions be supported despite problematic practices? Can they be reformed without destroying their cultural authenticity and legitimacy? How should the international community balance respect for cultural diversity with commitment to universal rights? These questions lack simple answers and require careful navigation in specific contexts.

Recognising both the potential and limitations of traditional institutions, scholars and practitioners increasingly advocate for hybrid approaches that integrate customary and formal mechanisms. Legal pluralism research documents how multiple normative orders coexist in most societies, with individuals navigating between traditional and state systems based on accessibility, legitimacy, and expected outcomes (Corey & Joireman, 2004). Rather than viewing this plurality as problematic, hybrid peacebuilding embraces it as an opportunity to create complementary systems that leverage respective strengths while mitigating weaknesses (Clark, 2014).

Successful integration requires careful attention to questions of complementarity versus competition. Complementarity emerges when traditional and formal mechanisms address different types of disputes, operate at different levels, or fulfil distinct functions within an overall justice architecture. For example, traditional mechanisms might handle community-level disputes and reconciliation while formal courts prosecute serious crimes requiring accountability at the national level. Competition arises when institutions vie for jurisdiction, resources, or legitimacy, potentially creating confusion, forum shopping, or parallel systems that undermine each other (Barkan, 2000). Several models of integration have emerged. Co-option involves state recognition and formalisation of traditional institutions, providing them with official status and resources but potentially compromising their autonomy and cultural character. Coordination establishes referral mechanisms and division of labour between systems while maintaining institutional separation.

Transformation involves reforming traditional institutions to align with human rights standards while preserving their cultural core (Clark, 2007). Each model presents distinct advantages and challenges, with context determining appropriate approaches. The key insight from this literature is that neither wholesale rejection nor uncritical embrace of traditional institutions serves peacebuilding well; rather, thoughtful, context-sensitive integration offers the most promising path forward (Clark, 2010).

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative case study approach to examine the role of traditional institutions in peacebuilding. The case study method is particularly appropriate for exploring complex social phenomena within their real-world contexts, allowing for in-depth investigation of how traditional mechanisms operate in practice, the conditions shaping their effectiveness, and the interactions between local and formal peacebuilding processes (Chandler, 2010). By focusing on Rwanda's Gacaca courts as a paradigmatic case, this research illuminates broader patterns and principles applicable across diverse post-conflict settings while remaining attentive to context-specific dynamics.

The research draws primarily on secondary data sources, including academic literature, policy documents, evaluation reports, and scholarly analyses of the Gacaca process. Key sources include peer-reviewed journal articles examining Gacaca's design and implementation, reports from human rights organisations documenting proceedings and outcomes, government policy documents outlining the legal framework, and ethnographic studies capturing community experiences (Bigagaza et al., 2002). This multi-source approach enables triangulation, cross-checking findings across different types of evidence to enhance reliability and validity. Additionally, the study incorporates comparative insights from scholarship on traditional institutions in other post-conflict contexts to situate the Rwandan case within broader theoretical and empirical discussions.

The analytical framework employs thematic analysis to identify patterns, tensions, and outcomes associated with traditional institution involvement in peacebuilding. Analysis focuses on three dimensions: structural characteristics of Gacaca (design, procedures, relationship to formal justice); processes and practices (participation, truth-telling, reconciliation mechanisms); and outcomes (justice delivery, social cohesion, limitations and critiques). This framework permits systematic examination of how traditional institutions contribute to peacebuilding objectives while critically assessing challenges and constraints (Call & Cousens, 2008). Several limitations warrant acknowledgement. First, reliance on secondary sources means findings

are filtered through other researchers' interpretations and potential biases. Direct fieldwork would provide richer, more nuanced insights into community experiences. Second, the single case study design limits generalizability; while Rwanda offers valuable lessons, each context presents unique historical, cultural, and political conditions requiring careful adaptation rather than direct replication. Third, the available literature reflects ongoing debates about Gacaca's legacy, with interpretations ranging from celebratory to highly critical (Berman, 2007). This study attempts a balanced analysis but acknowledges the contested nature of assessments. Finally, temporal distance from Gacaca's conclusion limits access to long-term impact data, though this gap also enables more reflective analysis of sustained effects.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Gacaca case illuminates several distinctive strengths that traditional institutions bring to peacebuilding processes, advantages often unattainable through formal mechanisms alone. Cultural legitimacy stands paramount among these strengths. Traditional institutions derive authority from cultural heritage, ancestral practices, and community recognition rather than state imposition or international mandate. This indigenous legitimacy fundamentally shapes how communities receive and engage with justice processes. In Rwanda, Gacaca drew on pre-colonial traditions of conflict resolution, offering a culturally familiar process that formal courts couldn't match, fostering participation as a return to genuine Rwandan values rather than adherence to foreign systems. This cultural resonance facilitated local ownership, transforming communities from passive recipients of externally designed justice into active agents of their own reconciliation.

Accessibility represents another critical advantage. Traditional institutions typically operate at grassroots levels, using local languages, requiring no legal representation, and involving minimal costs. This accessibility is particularly vital for marginalised populations, rural communities, the poor, and the illiterate who face insurmountable barriers to formal legal systems (Boraine, 2006). Gacaca's community-based structure meant that justice literally came to the people, with proceedings held in villages where survivors and

perpetrators lived. Over two million Rwandans participated in Gacaca as judges, witnesses, or observers, a scale of engagement impossible through conventional courts. This mass participation not only expedited justice delivery but also democratised the peacebuilding process, ensuring diverse voices shaped reconciliation.

The restorative orientation of traditional institutions offers profound advantages over purely retributive approaches. While formal justice focuses on determining guilt and imposing punishment, traditional mechanisms emphasise acknowledgement, compensation, and relational repair. Gacaca prioritised truth-telling, with perpetrators confessing crimes publicly and victims hearing acknowledgement of their suffering (Buckley-Zistel, 2006). This process addressed psychological and social dimensions of healing that prison sentences alone cannot achieve. The emphasis on restoring relationships proves particularly crucial in post-conflict contexts where former enemies must rebuild shared community life. Punishment without reconciliation leaves underlying animosities festering; restoration addresses both accountability and the social fabric necessary for sustainable peace.

Finally, traditional institutions excel at fostering social cohesion and community healing. By involving entire communities in justice processes, these mechanisms rebuild collective bonds fractured by violence. Gacaca's public proceedings created shared spaces where Rwandans confronted difficult truths together, processed collective trauma, and negotiated pathways forward. The ritual and symbolic dimensions of traditional practices, acknowledgement ceremonies, purification rites, and communal gatherings provide culturally meaningful frameworks for transitioning from violence to peace (Rombouts, 2004). These processes strengthen community solidarity, recreate moral consensus, and re-establish norms of coexistence essential for preventing conflict recurrence.

Despite these strengths, the Gacaca experience also exposes significant limitations inherent in many traditional institutions, limitations that cannot be ignored in romanticised celebrations of indigenous practices. Gender exclusion emerges as perhaps the

most troubling concern. While Gacaca included women as judges more than traditional practice had permitted, the process systematically excluded gender-based violence from its jurisdiction, relegating rape and sexual violence crimes overwhelmingly affecting women to conventional courts (Richmond, 2009). This exclusion sent a devastating message about which harms mattered and whose suffering warranted community attention. More broadly, traditional institutions often reflect patriarchal social structures, with male elders dominating decision-making and customary laws perpetuating discriminatory practices. When peacebuilding relies heavily on such institutions without addressing gender imbalances, it risks rebuilding oppressive structures rather than transforming them.

The potential for political manipulation and elite capture represents another serious limitation. Traditional institutions do not exist in political vacuums; they operate within contexts of power relations, factional competition, and state control. In Rwanda, the government exercised considerable influence over Gacaca, shaping its design, controlling its implementation, and using it to advance narratives supporting the ruling regime. Critics argue that Gacaca became a tool for political consolidation rather than genuine reconciliation, with certain crimes and perpetrators receiving scrutiny while others escaped accountability (Roht-Arriaza & Mariezcurrena, 2006). This instrumentalisation risk exists wherever traditional institutions lack genuine autonomy from political authority, raising questions about whether compromised indigenous mechanisms retain the legitimacy that makes them valuable.

Compatibility with international human rights standards poses fundamental normative challenges. Some traditional practices involve collective punishment, deny individual due process rights, or apply discriminatory standards based on gender, ethnicity, or social status. Gacaca's limited procedural protections, minimal legal representation, and community pressure to confess raised concerns about fair trial rights. While cultural relativism cautions against imposing external values, certain minimum standards of human dignity and equality enjoy widespread international consensus (Schabas, 2005). The tension between

respecting cultural autonomy and upholding universal rights creates genuine dilemmas without easy resolution. Finally, discourse around traditional institutions risks romanticisation that obscures historical realities and contemporary complexities. Not all indigenous practices promote peace; some traditional mechanisms have facilitated violence, exclusion, or oppression. Moreover, "traditional" institutions are not static remnants of pure pre-colonial society but have evolved through colonial encounters, state formation, and globalisation (Scheye & Peake, 2005). Gacaca was not simply a revived tradition but a deliberately constructed neo-traditional hybrid adapted for genocide prosecution. Treating traditional institutions as inherently authentic or superior to formal mechanisms oversimplifies reality and potentially undermines critical evaluation necessary for effective peacebuilding.

The Gacaca experience, examined alongside broader scholarship, suggests several conditions essential for effectively integrating traditional institutions into peacebuilding frameworks. First, context-specific adaptation proves crucial. There is no universal model of traditional institution engagement; what works in Rwanda may fail elsewhere. Successful integration requires a deep understanding of local cultural contexts, historical experiences, existing power dynamics, and community preferences. Peacebuilders must resist template approaches, instead engaging in sustained consultation with diverse community members to design context-appropriate mechanisms that honour indigenous practices while addressing contemporary needs (Braithwaite, 2002).

Second, robust safeguards and oversight mechanisms are essential to prevent abuses and protect vulnerable populations. Traditional institutions should not operate with complete autonomy if they perpetuate discrimination or violate fundamental rights. Safeguards might include appeals processes to formal courts, human rights monitors observing proceedings, explicit protections for minorities and women, and transparent complaint mechanisms (Straus, 2006). Rwanda incorporated some oversight through appeals and monitoring, though critics argue these proved insufficient. The challenge lies in implementing safeguards that protect rights without

undermining the cultural legitimacy and community ownership that make traditional institutions valuable.

Third, effective integration requires genuine complementarity with formal institutions rather than competition or simple substitution. Traditional and formal mechanisms should fulfil distinct roles within an overall justice architecture, with clear jurisdictional boundaries and referral procedures (Teitel, 2000). Serious crimes requiring substantial punishment might belong to formal courts, while community-level disputes and reconciliation processes might suit traditional mechanisms (Thomson, 2013). This division of labour leverages respective strengths while mitigating weaknesses. However, achieving complementarity demands coordination, mutual respect between systems, and political will to support institutional pluralism. Finally, traditional institutions require capacity building and resources to function effectively, especially when scaled up for post-conflict justice (Tiemessen, 2004). Gacaca judges received training, communities received civic education, and the government invested in infrastructure and administration. Without such support, traditional mechanisms may lack the capacity to handle complex or widespread cases. Yet capacity building must avoid over-formalisation that transforms traditional institutions into bureaucratic replicas of formal systems, thereby destroying the very characteristics that make them distinctive and valuable (Uvin, 2001).

The analysis of traditional institutions in peacebuilding yields several practical recommendations for diverse stakeholders engaged in post-conflict reconstruction and reconciliation processes. International actors and national policymakers must fundamentally shift their approach to traditional institutions, moving from scepticism or neglect toward active recognition and strategic support (Waldorf, 2006). This begins with acknowledging that sustainable peacebuilding cannot rely exclusively on formal, state-centred mechanisms imported from Western contexts. Traditional institutions possess legitimacy, accessibility, and cultural resonance that externally designed interventions cannot replicate. Policymakers should conduct comprehensive mapping exercises to identify existing traditional

mechanisms, understand their functions and limitations, and assess community attitudes toward their involvement in peacebuilding. Support should be substantive rather than merely rhetorical (Branch, 2014). This includes providing financial resources for capacity building, training traditional authorities in human rights principles, and facilitating platforms for coordination between traditional and formal justice systems. International organisations should incorporate traditional institution engagement into peacebuilding program design from the outset rather than as an afterthought. However, support must not become co-optation that compromises institutional autonomy or transforms traditional mechanisms into government instruments (Zehr, 2002).

Critically, ensuring human rights compliance represents a non-negotiable condition for support. Policymakers must establish clear benchmarks requiring traditional institutions to respect fundamental rights, particularly regarding gender equality, minority protection, and due process. This might involve conditioning support on reforms that increase women's participation, exclude discriminatory practices, or establish appeals mechanisms. The challenge lies in promoting rights compliance without destroying cultural authenticity, requiring sensitive negotiation rather than heavy-handed imposition (Allen, 2006). International actors should facilitate dialogue between traditional leaders and human rights advocates to identify culturally appropriate adaptations that honour both indigenous practices and universal principles (Zorbas, 2004).

Traditional leaders, civil society organisations, and community members bear primary responsibility for ensuring traditional institutions serve inclusive peacebuilding rather than perpetuating exclusion. Strengthening inclusivity must become a priority, particularly regarding gender. Traditional authorities should proactively recruit women into leadership roles, ensure women's voices receive equal weight in proceedings, and address gender-based violence through appropriate mechanisms (Weinstein & Stover, 2004). This requires confronting patriarchal norms embedded in many traditional structures, recognising that authentic tradition evolves rather than remaining static. Local actors should also establish mechanisms for

documenting traditional peacebuilding practices, evaluating their effectiveness, and sharing lessons learned across communities and contexts (Thomson, 2011). Too often, valuable indigenous knowledge remains oral and localised, preventing others from learning from successes and failures. Creating accessible repositories of best practices, challenges encountered, and adaptive strategies would strengthen traditional institutions' contributions to peacebuilding globally (Richmond, 2011). Civil society organisations can play crucial roles in facilitating documentation, conducting participatory evaluations, and creating networks for inter-community learning. Furthermore, local actors must resist romanticisation of traditional institutions while defending their value. Critical self-reflection about limitations, power imbalances, and problematic practices strengthens rather than undermines traditional mechanisms by enabling continuous improvement (Shaw & Waldorf, 2010). Communities should cultivate spaces for honest dialogue about how traditional institutions can evolve to meet contemporary challenges while maintaining cultural integrity.

Scholars have essential roles in advancing the understanding of traditional institutions in peacebuilding through rigorous empirical research. Despite growing interest, significant knowledge gaps persist. Long-term impact studies examining whether traditional mechanisms produce sustained reconciliation, reduced violence, and transformed relationships remain scarce. Most research captures immediate or short-term outcomes; tracking communities over decades would illuminate whether effects endure or fade. Comparative research across diverse contexts would identify patterns, contextual variables, and transferable principles. What conditions enable traditional institutions to contribute effectively? When do they fail? How do different cultural traditions produce distinct outcomes? Such analysis requires moving beyond single case studies toward systematic comparison while remaining attentive to context specificity. Additionally, researchers should employ diverse methodologies, including ethnography, participatory action research, and quantitative analysis, to capture multiple dimensions of complex peacebuilding processes.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This examination of traditional institutions in peacebuilding, centred on Rwanda's Gacaca courts, reveals a nuanced reality that defies simplistic celebration or dismissal. Traditional institutions possess distinctive strengths that make them indispensable to sustainable peace. Their cultural legitimacy, accessibility, restorative orientation, and capacity for community healing address dimensions of post-conflict reconstruction that formal mechanisms cannot reach. The Gacaca experience demonstrates how indigenous practices, thoughtfully adapted to contemporary challenges, can deliver justice, foster reconciliation, and rebuild social fabric on a mass scale impossible through conventional courts alone. Yet this study equally illuminates serious limitations that temper enthusiasm. Gender exclusion, vulnerability to political manipulation, tensions with human rights standards, and risks of romanticisation reveal that traditional institutions are not panaceas. They reflect the societies that produce them, including power imbalances, discriminatory norms, and political contestation.

The Gacaca courts, despite remarkable achievements in processing enormous caseloads and facilitating community dialogue, also demonstrated how traditional mechanisms can perpetuate exclusions, serve political agendas, and compromise procedural fairness. These limitations demand critical engagement rather than uncritical embrace. The central thesis advanced here bears restatement: traditional institutions play a critical yet complex role in sustainable peacebuilding, serving as vital complements rather than replacements to formal peace mechanisms. Neither traditional nor formal approaches alone suffice for the multifaceted challenges of post-conflict reconstruction. Sustainable peace requires hybrid architectures that integrate indigenous and modern mechanisms, leveraging respective strengths while mitigating weaknesses through careful design, robust safeguards, and genuine complementarity.

This conclusion calls for nuanced, context-sensitive approaches that resist both wholesale rejection of traditional institutions as backward or incompatible with modernity, and romanticisation that ignores real limitations and abuses. Effective peacebuilding demands deep contextual understanding, sustained

engagement with diverse community voices, adaptation rather than template application, and willingness to navigate tensions between cultural autonomy and universal rights. It requires recognising that traditional institutions are not static relics but dynamic entities that evolve through practice, capable of reform without losing authenticity. Looking forward, the future of peacebuilding lies in sophisticated hybridity that transcends false binaries between local and international, traditional and modern, particular and universal. As the limitations of liberal peacebuilding models become increasingly apparent, the international community must develop humility about importing solutions and genuine respect for indigenous knowledge. Simultaneously, local actors must critically examine traditional practices, embracing evolution that enhances inclusivity and rights protection. The Gacaca experience offers valuable lessons for this journey:

ambitious vision combined with pragmatic adaptation, mass participation enabling local ownership, acknowledgement of both achievements and failures, and recognition that peacebuilding remains ongoing work rather than a completed project. Traditional institutions will continue playing vital roles in post-conflict societies, whether formally recognised or operating informally. The question is not whether to engage them but how to do so responsibly, ethically, and effectively. This requires moving beyond ideological debates toward empirical learning, from theoretical positions toward practical wisdom, and from external imposition toward collaborative partnership. Only through such approaches can the international community and local actors together build peace that proves both just and durable, honouring both universal principles and cultural particularity in the service of human dignity and flourishing.

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