LEARNING PEACE AND JUSTICE THROUGH AFRICAN PHILOSOPHIES

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Introduction

This article is rooted in Indigenous knowledge as a theory, which refers to a combination of skills and practices that Indigenous communities acquire over generations through everyday life experiences, relationships, and the specific contexts in which such knowledge is created. In particular, the article seeks to explore the role that Indigenous knowledge institutions can play as instruments of peace in Lesotho.

Although Lesotho, like many postcolonial states, formally recognises state-based judicial systems for conflict resolution and the maintenance of law and order, Indigenous institutions such as *lebollo*, *khotla*, *borena*, and *pitso* (all explained further below) continue to enjoy social legitimacy and practical relevance within Basotho[1] communities. Despite this, the peacebuilding role of these institutions in Lesotho's context remains under-researched and under-theorised in African and peacebuilding scholarship.

The content is structured as follows: it begins with a discussion of my own understanding of peace and its broader meaning, then situates peace within the context of Indigenous knowledge in Lesotho. This is followed by an examination of Indigenous institutions and peace education, and an exploration of King Moshoeshoe I's[2] teachings on nonviolence. The article concludes by reflecting on the relevance of Indigenous institutions in contemporary peacebuilding scholarship and their potential contribution to global understandings of justice and reconciliation.

Why am I writing this article on peace?

My inspiration to write this article is two-fold. Firstly, it emanates from my rural upbringing as a Mosotho child[3], where the spirit of *Ubuntu* shaped everyday life. Ubuntu, an Indigenous framework, embodies collective African principles of care and responsibility - 'looking after our own.' I recall the famous phrase: *'It takes a village to raise a child.'* In practice, this meant that a child was not raised by parents alone but by the entire community. Discipline, morality, and peace were instilled at the family level and then replicated across society, creating a moral fabric that bound us together.

Secondly, my involvement in Peace and Justice Education exposed me to diverse peacekeeping methods, including *Alternatives to Violence* programmes[4]. These experiences broadened my understanding of how communities can resolve conflict without resorting to violence. It was through this lens that I came to appreciate the legacy of King Moshoeshoe I, the founder of the Basotho nation. His leadership was deeply rooted in Lesotho's Indigenous institutions. These institutions continue to remind us that peace is not merely the absence of war, but a lived practice sustained by culture, values, and community.

In 2005, Johan Galtung[5] introduced a simple yet profound way of understanding peace. He distinguished between *negative peace* - the absence of direct, physical violence, and *positive peace* - which conveys a deeper sense of harmony and the removal of social structures that limit human potential. His framework has since become a cornerstone in peace and conflict studies, albeit that his work is largely Eurocentric. It is important to note

that Africans have long had their own context-specific ways of understanding peace and conflict.

Situating peace within Lesotho's context

Khotso! Pula! Nala! Peace! Rain! Prosperity! To an outsider, these may seem like simple words, but to a Mosotho, they carry the weight of history and identity. This powerful slogan echoes the legacy of King Moshoeshoe I who cherished peace so deeply that it became entwined with his very name. The idiom: *Khotso, khaitseli ea Moshoeshoe* (peace, the sister of Moshoeshoe) reminds us that peace was not just a value to him, but a kinship bond, as close and vital as family. Peace is equated with blood relations, hence the saying: *Chabana sa Khotso* - the nation of peace - binding the Basotho together. The term *Chabana sa Khomo* - the nation of a cow - is also used. Chabana sa Khomo denotes that Basotho are related by blood and through marital relationships whereas, in the latter, khomo is used to pay lobola[6] to welcome the new relatives. A cow is therefore more than an economic asset - its deeper meaning in Lesotho is about relationships, identity, continuity, and connection (socially and spiritually).

For me, *Chabana sa Khotso* is more than a slogan; it is a living philosophy. It teaches that knowledge and values grow through interaction with family, elders, and the wider community. Observation, participation, and shared responsibility matter as much as formal instruction. Above all, learning is rooted in context and indigenously inherited, passed down through idioms, rituals, and everyday practices.

Reflecting on Moshoeshoe's vision, I see peace not as an abstract ideal but as a lived reality woven into language, celebrated in community, and carried forward as a moral inheritance. It is this peace that continues to define Basotho identity, reminding us that true prosperity begins with harmony.

The cow, a symbol of wealth and sustenance, represents interrelatedness and cohesion, showing how peace nourishes and sustains community life

Indigenous knowledge

Nyiraruhimbi[7] (2012) identifies three useful ways of understanding Indigenous knowledge. The first is to view it as *local science knowledge*, deliberately developed over time through familiar tools and practices, such as the use of traditional medicinal plants (Moteetee & Van Wyk, 2011). The second perspective frames it as *a local practice*, gradually shaped through experience, experimentation, and trial and error, as evidenced in creative activities like arts and crafts. The third understanding sees it as *local memory* ideas and wisdom internalised through socialisation, storytelling, and folklore.

Drawing from these three categories, I argue that in Africa, including Lesotho, Indigenous institutions stand at the very centre of knowledge creation. They are not static traditions but dynamic systems of learning, rooted in everyday life and sustained across generations. Whether through medicinal practices, communal rituals, or oral storytelling, these institutions embody communities' lived experiences and ensure that knowledge remains both relevant and resilient.

Indigenous institutions and peace education

The pivotal role of Indigenous institutions in peacekeeping cannot be overemphasised. The pre-colonial era saw African countries with strong, well-institutionalised Indigenous administrative systems deeply aligned with local contexts. For instance, in Cameroon[8], communities resolved their conflicts through the wisdom of community leaders, who relied on past experiences (local practice) and native intelligence acquired through daily interactions (local memory) to mitigate disputes (Olaopa & Okundare, 2023).

Across many African communities, peace is not simply declared; it is lived and celebrated. When conflicts are resolved, the moment is often sealed with solemn oath-taking, sometimes followed by vibrant ceremonies that honour the hard-won reconciliation. In some traditions, the mediator introduces sacred elements of daily life, such as the kolanut or palm wine, and the first bite or sip is taken as a gesture of trust. Each disputant then follows, symbolically sharing in the bond of restored harmony. To refuse is to reject the peace itself. Practices of this nature have been observed in parts of Eastern Nigeria, including among the Aguleri, Umuleri and Umuoba Anam peoples, where ritual acts of unity have accompanied broader peacebuilding processes (Olaopa & Okundare, 2023).

Lesotho, like other African countries, was no exception in its reliance on Indigenous institutions for peacekeeping. Local structures such as *khotla* (a community court and meeting place for men), *borena* (kingship), *pitso* (community gatherings), and *lebollo la banna* (a rite of passage for males) continue to hold social relevance nationally. This article mainly focuses on *lebollo la banna*.

Lebollo is not just about marking the passage of boys into men; it is about shaping identity. It prepares young men for marriage, for leadership, and for the weight of protecting their families and communities. No one could ascend to leadership without first undergoing initiation. That requirement transforms leadership from a privilege into a responsibility, earned through discipline and shared experience.

History tells us that King Moshoeshoe I, like other Basotho chiefs of old, could not ascend the throne without first undergoing *lebollo*. This was not a mere formality; it was a rite that shaped him into one of the most prominent African kings, instilling discipline, courage, and a sense of patriotic duty. Today, *lebollo* continues to hold its revered

place among the Basotho, reminding each generation that leadership is not inherited by name alone, but earned through responsibility and sacrifice.

In a world where modernity often overshadows tradition, *lebollo* teaches us that true education is not about erasing the past, but about carrying forward the values that shape identity and community. It is a call to honour heritage, to recognise that leadership begins with initiation into responsibility, and to embrace the lessons that history continues to whisper through rituals that endure.

This serves as a reminder that knowledge is not confined to books or classrooms. True wisdom is lived; it is passed down through stories told by elders, songs sung during ceremonies, and rituals that bind communities together. In that sense, *lebollo* is both education and memory, a way of carrying forward the values of courage, loyalty, and patriotism.

King Moshoeshoe I's spirit of non-violence

The story of King Moshoeshoe I is fascinating not only for his rise to power but also for the values he carried into leadership.

King Moshoeshoe I

A defining feature of King Moshoeshoe I's leadership was his commitment to nonviolent peacekeeping. History records that cannibals once captured, slaughtered, and ate his grandfather, Peete. Many leaders would have sought revenge, but the King chose a different path. He told his men that hunger and poverty had driven the cannibals to such desperate acts. Instead of punishing them, he gave them livestock so they could begin anew. That decision was not a weakness; it was wisdom, a recognition that peace is built not by retaliation but by restoring dignity and livelihood.

The King also rejected discrimination. His words: '*U seke oare ho moroa moroa tooe!'* (Do not say to a Bushman: You Bushman!) were a call to his people to resist racial prejudice. In essence, he reminded Basotho that humanity is shared, and that leadership must rise above divisions. This notion reflects that King Moshoeshoe I was more than a king. He was a teacher of values, showing that true leadership is rooted in compassion, inclusivity, and the courage to choose peace over vengeance. His story is a reminder that traditions like *lebollo* were not only about shaping men for leadership but about instilling the moral compass needed to guide communities through conflict.

Conclusion

Reflecting on these practices, one can argue that Indigenous institutions are more than cultural artifacts: they are living systems of wisdom. They remind us that peace, leadership, and identity are not abstract ideals but responsibilities carried in the body, the memory, and the community. For me, they serve as a call to honour the past while navigating the present, to see reconciliation not as a one-time act but as a lifelong commitment to harmony. These practices continue to offer valuable insights for contemporary approaches to peacebuilding and social cohesion.

References/Further reading

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Endnotes

1 Basotho are citizens of Lesotho, united under King Moshoeshoe I in the 19th century. They are distinguished by their language, Sesotho, and by cultural symbols such as the Basotho blanket and the Mokorotlo hat (a type of straw hat). Despite external pressures, they have preserved a strong national identity rooted in unity and resilience.

2 Moshoeshoe I was the first King of Lesotho and is remembered as a leader who prioritised peace by resolving conflict through dialogue, reconciliation, and restraint rather than violence.

3 As a Mosotho child, I was raised within a communal setting that, amongst other, emphasises and instils respect for elders, and unity and collective responsibility alongside personal growth. Our cultural traditions, language, and storytelling shaped my identity and resilience.

4 The Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP) began in 1975 at Green Haven Prison, New York. It was initiated when inmates requested assistance to reduce physical violence.

5 Johan Vincent Galtung (1930–2024) was a Norwegian sociologist and one of the founders of peace research. He was instrumental in establishing the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) in 1959 and founded the *Journal of Peace Research* in 1964. He pioneered influential concepts including *structural violence* and the distinction between *negative and positive peace*, making a major contribution to the development of peace research and the study of conflict and peace worldwide.

6 Bride price or wealth.

7 Agnes Nyiraruhimbi was a Master's scholar at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Her 2012 study explored Indigenous knowledge in maize production and soil management in Msinga, central KwaZulu-Natal. Using a qualitative design, she employed focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews to examine local practices.

8 Traditional institutions in Cameroon resolve village conflicts at the community level. Leaders prioritise governance and collective projects over individual concerns. This local approach sustains peace by embedding conflict resolution within communal structures.