



Conceptualising Nrunga: An Indigenous Moral Framework for Understanding Dehumanisation and Guiding Reconciliation in Djugu, Ituri, DR Congo

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Article History

Received: 2026-07-01

Revised: 2026-10-15

Accepted: 2026-10-20

Published: 2026-10-23

Keywords

Dehumanisation

Hema-Lendu conflict

Reconciliation

Ubuntu

How to cite:

Buju, A. N., Akoth, S. O., & Somjee, S. (2026). Conceptualising Nrunga: An Indigenous Moral Framework for Understanding Dehumanisation and Guiding Reconciliation in Djugu, Ituri, DR Congo. *Journal of Science, Innovation and Creativity*, 5(2), 274-285.

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Abstract

Indigenous African moral concepts are often invoked in peacebuilding scholarship but rarely defined with precision. This study conceptualises *Nrunga*, a concept of relational humanness shared by the Hema and Lendu communities of Djugu Territory, Ituri Province, Democratic Republic of Congo. It asks how community members define *Nrunga*, how the conflict has affected it, and what this means for reconciliation. The study used an indigenous-led qualitative design based on sensory ethnography. Between December 2024 and December 2025, data were collected through 20 storytelling interviews with elders, religious leaders, women leaders, youth and displaced persons, and five talking circles (n = 38) for women, youth, elders, religious leaders and a mixed group. Ten institutional documents, including the 2020 Ituri peace agreement, policy briefs, non-governmental reports and community statements, were purposively selected for their relevance to peacebuilding in Ituri. Data were analysed thematically. Participants defined *Nrunga* through four related dimensions: moral interiority, relational ontology, theological-cosmological grounding and embodied institutional practice. They also distinguished an active from a corrupted form of *Nrunga*. We define '*Nrunga* crisis' as the cascading but incomplete erosion of these dimensions under violence. The construct explains why the conflict persists and why reconciliation is difficult, rather than why it began. We show how it differs from structural violence, dehumanisation and *Ubuntu/Utu* frameworks. Reconciliation initiatives in Djugu should restore the four dimensions together, give women and youth formal roles, and rebuild cross-community institutions.

Introduction

African moral and philosophical concepts such as *Ubuntu*, *Utu* and their many local cognates have become prominent in peacebuilding scholarship over the past two decades. They are invoked as evidence that African communities hold their own resources for conflict resolution, distinct from imported liberal models (Akinola & Uzodike, 2018; Metz, 2007; Somjee, 2023; Tutu, 1999). Cognate concepts recur across the continent: *Utu* in East Africa, *Namummaa* among the Oromo, *Botho* in Botswana and *Hunhu* in Zimbabwe. They share values of compassion, hospitality and mutual accountability that are often mobilised after conflict (Akinola & Uzodike, 2018).

Yet much of this scholarship treats such concepts descriptively. They are cited as a cultural resource, but rarely given a clear definition, specified dimensions, or a boundary with neighbouring concepts. Molefe (2019) argues that communitarian concepts must meet the same



standards of definition as any other moral theory. Martin de Almagro (2018), writing on the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), shows how a feminist lens exposes the gap between an indigenous framework's stated inclusiveness and its institutional practice. Critics also warn that indigenous frameworks can be romanticised or used for political ends, and that they are seldom examined for gender exclusion or generational change (Chitando & Kilonzo, 2023; Molefe, 2019).

This study takes up these concerns for one concept, *Nrunga*. *Nrunga* is a moral concept shared, in related linguistic forms, by the Hema and Lendu communities of Djugu Territory, Ituri Province, in north-eastern DRC. For more than two decades the relationship between the two communities has been marked by recurring and devastating violence. Concepts of this kind are often mentioned in peace documents for the region, but they are seldom defined or examined. We therefore asked three research questions:

1. How do Hema and Lendu community members define *Nrunga*, and what dimensions does it comprise?
2. How has violence affected *Nrunga*, and what does a '*Nrunga* crisis' consist of?
3. How does *Nrunga* relate to adjacent frameworks, and what does it imply for the design of reconciliation initiatives?

Our central argument is that *Nrunga* can be defined with the same rigour as any social-scientific construct, and that doing so is what allows it to inform reconciliation practice. The paper first reviews the relevant literature. It then describes the methodology, presents the findings in answer to each question, discusses them in relation to other frameworks and to reconciliation design, and concludes.

Literature review

This section reviews three bodies of work on which the study draws: African relational ethics, theories of structural violence and dehumanisation, and critiques of indigenous approaches to peacebuilding. It ends by identifying the gap that the study addresses.

African relational ethics and its Congolese forms

Ubuntu scholarship holds that a person becomes a person through relationships with others. Metz (2007, 2011) has developed this idea into a moral theory in which right action is that which honours communal relationships. *Utu*, in East African usage, carries similar values of humaneness and mutual care, and Somjee (2023) shows that it also includes obligations to ancestors and the sacred. Magesa (1997) describes African moral traditions as aimed at the preservation of 'abundant life' shared by the living, the dead and the yet unborn.

Congolese scholars have developed a related idea under the name *Bumuntu* (humanness). Bujo (2001, 2021) describes humanity as a process realised through relationship with God, the ancestors, the living and the not-yet-born. He calls this *engendrement mutuel* (mutual engendering). Mbayo Mbayo (2021) treats *Bumuntu* as both an ontological and a moral principle, and proposes it as a criterion for judging conduct and institutions. Mpuku Laku (2021) observes that several Bantu languages express marriage and kinship as being-with rather than possession. He concludes that a person is human only in harmony with others. These Congolese writers place vertical relationships, with God and ancestors, alongside horizontal ones.

Structural violence and dehumanisation

Galtung (1969, 1990) showed that harm is produced not only by direct violence but also by social structures that prevent people from flourishing. Haslam (2006) distinguishes two forms of dehumanisation: an 'animalistic' form, which denies others uniquely human traits such as moral sense, and a 'mechanistic' form, which denies them warmth and individuality. Bandura (1999) explains how people disengage their moral standards so that they can take part in harming others.



These theories explain how the humanity of the other is denied. They are general, however, and do not use the moral vocabulary of particular communities.

Critiques of indigenous approaches to peacebuilding

Recent work cautions against treating indigenous concepts as uniformly positive. Chitando and Kilonzo (2023) argue that *Ubuntu* must be reconceptualised if it is to include groups it has historically excluded. Martin de Almagro (2018) shows that local peace initiatives in the DRC can reproduce gender hierarchies. Studies elsewhere on the continent show how *Ubuntu* values erode under political competition and economic pressure, as in South Africa's xenophobic violence (Mthombeni, 2022; Sule, 2022) and Kenya's post-election violence (Muyonga, 2024). Work on the transmission of values in East Africa shows that technology, globalisation and weakened parenting reduce the passing on of cultural values to young people (Mbwete & Bulengela, 2025; Tusasiirwe et al., 2021).

Research gap

Three gaps follow from this review. First, no study has defined *Nrunga* or specified its dimensions. Second, existing accounts of dehumanisation do not explain how the moral vocabulary of a specific community erodes under violence. Third, little is known about how such a concept could inform reconciliation that includes women and youth. The present study addresses these gaps.

Methodology

This section describes the research design, the study site, participants and sampling, data collection, data analysis, translation, and ethical considerations, including pseudonymisation.

Research design

The study adopted an indigenous-led qualitative design using sensory ethnography (Pink, 2015; Somjee, 2026). A qualitative design suited a study of meanings and lived experience. Ethnography allowed us to observe *Nrunga* as everyday practice. Attention to the senses was needed because much of *Nrunga* is carried in greetings, shared meals, rituals and mourning rather than in words. The design follows indigenous research principles that treat community members as producers of knowledge and oral testimony as valid evidence (Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008).

Study site

The study was conducted in Djugu Territory and in Bunia, the provincial capital of Ituri. Djugu has been the main site of the Hema-Lendu conflict. Between 1999 and 2003 the Ituri conflict claimed an estimated 50,000 to 60,000 lives and displaced more than half a million people (Human Rights Watch, 2003). Violence resumed in 2017. We focused on four Hema communities (Nord, Badjere, Banyawagi and Baguru) and four Lendu communities (Pitsi, Djatsi, Tatsi and Mabendi). Because insecurity made much of rural Djugu inaccessible, part of the fieldwork took place in Bunia neighbourhoods where Hema and Lendu residents, including displaced persons, live.

Participants and sampling

Participants were selected by purposive sampling for their knowledge or experience of *Nrunga* and of the conflict. To be included, participants had to be adults, current or former residents of Djugu, and speakers of *Bbadha*, *Bbaledha*/ *Kikendu* or *Kingwana*. Active combatants and people in acute psychological crisis were excluded. In total, 58 people took part. Twenty took part in storytelling interviews and 38 in five talking circles. Table 1 shows the categories of participants for each method.

*Table 1: Participants by category and method of data collection*

No.	Category	Storytelling interviews	Talking circles
1	Community elders, recognised custodians of <i>Nrunga</i> knowledge	6	–
2	Religious leaders (Catholic, Protestant and indigenous traditions)	4	–
3	Women leaders, including survivors of gender-based violence	5	–
4	Youth representatives	3	–
5	Community members with direct experience of displacement	2	–
6	Women's peace circle	–	8
7	Elders' council	–	9
8	Religious leaders' circle	–	6
9	Mixed community circle	–	8
10	Youth dialogue circle	–	7
Total (N = 58)		20	38

Note. Of the 20 interviewees, 11 were Hema and 9 Lendu; 12 were men and 8 women. Across the full sample, 38% were women and 21% were youth.

As Table 1 shows, the interviews targeted individuals who hold *Nrunga* knowledge or have direct experience of the conflict, while the talking circles brought together groups defined by gender, age and role. Separate circles for women, youth and elders allowed us to compare how each group understood *Nrunga*. The mixed circle tested whether meanings held across groups. The sample size followed evidence that saturation in qualitative studies is usually reached within 9 to 17 interviews and 4 to 8 group discussions (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022).

Data collection

Data were collected between December 2024 and December 2025 through four methods. Storytelling interviews invited participants to narrate their experiences of conflict, their understanding of *Nrunga*, and their hopes for peace. They lasted 60 to 120 minutes. Talking circles followed indigenous protocols of opening prayer, acknowledgement of the ancestors and uninterrupted turn-taking. They lasted 90 to 150 minutes. All sessions were held in the participants' preferred language and audio-recorded with consent. The first author also recorded field notes on markets, churches, camps for displaced persons, elder assemblies and reconciliation rituals, attending to sound, gesture, atmosphere and objects.

Ten institutional documents were selected purposively. The criteria were relevance to conflict or peacebuilding in Ituri, and a balance between international, national and community producers. The international and national documents were the 2020 Ituri peace agreement, the 2019 national peacebuilding strategy and three non-governmental reports on Djugu. They also included two policy briefs on traditional justice and one academic report on the political economy of the conflict (Hoffmann et al., 2018). The community documents were a Hema community priorities statement and a women's peace declaration. We read each document for how it framed the conflict and whether it represented indigenous knowledge.

Data analysis

Interview and circle transcripts were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis in NVivo 15. Codes were generated from participants' own words. We then re-read the coded material using categories drawn from *Nrunga* itself, attending to relationships,



senses and cosmology. Documents were analysed with a matrix that recorded each document's producer, its framing of the conflict and peace, and its treatment of indigenous knowledge.

The four dimensions of *Nrunga* entered the study as sensitising concepts, that is, provisional categories that guide attention without fixing the findings (Blumer, 1954). They came from consultations with elders between 2022 and 2024 and from the literature on African relational ethics. During analysis, codes were first generated without reference to the dimensions. We then examined whether participants' accounts confirmed, complicated or contradicted them. The dimensions were retained because they recurred independently across participants. The analysis also produced a category that the sensitising concepts had not anticipated: the distinction between active and corrupted *Nrunga*.

Translation

Transcripts were translated into English by the first author, a native speaker of Bbadha, and checked by a second bilingual translator. The origin of the word *Nrunga* given in this paper is the one offered by elders and participants. It has not been verified against linguistic sources. We therefore treat it as a community explanation of the term, not as linguistic proof. Our analytical claims rest on how participants used the term rather than on its etymology.

Ethical considerations

The study received ethical approval from the Tangaza University research ethics committee and a research permit from the DRC Ministry of Scientific Research. Consent forms and information sheets were translated into Kilendu, Swahili and French and explained orally. The Hema and Lendu cultural associations, *Ente* and *Lori*, were consulted on research protocols. Psychological support and referral were available to participants who became distressed.

To protect participants, names and specific places of residence were removed from all transcripts and replaced with codes. Interview codes take the form INT-[community]-[gender]-[number]. For example, INT-H-M-05 refers to Hema male interviewee number 5, and INT-L-F-04 to Lendu female interviewee number 4. Talking circle codes take the form TC-[circle]-[number], where W denotes the women's circle, Y the youth circle, E the elders' council, R the religious leaders' circle and HL the mixed circle. The key linking codes to identities is held separately by the first author.

The first author is a Hema Catholic priest from Djugu territory. This position gave access and trust but could also shape what participants said, especially Lendu participants and women. To reduce this effect, Lendu research assistants facilitated interviews in Lendu communities, and the first author kept a reflexive journal.

Findings

The findings are presented in the order of the research questions. We first report how participants defined *Nrunga* and the four dimensions that emerged. We then report the distinction between active and corrupted *Nrunga*, and finally the evidence on *Nrunga* crisis.

How participants define Nrunga

According to elders, *Nrunga* combines the words *nru* (person) and *nga* (inner essence). Participants consistently described it as an inner moral faculty. One elder said: "*Nrunga* is what is inside the person. It is the heart that knows right from wrong. When you have *Nrunga*, you cannot kill, you cannot steal, you cannot lie, because something inside you says no" (INT-H-M-07). Another elder called this faculty *le thi na ba nga na nyo d'yu* ('heart knowledge'). He said: "It is what makes you feel shame when you do wrong, what makes you feel compassion when you see suffering. Without it, you are not truly human" (INT-H-M-02).

Participants differed on whether *Nrunga* is given at birth or learned. One elder held that "every person is born with *le thi na ba nga na nyo d'yu*. Even a newborn baby has it" (INT-H-M-19). Another



participant stressed upbringing. He called it *nru dho namna* ('the manner of a person'), mixing Bbadha and Swahili. He explained: "A pastor may have a child, but that child might not become a pastor or behave like the father. So *Nrunga* refers to behaviour. It refers to conscience, to habits, and to knowing how to live together" (INT-H-F-13). We read these accounts together. The capacity for moral judgement is given at birth, but its expression in character must be cultivated. It can therefore grow, weaken, be corrupted or be restored.

The four dimensions of Nrunga

Eleven participant files, from both Hema and Lendu participants, contained sustained definitions of *Nrunga*. Four dimensions recurred across them. We distinguish the dimensions by where each locates the source of moral obligation: inside the person, in relationships with others, in God and the ancestors, or in named institutions and practices. Table 2 summarises each dimension, gives an example from the data, and shows the number of participant files in which it was coded.

Table 2: The four dimensions of Nrunga, with evidence from the data

Dimension	Source of obligation and boundary	Example from the data	Files coded (of 11)
Moral interiority (<i>le thi na ba nga na nyo d'yu</i>)	Inside the person: conscience, shame and compassion	"It is the voice inside that says 'this is not right'" (INT-H-M-02)	9
Relational ontology (<i>d'di nga di dha</i> , 'living together')	Relationships: a person's humanity depends on others	"My humanity depends on your humanity. If I harm you, I harm myself" (INT-L-M-01)	8
Theological-cosmological grounding	God (<i>Ruhanga</i> ; <i>Gindri</i> , <i>Dja</i> , <i>Dra</i>) and the ancestors (<i>Kobbui</i>)	"You can hide from the police. You cannot hide from the ancestors" (INT-H-M-06)	6
Embodied institutional practice	Named institutions, rituals and routine practices	"My <i>Lo</i> partner hid me in his house. He risked his own life to save me" (INT-H-M-05)	7

Note. Files could be coded to more than one dimension. A fifth code, for the active and corrupted forms of *Nrunga*, appeared in four files.

Moral interiority

Moral interiority refers to the inner capacity for moral judgement and self-restraint. It was the most frequently coded dimension (Table 2). Participants located it in the heart and described it through shame and compassion. Its boundary is that it concerns what a person knows and feels inside, whatever others see. Akoth (2026) uses the term 'domesticated agency' to describe how such inner capacity can be suppressed when armed groups or outside authorities impose their own moral scripts.

Relational ontology

Relational ontology, expressed as *d'di nga di dha* ('living together'), holds that a person's humanity is formed through relationships with others. Its boundary is that it concerns obligations among the living. One participant expressed it directly: "If I help you, I help myself" (INT-L-M-01). This dimension makes reconciliation a collective rather than a purely individual responsibility.

Theological-cosmological grounding

The third dimension is accountability to God, called *Ruhanga* in Kihema and *Gindri*, *Dja* or *Dra* in Bbadha and Bbaledha/Kilendu, and to the ancestors (*Kobbui*). Its boundary is that the sanction comes from beyond the human community. Participants said that breaking *Nrunga* offends a sacred order and not only one's neighbours. Some said that a person who has killed has *Nrunga* 'covered' or 'asleep' rather than destroyed.

*Embodied institutional practice*

The fourth dimension refers to the institutions and practices through which *Nrunga* is enacted. These include elder assemblies (*Ite*), joking alliances (*Lo*), blood-brotherhood ceremonies (*Omukago*, *Gaddu*), marriage-based repair of relations (*Lo thi dha thi ku*) and purification rituals for those who have killed (*Nzz'u dha/Nzz'u d'do dha*). They also include everyday practices such as shared markets, intermarriage and hospitality. One participant said: "When I buy from a Lendu trader, I am practising *Nrunga*. I am saying: you are my brother" (INT-H-M-08). This dimension is the one through which *Nrunga* becomes observable.

Women participants affirmed *Nrunga* but described their exclusion from *Ite* and from the authority to invoke it formally. One woman said: "The men talk about *Nrunga*, about the old ways. But in the old ways, women had no voice. If we want *Nrunga* to help us now, it must change" (TC-W-03). Women's hospitality, shared mourning and market relations are genuine expressions of *Nrunga*. Its institutions, however, have operated within patriarchal structures. We therefore distinguish *Nrunga* as a moral system from its current gendered institutional practice.

Relationships and overlaps between the dimensions

The four dimensions are distinct but overlap in predictable ways, as Figure 1 shows. Embodied practice is where the other three become visible, so most practice passages were also coded to another dimension. For example, the *Lo* partner who hid a friend from militia acted from conscience (interiority) within a cross-ethnic bond (relational ontology) through a named institution (practice). Interiority is cultivated through practices such as evening storytelling and elder mentorship. Cosmology supplies the sanction that holds relationships and promises in place. We expect the dimensions to separate most clearly in crisis, when one can erode faster than another.

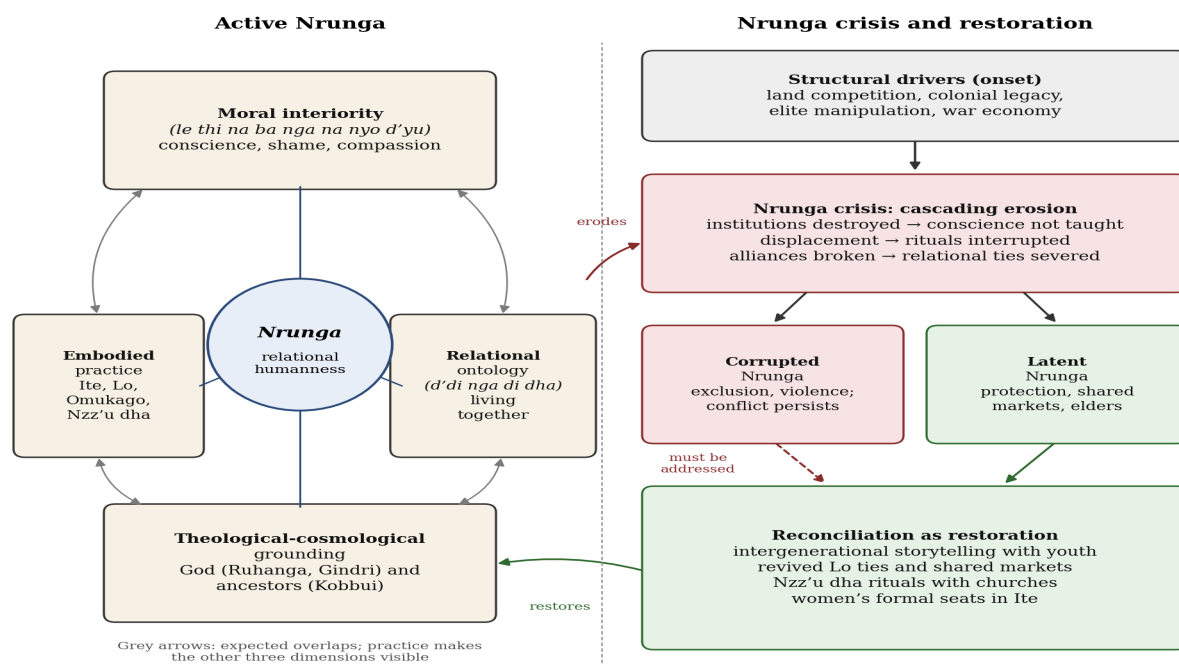


Figure 1: The Nrunga framework: four dimensions, their erosion in Nrunga crisis, and pathways to restoration

Note. Authors' construction from the study data.



Figure 1 summarises the framework. The left side shows the four dimensions and their links in active *Nrunga*. The right side shows how structural drivers erode them in a cascade, what remains latent, and where reconciliation can intervene.

Active and corrupted Nrunga

Participants themselves distinguished two forms of *Nrunga*. One participant explained: “There are two dimensions of *Nrunga*: one positive and one negative. Positively, we talked about love for one’s neighbour. When there is a need, the person comes quickly to help you. Negatively, there is also a kind of *Nrunga* where there is discrimination, where there is no love, for example, when someone comes to steal your goats or your cows. That is bad *Nrunga*” (INT-L-M-16). We call these active and corrupted *Nrunga*. The same moral capacity can be directed towards welcome and coexistence, or towards exclusion and violence. On the community’s own terms, then, the conflict reflects corrupted *Nrunga* rather than its simple absence. Appeals to *Nrunga* in peacebuilding must therefore ask which form a given practice activates.

Nrunga crisis

We define *Nrunga* crisis as the systematic erosion of *Nrunga* across its four dimensions, which weakens communities’ capacity for moral self-restraint, mutual recognition and peaceful coexistence. The construct has a defined explanatory scope. It does not explain why the conflict began. Participants and the documents attributed its onset to structural causes: colonial land policies, competition for land and minerals, elite manipulation and a war economy (Hoffmann et al., 2018). *Nrunga* crisis instead describes a consequence of that violence. It also helps explain why violence persists and why reconciliation is difficult.

Three features define it. First, it is structural. It results from systemic conditions rather than from individual immorality. Second, it is cascading. The destruction of *Ite* and *Lo* removes the settings in which moral interiority is taught. Displacement from ancestral land interrupts the rituals that maintain cosmological accountability. Third, it is not total. Even during extreme violence, participants reported cross-ethnic protection, shared markets and elders invoking *d’di nga di dha*. *Nrunga* is suppressed and made latent, not destroyed. This is why we frame peacebuilding as restoration rather than invention.

This persistence matters given the scale of violence. Diocesan testimony records the massacre at Drodoro on 5 April 2003, which left 943 identified dead, including 257 children under twelve (Dhejju, 2015). That cross-ethnic protection survived such events supports the distinction between erosion and elimination.

The crisis appeared differently across groups. Elders described *Nrunga* in rich detail and stressed its cosmological side. Youth retained its core moral principles but spoke less of cosmology and more of economic and structural factors. They also reported that the settings for learning *Nrunga* had broken down: “My grandfather knew all the proverbs, all the stories. But he died in the war. No one taught me these things” (INT-L-M-06). This matches findings on weakened value transmission to youth elsewhere in East Africa (Mbwete & Bulengela, 2025; Tusasiirwe et al., 2021). Women’s circles named their exclusion from *Ite* as a distortion of *Nrunga*, not an authentic expression of it.

The documents showed a further pattern. Internationally produced documents largely ignored *Nrunga* and indigenous institutions. They framed the conflict through governance, disarmament and humanitarian indicators. Locally produced documents, including the two community statements, treated *Nrunga* and practices such as blood covenants and elder negotiation as central peacebuilding resources.

*Alternative interpretations of cross-ethnic cooperation*

Cross-ethnic cooperation during violence can be read in other ways. Shared markets may reflect economic self-interest. Protection may follow kinship created by intermarriage, shared church membership, or a calculation that today's protector may need protection tomorrow. Our data cannot rule these readings out, and they are not mutually exclusive with *Nrunga*. What the data do show is that participants themselves explained these acts in the language of *Nrunga*, *Lo* and the ancestors. We therefore claim only that *Nrunga* is one frame through which participants understood and justified cooperation, not that it is its sole cause.

Discussion

This section relates the findings to adjacent frameworks, considers the theological grounding of *Nrunga*, and draws implications for reconciliation design. It ends with the study's limitations.

Nrunga and adjacent frameworks

Table 3 sets *Nrunga* crisis beside three adjacent frameworks. For each, it shows the primary focus, the common ground, the point of distinction, and what the framework can explain.

Table 3: Comparison of *Nrunga* crisis with adjacent conceptual frameworks

Criterion	<i>Nrunga</i> crisis (this study)	Structural violence (Galtung, 1969, 1990)	Dehumanisation (Haslam, 2006)	<i>Ubuntu/Utu</i> (Metz, 2007; Somjee, 2023)
Primary focus	Erosion of the four dimensions of <i>Nrunga</i> under violence	Harm embedded in social, political and economic structures	Psychological denial of human attributes to others	Personhood formed through relationship
Common ground with <i>Nrunga</i> crisis	–	Harm is not limited to direct violence	The other comes to be seen as less than human	Personhood is relational; rupture is a crisis of personhood
Point of distinction	Local vocabulary; vertical accountability; observable institutions (<i>Ite</i> , <i>Lo</i>)	Does not theorise the moral and relational damage that structures inflict	Generic process, without a local vocabulary or institutional indicators	Stresses horizontal relations; gives less weight to ancestors, God and named institutions
Explains onset of conflict?	No	Yes, through structural conditions	Partly, through mobilisation	No
Explains persistence and barriers to reconciliation?	Yes	Partly	Partly	Partly

Note. Authors' comparison based on the cited sources and the study findings.

As Table 3 indicates, the frameworks are complementary. Galtung's structural violence explains the conditions that produce a *Nrunga* crisis. *Nrunga* crisis names the moral and relational damage those conditions cause. Haslam's model explains the psychology of denying another's humanity. *Nrunga* crisis grounds that process in local categories, such as the breaking of *Lo* alliances, that can be observed. Compared with much *Ubuntu* scholarship, which stresses horizontal relations among the living, *Nrunga* begins from inner conscience. It also treats accountability to ancestors and God as constitutive. In this it is closer to *Utu* (Somjee, 2023) and to Congolese *Bumuntu* (Bujo, 2021; Mbayo Mbayo, 2021).

Theological grounding

Participants' belief that *Nrunga* is covered rather than destroyed in those who have done violence converges with the Christian doctrine that humans bear the image of God (*Imago Dei*). This doctrine holds that human dignity survives grave moral failure (Catholic Church, 1997, para. 357). Bujo (2001) argues that the African view of the person as being-in-relation enriches rather than



contradicts this doctrine. Mveng (1994) argues that violating human dignity is a sacrilege against God (p. 154, our translation). We do not claim that *Nrunga* derives from Christianity; its accountability to the ancestors predates missionary contact. The convergence matters because most people in Djugu are Christian. Churches could therefore support restoration of *Nrunga* without asking people to choose between faith and tradition.

Implications for reconciliation design

The framework suggests that reconciliation initiatives in Djugu should address all four dimensions together, since each depends on the others. Four implications follow.

First, for moral interiority, programmes should rebuild the settings where conscience is formed. Intergenerational storytelling, in which elders teach proverbs and history to youth, directly answers the transmission gap that youth described. Youth should take part as co-facilitators, not only as an audience, since they hold different priorities, including economic ones.

Second, for relational ontology, initiatives should restore cross-community ties through shared markets, joint work and the revival of *Lo* partnerships across the Hema-Lendu line. Such ties give former neighbours regular, low-risk contact.

Third, for theological-cosmological grounding, purification and reintegration rituals such as *Nzz'u dha/ Nzz'u d'do dha* can be combined with church-led reconciliation. This offers those who have killed a recognised path back into the community.

Fourth, for embodied practice, *Ite* and other institutions should be reformed to give women formal seats and voice. Women's councils with recognised authority, and rituals adapted to include women, would address the exclusion that women's circles named. Recent gender-transformative frameworks in East African institutions offer models for such reform (Uzabakiraho et al., 2025). Without these changes, reviving *Nrunga* institutions risks reviving their exclusions as well.

Finally, peace agreements and national strategies should recognise *Nrunga* institutions explicitly. The document analysis showed that they are currently absent from international frameworks.

Limitations

The study has several limitations. It is a single case limited to Djugu and Bunia. Purposive sampling may have favoured people sympathetic to *Nrunga*. Definitional accounts came mainly from elders and clergy, and women (38%) and youth (21%) were under-represented. The etymology of *Nrunga* has not been verified by linguists. The first author's Hema identity may have shaped what Lendu participants and women chose to say.

Conclusion

This study set out to define *Nrunga*, to explain how violence has affected it, and to draw implications for reconciliation. Participants defined *Nrunga* through four dimensions: moral interiority, relational ontology, theological-cosmological grounding and embodied institutional practice. They also distinguished active from corrupted *Nrunga*, showing that the concept is not uniformly positive. We defined *Nrunga* crisis as the structural, cascading but incomplete erosion of these dimensions. It explains the persistence of violence and the barriers to reconciliation, though not the conflict's onset.

The study contributes a precisely defined indigenous construct that can be compared with established frameworks. It also offers a basis for reconciliation initiatives that involve elders and youth, address the exclusion of women, and restore cross-community institutions. Future research should verify the linguistic origin of *Nrunga*, include more women and youth, and test the framework in reconciliation programmes led by Hema and Lendu communities themselves.



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