

Navigating Cultural and Human Rights in Pluralistic Societies: The case of Nigeria

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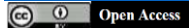
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ABSTRACT

In present-day Nigeria, the complex interplay between cultural norms, religious norms and international human rights standards present one of the most persistent ethical and legal challenges in Africa's pluralistic societies. This paper examines how Nigeria as a multi-ethnic country navigates tensions between cultural identity and universal human rights principles, especially in the light of legal pluralism that recognises statutory, customary and religious laws. Adopting the method of comparative analysis, the paper highlights situations where customs seem to conflict with constitutional and international guarantees, including gender and inheritance practices, freedom of religion, same-sex relations and environmental justice. The paper argues that Nigeria's pluralistic normative order is rich and culturally legitimate but often reproduces structural inequities and moral contradictions that undermine inclusive citizenship, justice and social cohesion. Navigating these complexities is essential for achieving social cohesion and justice in a diverse society such as Nigeria. The paper thus advocates for a contextual human rights approach that respects cultural identities while promoting human rights and emphasizing dialogue in order to foster mutual understanding. It also calls for legal reforms and interventions that recognise cultural values devoid of discriminatory practices. Hence, the paper concludes by proposing a model of constructive pluralism, situating Nigeria's human rights dilemmas within the broader debates on universalism, relativism and postcolonial modernity, offering pathways for harmonising indigenous norms with global human rights obligations.

Introduction

Human rights discourse in Africa has long been situated at the intersection of universal norms and indigenous cultural values. Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation and one of its most ethnically diverse, embodies this tension more acutely than most. With over 250 ethnic groups, multiple religious affiliations, and overlapping systems of customary, Islamic, and statutory law, the country presents a paradigmatic case of legal and moral pluralism (Ekanem & Okorie, 2022). The coexistence of these normative orders reflects both the nation's colonial legacy and its ongoing struggle to reconcile cultural identity with the demands of modern constitutionalism and international human-rights regimes. While the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria enshrines fundamental rights consistent with international conventions, such as the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)* and the *African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights*, practical realities reveal persistent conflicts between these formal provisions and deeply rooted socio-cultural traditions (Renteln, 2022).

The challenge of navigating cultural and human rights in Nigeria arises not merely from legal contradictions but from competing conceptions of personhood, morality, and community. In many indigenous worldviews, rights are relational rather than individualistic, grounded in social harmony, duty, and collective well-being (Atuire, 2022). This contrasts with the liberal individualism that underpins international human-rights law, leading to tensions in areas such as gender equality, religious freedom, and sexual rights. For instance, customary laws governing inheritance, marriage, and land ownership often disadvantage women despite statutory and international provisions guaranteeing equality. Similarly, the continued criminalisation of same-sex relationships through the *Same-Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act 2014* demonstrates how state institutions sometimes align with cultural or

religious sentiment at the expense of human dignity (Ihedioha, 2023). These examples reveal not only the friction between normative systems but also the enduring influence of cultural epistemologies on rights interpretation.

Recent scholarship has emphasised that Nigeria's pluralism is both a source of richness and a site of contestation. Legal pluralism provides room for diverse moral systems to coexist, yet it also exposes vulnerable groups especially women, children, and sexual minorities to discrimination and marginalisation (Ajayi, 2020). The problem is not pluralism per se but the absence of mechanisms for negotiation and harmonisation among competing value systems. Human-rights advocates frequently face accusations of cultural imperialism when they challenge discriminatory traditions, while cultural relativists are criticised for tolerating injustice under the guise of respect for tradition (Ajayi, 2020). Consequently, any meaningful resolution must transcend binary oppositions and instead pursue what scholars call "constructive pluralism" a pragmatic, context-sensitive approach that upholds universal human dignity while recognising the legitimacy of local moral frameworks (Ezeani & Nwosu, 2020).

This article therefore seeks to examine how Nigeria, as a pluralistic society, negotiates the balance between cultural values and human-rights imperatives. It explores four thematic domains where these tensions are most visible: gender and inheritance laws, religious and customary adjudication, sexual rights, and environmental justice. Using the methods of analysis and hermeneutics, the paper investigates how legal and moral pluralism shapes the lived experience of rights in Nigeria. It argues that a dialogical model can foster coexistence and reform than viewing culture and human rights as mutually exclusive. Such a model encourages rights harmonisation through intercultural negotiation, legislative reform, and civic education. The ultimate goal is not to impose uniformity but to achieve a morally sustainable synthesis, one that allows Nigeria's diverse communities to maintain cultural integrity while advancing the protection of universal human dignity.

Conceptual and Normative Background

The discussion on cultural and human rights in Nigeria cannot proceed without first clarifying the conceptual terrain on which these ideas rest. The terms "culture" and "human rights" are not neutral; each carries historical, philosophical, and ideological connotations that have evolved in interaction and sometimes in tension. Let us explore how these concepts are understood within contemporary discourse, especially in African scholarship and how their intersection shapes normative debates in pluralistic societies like Nigeria.

Culture, broadly conceived, refers to the totality of shared beliefs, practices, values and institutions through which a community defines its worldview and regulates social life (Falola, 2023). From an anthropological perspective, culture encompasses both tangible and intangible dimensions: the arts, customs, rituals, language and moral codes that give coherence to a people's identity (Falola, 2023). In the African context, culture is not merely descriptive but prescriptive; it functions as a moral compass, providing both the justification and the boundaries for social conduct (Gyekye, 2017).

African philosophers have long argued that culture in Africa embodies a communitarian ethos, which contrasts sharply with the individualist orientation of much Western moral and political thought. According to Atuire (2022), the African moral universe privileges relationality, the view that personhood and moral worth emerge through social participation and mutual recognition. Similarly, Ramose (2019) situates Ubuntu, the Southern African moral philosophy of humaneness, as a living testament to Africa's cultural orientation towards harmony, reciprocity, and collective responsibility. Within this worldview, rights and duties are inseparable; the welfare of the individual is bound to that of the community.

However, culture is not static. It is dynamic and continually reinterpreted in light of historical experience, globalisation, and social transformation. Cultural traditions are constantly being reconstituted through human agency and negotiation (Falola, 2023). This insight challenges essentialist understandings of culture that treat traditions as unchanging relics of the past. For Nigeria, this means that while cultural practices rooted in customary law may have historical legitimacy, they must also remain open to ethical scrutiny and reinterpretation in the face of contemporary realities such as gender equality, human rights, and global integration. Collectivism which is one of the tenets of African

communitarian ethics can often times clash with human rights norms, such as in matters where communal decisions override personal autonomy (Akpuogwu, Ngangah and Nwoye, 2025).

Human Rights: From Universalism to Contextualism

Human rights, by contrast, are often framed in universalist language. The modern human-rights movement, emerging from the Enlightenment and post-World War II liberalism, posits that all persons possess inalienable rights by virtue of their humanity (Donnelly, 2019). This universality is codified in key international instruments such as the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, 1948)*, the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR, 1966)*, and the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR, 1966)*. The *African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (1981)* sought to bridge universal norms with African communitarian ethics by incorporating both individual rights and collective duties (Ihedioha, 2023).

Yet, debates persist about the universality of human rights in non-Western contexts. Critics of universalism contend that human rights, as articulated in Western political thought, often reflect Eurocentric assumptions about autonomy, rationality, and secularism (Mutua, 2016). African scholars such as Eze (2017) cautions against treating human-rights discourse as culturally neutral, arguing that such universality risks marginalising indigenous epistemologies and moral systems. Hence, they advocate for what has been called *contextual universalism* or *cultural legitimacy*, the idea that universal principles must be grounded in the lived moral experiences of local communities (Eze, 2017). This is because in Africa, human life is conceived not as an autonomous journey, it as a spiritually mediated process governed by divine intelligence and ancestral participation but must be interpreted within the context of the local communities (Agetue, 2026). This way, it is culturally inclined and contextualized.

This debate is particularly pertinent in Nigeria, where multiple normative systems coexist. The statutory system, derived from English Common Law, operates alongside Islamic (Sharia) law in northern states and customary law in much of the South. These systems occasionally produce conflicting interpretations of human rights. For example, statutory law upholds freedom of religion and gender equality, yet Sharia provisions may prescribe corporal punishment or discriminatory inheritance laws. Customary norms, meanwhile, often maintain patriarchal structures that deny women property rights or exclude them from community leadership (Ezeani & Nwosu, 2020). The tension here is not only legal but also moral, revealing divergent understandings of what constitutes justice and personhood.

One of the central theoretical tensions in human-rights discourse is between cultural relativism and universalism. Cultural relativists argue that moral norms and values must be understood within their specific cultural contexts; thus, imposing external standards constitutes moral imperialism (Renteln, 2022). Conversely, universalists maintain that certain rights such as the right to life, freedom from torture, and equality before the law transcend cultural variation and must be upheld universally (Sen, 2020).

In the Nigerian context, this debate manifests in controversies over women's rights, LGBTQ+ rights, and traditional practices such as female circumcision or child marriage. Advocates of cultural relativism often invoke tradition and religion as sources of moral authority, while rights activists emphasise the primacy of international human-rights norms (Donnelly, 2019). The problem with extreme relativism, however, is that it risks legitimising oppression under the guise of cultural autonomy. Likewise, rigid universalism may alienate communities by appearing culturally insensitive or neo-colonial.

To navigate this impasse, some scholars propose the notion of intercultural dialogue, which emphasises negotiation rather than confrontation between cultural values and human-rights norms. This approach, articulated by scholars such as Menkiti (2018) suggests that moral reasoning must emerge from dialogue among diverse moral agents rather than from external imposition. It affirms that while cultural traditions offer valuable insights into human flourishing, they must evolve to align with universal commitments to human dignity and justice.

For legal pluralism, the coexistence of multiple legal systems within a single state is one of the defining features of Nigeria's legal landscape. This pluralism is both a colonial inheritance and a

reflection of Nigeria's cultural diversity (Eze, 2021). Customary law, Islamic law, and statutory law each claim legitimacy within their respective domains, often overlapping in personal matters such as marriage, inheritance, and child custody. The resulting interplay can be both creative and conflictual (Eze, 2021).

For instance, Nigeria's constitution guarantees fundamental rights, but the enforcement of these rights often depends on which legal system governs a particular dispute. Customary courts may prioritise reconciliation and community harmony over individual justice, while statutory courts adhere strictly to procedural legality (Eze, 2021). Islamic courts, meanwhile, derive authority from divine injunctions, which may sometimes contradict constitutional provisions. The coexistence of these systems without effective coordination creates ambiguity in rights protection and access to justice.

Okoro (2023) suggests that harmonising these systems requires both legal reform and cultural reorientation. Legal pluralism need not imply fragmentation if anchored in a shared commitment to human dignity. Rather, as Adeniran (2021) argues, the goal should be a dialogical synthesis that allows each system to contribute to a broader moral and legal consensus. Such synthesis must, however, be grounded in inclusivity and critical reflection to prevent the perpetuation of discriminatory norms.

In light of these conceptual debates, this article adopts a contextual human-rights paradigm as its analytical lens. This paradigm recognises the universality of human dignity while affirming the necessity of cultural relevance in rights interpretation. It aligns with the position of contemporary African theorists such as Atuire (2022), who argues for a humanism that is both relational and globally responsible. Within this model, culture and rights are not oppositional categories but dialogical partners in moral reasoning.

Nigeria's pluralistic reality demands such a nuanced approach. The cultural embeddedness of human experience means that abstract rights principles must be interpreted through local moral vocabularies and lived social relations. A contextual paradigm thus seeks not to dilute universal norms but to anchor them in cultural legitimacy, ensuring that rights discourse resonates with communal values and promotes genuine empowerment.

Cultural Diversity and the Human Rights Discourse in Nigeria

Nigeria presents one of the most complex cases of cultural plurality in Africa, characterised by over 250 ethnic groups, multiple religions, and diverse systems of customary practices. This pluralism, while a source of richness and identity, also creates persistent challenges for human-rights protection and national cohesion (Ekanem & Okorie, 2022). The interaction of diverse cultural norms, legal traditions, and religious worldviews generates tensions between collective identity and individual rights, between communal obligations and constitutional guarantees. Understanding this interface is essential for constructing a rights discourse that is both contextually legitimate and normatively universal.

The Nigerian state, as it emerged from colonialism, amalgamated pre-existing communities with distinct moral and social orders. The Hausa-Fulani in the North, the Yoruba in the West, and the Igbo in the East represent the three dominant ethnic blocs, but there are hundreds of minority communities, each with unique cosmologies and value systems (Falola, 2023). Religion further compounds this diversity, with Islam, Christianity, and traditional African religions coexisting and at times competing for moral and political authority.

This diversity shapes how Nigerians perceive rights, justice and human dignity. In the predominantly Muslim North, moral and legal authority often derives from Sharia, which informs conceptions of justice, family, and gender relations (Yusuf, 2022). In contrast, the Christian-dominated South tends to draw on biblical ethics and Western legal traditions, while traditional religious adherents emphasise ancestral customs and spiritual harmony (Ezeani & Nwosu, 2020). Consequently, there is no single normative framework that commands universal acceptance across Nigeria. The challenge for human rights, therefore, lies in reconciling these divergent frameworks without erasing cultural particularities.

Pluralism in itself is not inherently problematic; indeed, it can foster tolerance, creativity, and cross-cultural learning. However, when cultural identity becomes politicised, as seen in Nigeria's ethno-religious conflicts, it often leads to exclusionary practices and rights violations (Ihedioha, 2023). The

persistent clashes between herders and farmers, religious extremists and secular groups, or majority and minority ethnic communities are not merely political but deeply moral conflicts over whose conception of justice and dignity should prevail (Ihedioha, 2023). Thus, the Nigerian situation exemplifies how cultural diversity both enriches and complicates the human-rights landscape.

One of the most contested areas of Nigeria's cultural pluralism is the persistence of customary law in personal and family matters. Customary law, which predates colonialism, regulates marriage, inheritance, and land tenure based on communal traditions. While it serves as an expression of collective identity and local autonomy, many of its provisions conflict with contemporary human-rights norms, particularly regarding gender equality (Ezeani & Nwosu, 2020).

In many Nigerian communities, for instance, women cannot inherit land or family property, a practice rooted in patriarchal cultural logic that views lineage and property as male prerogatives which often times termed "male dominance" (Akpuogwu, 2023). Similarly, widowhood rites in parts of the East and North often involve degrading rituals that undermine women's dignity. The constitutional guarantee of equality before the law is thus routinely undermined by the continued enforcement of these customs (Olatunji, 2023). Attempts at reform have encountered resistance from traditional authorities who argue that such customs embody cultural authenticity and social cohesion.

Feminist scholars and human-rights advocates have challenged this defence of patriarchy as cultural relativism. Any cultural practice that denies human dignity or perpetuates subordination cannot claim moral legitimacy in a democratic society (Okonkwo, 2020). At the same time, human-rights discourse in Nigeria must avoid cultural alienation by engaging traditional leaders and communities in dialogue than imposing reforms from above. Grassroots movements that frame gender equality in culturally resonant terms such as drawing on traditional symbols of motherhood, communal responsibility, and divine justice have achieved greater success than purely legalistic approaches (Okonkwo, 2020).

Religious pluralism is another arena in which Nigeria's human-rights discourse faces tension. The Nigerian Constitution guarantees freedom of religion and belief, yet religious identity often functions as a marker of political belonging and social privilege. The implementation of Sharia law in twelve northern states since 1999 has generated intense debate about the compatibility of religious law with constitutional democracy (Olatunji, 2023). Critics argue that Sharia provisions on apostasy, gender roles, and corporal punishment contravene the constitution and international human-rights norms. Supporters, however, maintain that Sharia reflects the moral will of the Muslim majority in those states and thus expresses cultural sovereignty (Yusuf, 2022).

Christian communities have also contributed to exclusivist tendencies, particularly where church doctrines influence social policy and education. Cases of religious intolerance, including blasphemy killings and interfaith violence, illustrate the fragility of Nigeria's secular order (Okoro, 2023). Such incidents reveal the limits of a merely legalistic approach to religious freedom; what is needed is an ethical framework that promotes mutual recognition and dialogue across faith traditions. As Yusuf (2022) notes, interfaith education and civic dialogue can foster respect for diversity while upholding the inviolability of human life and conscience.

The interrelation between religion and human rights in Nigeria demonstrates a fundamental paradox: while religion is often invoked as a source of moral authority, it can also be instrumentalised to justify exclusion and violence (Adeniran, 2021). Hence, the pursuit of human rights in Nigeria must incorporate a theological ethics of pluralism one that respects faith commitments while insisting on the universality of human dignity.

Ethnic identity in Nigeria often intersects with issues of citizenship and belonging, influencing access to rights, resources, and representation. The principle of *indigeneity* which grants privileges to those considered natives of a locality has been widely criticised for institutionalising discrimination against settlers (Adebayo, 2022). This practice affects employment, education, and political participation, particularly for internally displaced persons and migrants. Such exclusion undermines the constitutional guarantee of equality and threatens national integration.

The persistence of indigene-settler dichotomies reveals how colonial legacies of indirect rule and ethnic categorisation continue to shape Nigeria's political structure (Falola, 2019). It also underscores the need to expand human-rights discourse beyond civil and political rights to include socio-economic and cultural rights. As Adeniran (2021) argues, genuine equality and respect for human rights in Nigeria require reimagining citizenship not as a legal abstraction but as a lived social relation grounded in mutual respect and recognition. This entails transforming cultural attitudes that equate identity with exclusivity and replacing them with inclusive narratives of shared belonging.

Human Rights in Practice: Implementation Gaps

Despite Nigeria's formal commitment to human rights through its Constitution and ratification of international treaties, implementation remains weak. The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) has limited enforcement power, and judicial processes are often slow and inaccessible to ordinary citizens (Akinola, 2022). Corruption, political interference, and a lack of public awareness further erode institutional capacity. More fundamentally, many Nigerians perceive human rights as foreign impositions disconnected from everyday moral realities (Ikpeme, 2024). This perception underscores the need for a culturally grounded approach that translates rights into familiar moral idioms.

Several civil society organisations have sought to bridge this gap by integrating human-rights education into community development programmes. For instance, initiatives in Northern Nigeria that link girls' education to Islamic principles of knowledge and justice have gained greater local acceptance than secular advocacy alone (Yusuf, 2022). Similarly, community-based mediation rooted in indigenous values of reconciliation has proven effective in resolving land disputes and family conflicts without undermining constitutional rights (Okoro, 2023). These examples demonstrate that contextualising rights in local ethical frameworks enhances their legitimacy and sustainability.

Cultural Practices and Universal Human Rights in Nigeria

Nigeria's encounter with universal human-rights norms reveals deep philosophical and ethical tensions rooted in divergent worldviews. While global frameworks such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) uphold equality and freedom, many Nigerian communities remain guided by customs prioritising communal harmony, lineage continuity, and respect for elders. The conflict, therefore, lies not merely in law but in contrasting conceptions of personhood individual autonomy versus communal identity (Atuire, 2022).

Gender relations exemplify this tension most visibly. Practices such as bride price, early marriage, and male primogeniture are often defended as cultural imperatives but clash with constitutional guarantees of gender equality (Ezeani & Nwosu, 2020). In *Anekwe v. Nweke*, the Nigerian Supreme Court in 2014 invalidated discriminatory inheritance customs, underscoring that tradition cannot override human dignity. Nonetheless, patriarchal resistance persists, revealing the slow moral evolution of customary law (Akpuogwu, 2023). Feminist philosophers urge cultural reinterpretation rather than outright rejection, emphasising indigenous ideals of complementarity between genders (Ajayi, 2020). Hence, organisations like WRAPA and WARDC have reframed gender justice in culturally grounded narratives of fairness and mutual respect.

Also, debates on sexuality, particularly around Nigeria's *Same-Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act (2014)*, expose the collision between religious morality and rights universalism. Many view same-sex relations as culturally alien and morally unacceptable, reflecting strong Christian and Islamic influence (Chukwu, 2018). Critics, however, argue that criminalisation violates rights to privacy and equality (Adepoju & Worimegbe, 2024). For many Nigerians, global advocacy for LGBTQ+ rights evokes neo-colonial memories (Okanlawon, 2018). Scholars like Ehiemua (2020) propose an *African humanist* response one that upholds respect and nonviolence without eroding communal moral autonomy.

Furthermore, traditional conceptions of childrearing emphasise communal responsibility but often justify corporal punishment, child marriage, and labour. Despite Nigeria's ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, enforcement remains weak, especially in rural areas (Adebayo, 2022). Reform initiatives succeed most when framed through indigenous moral idioms such as care

(ìhùnyanya), kinship and continuity (Ibekwe, 2020), demonstrating that aligning children's rights with cultural ethics enhances compliance and legitimacy.

Nigeria's dual system of democratic and traditional governance presents further complexity. Traditional rulers hold moral authority but sometimes uphold exclusionary customs that marginalise women and minorities (Okoro, 2023). Scholars recommend democratising tradition in order to ensure accountability and human-rights compliance within the customary institutions; a hybrid justice models, inspired by respect and reconciliation (Nnamani, 2022).. This therefore illustrates that tradition and rights can coexist through restorative frameworks.

The philosophical debate between cultural relativism and universalism remains pivotal. Genuine universality, Gyekye (2017) argues, must be *contextual* universally valid but locally expressed. Nigerian moral philosophies like the Igbo *mmadu bu chi ozo* (a person is another's god), Yoruba *omolúàbí* (good character), and Hausa *mutunci* (honour) all affirm intrinsic human dignity. Thus, Nigeria's human-rights future lies in critical reinterpretation, not rejection, of its cultural foundations. As Atuire (2022) affirms, moral progress emerges from dialogue between ancestral wisdom and contemporary ethics.

Reconciling Cultural Values and Human Rights in a Democratic Nigeria

Reconciling cultural values with human rights in Nigeria's pluralistic democracy poses a significant moral and political challenge. It entails balancing respect for indigenous traditions with the protection of individual rights enshrined in national and international law. Achieving this balance requires not just legal reform but a reorientation of moral consciousness through education, dialogue, and inclusive governance.

Culture, as Wiredu (2017) observes, is dynamic and capable of moral renewal through dialogue and communal reflection. Across Nigeria, traditional institutions have begun to reform discriminatory customs, such as inheritance practices, by invoking indigenous ethical ideals like *omolúàbí* (integrity) and *nchekwube* (justice) (Ezeani & Nwosu, 2020). This demonstrates that human rights can be understood as extensions of African moral values than foreign impositions. Such reinterpretation reflects Atuire's notion of *critical traditionalism*, which preserves cultural identity while discarding oppressive elements.

From the enlightenment perspective, education serves as a vital instrument for harmonising culture and human rights. Beyond academic learning, it nurtures civic responsibility, tolerance, and empathy. Recent initiatives by the *National Human Rights Commission (NHRC)* and *Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC)* integrate rights education into school curricula, combining legal awareness with indigenous storytelling and proverbs (Adeniran, 2021; Adebayo, 2022). As Falola (2023) notes, moral transformation emerges from cultural ownership of values; thus, embedding human rights in local languages and moral idioms strengthens community engagement.

Also, civil society and the media have become crucial mediators between culture and rights. Through radio dramas, documentaries, and theatre, they translate rights discourse into relatable moral narratives. Organisations like *WARDC* collaborate with traditional and religious leaders to address gender-based violence while promoting values of mutual respect (Ajayi, 2020). Moreover, digital activism such as *#EndSARS* and *#ChildNotBride*, illustrates how social media provides a moral space for youth-driven rights advocacy grounded in cultural solidarity (Akinola, 2022).

Nigeria's plural legal system statutory, customary, and religious often produces inconsistencies that hinder justice (Eze, 2021). Legislative efforts like the *Violence against Persons (Prohibition) Act (2015)* and *Child Rights Act (2003)* attempt to bridge this gap, but uneven implementation remains a challenge (Okonkwo, 2020). Community paralegals and human-rights desks within traditional courts have shown promise in aligning cultural legitimacy with constitutional justice (Olatunji, 2023).

Democratic governance, as Ekanem and Okorie (2022) argue, must evolve toward *ethical pluralism* a system that respects diversity while maintaining shared commitment to dignity and justice. Consensual democracy rooted in African ethics, as proposed by Wiredu (2017), offers a culturally grounded alternative to adversarial politics, though vigilance against cultural relativism remains essential (Omodia, 2023).

From religion and culturally informed ethics, religion continues to shape moral discourse in Nigeria, and interfaith initiatives such as those led by the Interfaith Mediation Centre (IMC) demonstrate how collaboration between Christian, Muslim, and traditional leaders can reconcile faith and human rights (Yusuf, 2022). These efforts affirm that compassion, justice, and dignity are universal ethical imperatives embedded in Nigeria's religious traditions.

Ultimately, reconciling culture and rights requires mutual transformation: human rights must learn to speak the moral language of the people, while culture must evolve toward justice and equality. As Atuire (2022) and Ihedioha (2023) suggest, this synthesis embodies African humanism a vision of dignity rooted in communal solidarity, where to be human is to live rightly with others and the moral order.

Towards Human Rights Culture Rooted in African Humanism

A sustainable reconciliation between culture and human rights in Nigeria requires not only legal reform but a transformation of moral consciousness grounded in African humanism. Rooted in philosophies such as *ubuntu* (Southern Africa), *omolúàbí* (West Africa) and *ujamaa* (East Africa), For instance, Ubuntu is a famous indigenous term in African philosophy embedded in the Nguni maxim-*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, which translates to “a person is a person through others” (Agetue & Anowai, 2026, p.28). African humanism views personhood as a communal achievement than an individual entitlement. As Menkiti (2020) and Atuire (2022) observe, personhood is realised through moral participation, empathy, and solidarity within the community. This relational understanding redefines rights as shared responsibilities to uphold human dignity. The language of rights thus shifts from *I have a right* to *we owe one another dignity*, thus creating a more cooperative moral order that is culturally grounded, and at the same time globally relevant.

Embedding African humanism in Nigerian law involves reimagining justice beyond punishment toward restoration and reconciliation. Indigenous systems such as the *Igbuzo Truth Councils* and *Agbomma Assemblies* exemplify dialogical conflict resolution (Ezeani & Nwosu, 2020). These approaches can inspire restorative-justice mechanisms within the formal judiciary (Adebayo, 2022). Local ownership is also vital. Agencies like the National Orientation Agency (NOA) could partner with traditional institutions to promote civic ethics through indigenous proverbs. For example, the Igbo adage, *onye aghala nwanne ya* (do not abandon your brother) and *ejìòfò na ogu* (justice is sacred) can positively improve public morals (Falola, 2023). Grounding policy in such moral idioms fosters genuine behavioural transformation.

It is a truism that education is also central to nurturing a human-rights culture informed by African values. Incorporating African philosophy, proverbs, and ethics into curricula can help students see rights as part of their moral heritage (Adeniran, 2021). Proverbs like *egbe bere, ugo bere* (live and let others live) symbolise tolerance, while *ìwàpèlẹ́* (gentle character) reflects dignity and empathy (Akinola, 2022).

Universities should champion interdisciplinary learning in law, ethics, and African studies, encouraging students to synthesise Western and African moral paradigms (Omodia, 2023).

Furthering this discussion, religion remains a powerful moral force that can complement African humanism. Both Christianity and Islam share values of compassion, justice, and stewardship. When reinterpreted through communal ethics, these traditions reinforce rather than resist human rights (Yusuf, 2022). The *Interfaith Mediation Centre (IMC)* in Kaduna exemplifies this synergy by fostering Christian–Muslim–traditional collaboration in peace-building. Emerging movements in African liberation theology and Islamic humanism illustrate that religion and rights share a common quest for human flourishing (Okoro, 2023).

Governance and ethical leadership also play vital role because human rights thrive only under ethical leadership. Nigerian democracy must embody moral integrity, accountability, and empathy (Ekanem & Okorie, 2022). Leadership in African thought is stewardship or service and not domination. Political decision-making should follow consensual democracy which places more value on deliberation and collective reasoning than adversarial politics (Wiredu, 2017).

Nigeria must therefore articulate a human-rights model that avoids both cultural relativism and Western absolutism. African humanism provides this middle path through *contextual universalism* universal dignity expressed through local idioms (Atuire, 2022). Rights can be embodied through symbolic practices such as community oaths, blessings and storytelling that make ethics culturally intelligible than abstract legalism. On this note, Ihedioha (2023) explains that humanising rights in Africa entails re-rooting them in the soil of moral belonging.

Nigeria's pluralism can become strength, that is, a testing ground for true global ethics. This journey however requires:

1. Cultural Reflexivity – questioning traditions through the lens of justice;
2. Moral Translation – expressing universal rights through indigenous idioms; and
3. Democratic Humanism – grounding governance in dignity and participation.

Integrating these principles would enable Nigeria form a new African humanism that reconciles Western and traditional norms, thus honouring heritage and embracing universality.

Conclusion

In navigating culture and human rights in Nigeria's pluralistic society, the central task is moral synthesis forging harmony between tradition and justice, community and individuality, faith and reason. This synthesis must be guided by African humanism, which affirms that to be human is to live in relation to one another in respect and dignity which foster harmony in diversity. Nigeria's pluralism, with its variety of ethnic, religious and cultural identities, offers both challenge and promise. The challenge lies in overcoming cultural rigidity and rights absolutism while the promise lies in constructing a shared moral order that reflects the best of both world through education, law, dialogue, and ethical leadership in order to ensure a human rights culture rooted in African moral imagination that speaks the language of the people while upholding the dignity of all. The human person is a being of community neither absorbed by it nor detached from it (Gyekye, 2017). In this relational vision lies the future of Nigeria's moral democracy, a society where human rights are not foreign doctrines but living expressions of our shared humanity.

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