

THE ETHICS OF LITURGICAL *RECONCILIATIO ET PAENITENTIA* (§§4, 23, 29, 31): A STUDY INTO *GWONG* CULTURAL MODELS OF TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE

MARTIN GYULA MAICHIKI
Catholic Institute of West Africa

ABSTRACT

The study examines “the ethics of liturgical *reconciliatio et paenitentia* (§§4, 23, 29, 31): A study into *Gwong* cultural models of transitional justice.” It analyses the ethical and theological logic of forgiveness and asks how Catholic liturgical penance can converse with African transitional justice, with specific attention to the *Gwong* of Central Nigeria. While many dominant frameworks privilege legal accountability and institutional redress, *Gwong*’s moral reasoning emphasises communal restoration, moral equilibrium, and reintegration. Forgiveness (*Thyisyam*) is enacted as a ritual-ethical sequence of confession, cleansing, restitution, and social restoration, initiated by the offender’s request for forgiveness (*kyala thyisyam*) and formalised through the act of seeking reconciliation (*Hgyèé khítóng*). In dialogue with John Paul II’s *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia* (1984), the study develops a contextual theological-ethical model that interprets forgiveness as justice realised through restored relationships. Using qualitative theological-ethical inquiry, ritual studies, communitarian virtue ethics, and inculturation theory, it draws on cultural descriptions, oral traditions, and liturgical texts to show convergences around truth-telling, confession, reparative action, and reintegration. It proposes a ritual-ethical synthesis for post-conflict reconstruction in African Christian contexts.

KEYWORDS: Reconciliation, Justice, Forgiveness, Inculturation, and Ritual.

INTRODUCTION

Following a quarrel that fractured two households in *Ngatkpoo* (Fori), a *Gwong* village, social interactions ceased, and the community’s moral equilibrium was visibly disrupted. The offender, accompanied by elders, approached at dawn to acknowledge his wrongdoing and request forgiveness (*kyala thyisyam*), rather than seeking legal intervention. The elders listened attentively, recognising that truth-telling is foundational to restoring harmony in *Gwong*’s moral life (Danbaki, 2017; Odey, 2018). Upon completion of the admission, the ritual progressed to cleansing (*gwat nyam*) and reparative gestures, underscoring the community’s belief that forgiveness necessitates tangible moral responsibility (Rituals of apology in the global arena, 2009: 43-59). The subsequent communal meal symbolised reconciliation (Rendang and Reconciliation: The Role of Food in Social Harmony, 2023), demonstrating that peace is enacted through ritual restoration and communal witness, consistent with the *Gwong* perspective

that justice is oriented toward restored relationships rather than punitive measures (Odey, 2018; Mbiti, 1969).

At a recent reconciliation gathering in a *Gwong* village, elders sat in a circle under the shade of a tree. At the same time, parties to a lingering conflict brought kola nuts and water as gestures of peace. The disputants had previously attempted to resolve the matter through the local magistrate's office. However, the outcome, though legal, was met with unease and left both families estranged from their neighbours. As dusk settled, a respected elder stood and reminded all gathered that "no law can remove bitterness from the heart if the community is not healed together" (Rojas, 2025). The ritual that followed, involving public confession and symbolic handwashing, unfolded with a quiet intensity:

In the fading golden light, each participant dipped their hands into the cool water, the faint splash echoing beneath the rustling tree branches. The water in the communal basin, slightly clouded by many hands, caught the last glimmers of sunlight, visually marking the shared act of release and cleansing. As the circle watched in stillness, the gesture's weight was felt not only in the tangible cleansing but also in the collective silence that accompanied it. The shared meal that followed signified not only the end of the dispute but also the reintegration of both families into the village's moral and social bonds (Conant, 2012: 1-20; Yusuf, 2018).

Forgiveness and justice are central to African moral reasoning and Christian theology, yet their systematic integration remains uneven within many transitional justice paradigms (Fiddes, 2016). Across post-conflict African settings, mechanisms that privilege truth-telling, social repair, and moral reintegration have sought to move beyond strictly punitive approaches (Llewellyn, n.d.; Llewellyn & Philpott, 2014). Nevertheless, the dominance of Western legal rationality often sidelines the spiritual, ritual, and communal dimensions through which many African communities interpret harm and healing (Metz, 2011; Mbiti, 1969). In the *Gwong* worldview, wrongdoing disrupts a network of relationships binding persons to one another and to a sacred moral order (Manda, 2014); reconciliation is therefore enacted through communal rites that re-establish moral equilibrium and social cohesion (Odey, 2018; Danbaki, 2017; Ross, n.d.).

Within Christian tradition, penance and reconciliation likewise function as a ritual path of moral restoration, guiding believers through repentance, confession, satisfaction, and reconciled communion with God and the Church (Rahner, 1966; Schmemmann, 1973). The normative ecclesial articulation of this dynamic receives clarity in *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia* (1984), which frames reconciliation as a divine gift offered through Christ and continuously mediated by the Church's ministry. The exhortation resists reducing forgiveness to sentiment or private spirituality and insists upon its ecclesial, ethical, and relational character. In a formulation crucial for an African transitional justice hermeneutic, the text anchors reconciliation in divine initiative and ecclesial mediation:

Reconciliation is principally a gift of the heavenly Father. It is he who takes the initiative and offers forgiveness to humanity. Through the death and resurrection of his Son, reconciliation is accomplished, and through the ministry of the

Church, it is continually offered to all people. The Church herself is at once reconciled and reconciling. (*Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, 1984, §31).

This study argues that placing such ecclesial teaching in critical dialogue with *Gwong* ritual-ethical processes illuminates a shared moral logic oriented toward truth-telling, reparative practice, and restored communion, and it provides a coherent basis for a contextual model of transitional justice in African Christian contexts.

RESEARCH PROBLEM

The ethical problem addressed here concerns the persistent disjunction between institutionalised transitional justice models that privilege legal redress and African communal ethics, which interpret reconciliation as a relational, spiritually textured repair (Metz, 2011). Within *Gwong* society, reconciliation is not merely a declaration of pardon but a ritual-ethical sequence involving confession before recognised moral authorities, symbolic cleansing, restitution or fines where appropriate, and reintegration affirmed through communal gestures and feasting (Odey, 2018; Danbaki, 2017). These processes are embedded in indigenous governance patterns that historically relied on gerontocratic mediation and village-level moral authority, as documented in local development reports and historical studies of Southern Kaduna communities (Annexes, 1998; Ibrahim, 1997; James, 1997).

In many local church contexts, Christian penitential practice is frequently experienced as individualised, interiorised, and disconnected from the social consequences of wrongdoing. (Fitzgerald, n.d.) This dynamic produces a fragmented moral landscape in which legal processes lack ritual embodiment and ecclesial confession lacks the communal restitution necessary for socially credible reconciliation. For instance, ex-combatants or individuals returning from conflict may be liturgically absolved yet remain socially estranged within parish communities, thereby complicating reintegration and broader post-conflict healing efforts. (Bigombe, 2020) These gaps illustrate how parish life and local policy design can falter when sacramental practices are not closely linked to communal repair.

This study contends that the Church's own teaching in *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia* offers a doctrinal foundation for reintegrating penance and reconciliation with communal life (II, 1984), since the exhortation insists that conversion must be embodied and that reconciliation possesses an irreducibly social character: "Conversion and repentance are not only interior acts; they involve a radical change of life, a return to God with all one's heart, and reconciliation with one's brothers and sisters" (*Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, 1984, §4).

AIM AND OBJECTIVES

The study aims to formulate a contextual ethics of forgiveness by integrating Catholic liturgical penance with *Gwong* cultural mechanisms of reconciliation.

The objectives of this study are as follows:

- i. To examine and clarify the ethical framework of forgiveness (*Thyisyam*) within *Gwong* cultural thought and traditional systems of reconciliation.

- ii. To analyse the ritual-theological significance of Catholic liturgical penance in light of the ecclesial teaching of *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia* (§§4, 23, 29, 31).
- iii. To conduct a comparative ethical and ritual analysis of *Gwong* reconciliation practices and Christian penitential liturgy to identify areas of convergence and divergence.

To develop a contextual theological-ethical model of reconciliation that integrates *Gwong* indigenous practices with Catholic liturgical penance while maintaining doctrinal integrity. To propose practical applications of this integrated model for pastoral ministry, transitional justice processes, and peacebuilding initiatives within African Christian contexts.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How does *Gwong* culture conceptualise forgiveness (*Thyisyam*) and moral restoration within its traditional framework of justice and reconciliation?
2. What ethical and theological insights does Catholic liturgical penance, especially as described in *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia* (§§4, 23, 29, 31), offer for understanding forgiveness within African transitional justice contexts?
3. How do *Gwong* reconciliation rituals and Catholic penitential practices compare and contrast in their ethical frameworks, ritual reasoning, and concepts of justice?
4. How can integrating liturgical penance and *Gwong* Indigenous reconciliation practices create a contextual model of reconciliation that embodies both moral accountability and grace?
5. What practical implications does such an integrated model have for transitional justice, pastoral ministry, and peacebuilding initiatives within African Christian communities?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The research is grounded in a synthesis of communitarian virtue ethics, liturgical theology, ritual theory, and inculturation. Virtue ethics highlights moral formation through practices that shape character and communal identity (Hauerwas, 1981; MacIntyre, 1984), while African communitarian accounts frame moral agency as relational and oriented to shared flourishing (Gyekye, 1997; Mbiti, 1969; Metz, 2011). Liturgical theology reads worship as ethically formative (Schmemmann, 1973; Wepener, 2009), and ritual theory clarifies how symbolic action generates social meaning and restores relationships (Bell, 1997; Grimes, 2000; Turner, 1969; Van Gennep, 1960). Inculturation theology guides a faithful cultural embodiment of sacramental logic, attentive to magisterial safeguards such as *Varietates Legitimae* (Congregation for Divine Worship, 1994).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Forgiveness and Justice in African Contexts

African moral frameworks frequently construe wrongdoing as a rupture within a communal and spiritual fabric, requiring restoration rather than retribution (Mbiti, 1969; Gyekye, 1997). The *Ubuntu* tradition, as interpreted in contemporary moral philosophy, emphasises personhood as relational and justice as reintegrative, with the restoration of right relationship as the primary moral goal (Metz, 2011). Transitional justice processes that emphasise confession, truth-telling, and reintegration, therefore, resonate with African moral intuitions, even when shaped by modern political constraints (Llewellyn & Philpott, 2014; Villa-Vicencio, 2009). Tutu's theological framing of public forgiveness further highlights how Christian language of reconciliation can serve post-conflict reconstruction when tethered to accountability and truth (Tutu, 1999).

In the Nigerian context, indigenous reconciliation mechanisms remain significant, particularly in communities whose moral life is ordered through customary mediation and ritual repair (Opeyemi et al., 2025). *Gwong* reconciliation rites, such as cleansing processes and communal feasting, exemplify this integrated moral worldview in which justice is accomplished through ritual mediation, public acknowledgement, and social reintegration (Odey, 2018; Danbaki, 2017).

Liturgical Penance in Christian Tradition and Ecclesial Teaching

Historically, penance developed from early public forms of reconciliation into the sacramental practice that came to include contrition, confession, satisfaction, and absolution (Rahner, 1966). Liturgical theology interprets penance not as a legal transaction but as a formative journey of conversion in which ritual participation reshapes moral agency and communal identity (Schmemmann, 1973). Within this tradition, the Church's magisterial teaching in *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia* explicitly identifies penance as the ordinary sacramental means of reconciliation after baptism. It locates it within the Church's reconciled and reconciling mission: "The sacrament of Penance is the ordinary way for the faithful who have fallen into sin after Baptism to obtain forgiveness and be reconciled with God and with the Church" (*Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, 1984, §23).

This claim is particularly important for transitional justice ethics because it identifies penance as a concrete ecclesial practice for moral restoration rather than an abstract ideal. The exhortation also challenges individualistic moral accounts by insisting that sin and reconciliation have communal consequences: "Sin is never purely personal; it damages the communion of the Church. Therefore, reconciliation also has an ecclesial dimension, expressed and realised sacramentally" (*Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, 1984, §29). This teaching provides a doctrinal basis for interpreting confession and reconciliation as practices with significant social implications. While Western pastoral approaches may tend toward privatisation, the Church's theology emphasises communal accountability and restored communion. This convergence is particularly relevant when considered alongside *Gwong* ritual ethics.

Ritual and Reconciliation in African Cultures

Ritual studies demonstrate that reconciliation is often enacted through performative gestures such as washing, sacrifice, meals, public speech, and symbolic acts of passage that mark a transition from alienation to belonging (Bell, 1997; Grimes, 2000; Turner, 1969; Van Gennep, 1960). In many African societies, ritual action is simultaneously spiritual and juridical, re-establishing social order by restoring moral relationships (Mbiti, 1969). *Gwong* reconciliation practices, including cleansing rites and communal meals, are intelligible within this broader anthropology of rites of restoration, in which the community publicly witnesses the moral reintegration of an offender and the repair of relationships with victims and communal norms (Odey, 2018; Danbaki, 2017).

Ethical Dimensions of Forgiveness

Philosophical accounts of forgiveness have explored its power to interrupt cycles of vengeance and renew moral agency (Arendt, 1958), while other approaches distinguish between conditional and unconditional forgiveness, or between forgiveness as a gift and forgiveness as a moral demand (Derrida, 2001; Ricoeur, 2004). African moral reasoning often resists a sharp dichotomy between mercy and justice by placing forgiveness within a relational ethic that includes accountability and communal repair (Metz, 2011). Christian ethics similarly frames forgiveness as moral formation, cultivated through practices that shape character and community life (Hauerwas, 1981; MacIntyre, 1984). The convergence of these traditions suggests that forgiveness becomes ethically credible when embodied in ritual processes that integrate confession, restitution, and reintegration rather than treating pardon as a mere declaration (Pereyra, 2012).

Identified Gaps

Although scholarship increasingly recognises ritual and forgiveness in African contexts, it seldom places sacramental penance in sustained dialogue with transitional justice, and it often offers only limited theological analysis of how sacraments and indigenous rites interact ethically. Detailed contextual studies, including close cultural descriptions of *Gwong* reconciliation, remain comparatively rare (Chupungco, 1992; Wepener, 2009; Odey, 2018). A further gap concerns the dynamics of participation and moral authority within reconciliation processes, especially where elder-led rites shape access to public speech and recognition, raising questions about inclusivity and representation (Ifenweobi et al., 2024). Recent reviews likewise suggest that, despite renewed interest in inculturation, few studies since 2020 have combined theological argument with empirical attention to the convergence of Catholic liturgical penance and African restorative justice models (Munyaneza & Byaruhanga, 2021; Ndengeyingoma, 2023).

These recent contributions underscore that the integration of sacramental reconciliation and indigenous African practices remains under-theorised and under-documented, especially in terms of detailed contextual analysis and interdisciplinary dialogue (Armstrong, 2025). While this study aims to address these gaps by engaging *Gwong* ritual ethics in direct doctrinal dialogue with *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia* and

constructing a model of reconciliation that is simultaneously ritual, ethical, and ecclesial, it is necessary to acknowledge possible theological objections. Some critics may express concern about the risk of doctrinal dilution or syncretism when integrating Catholic sacramental practices with indigenous rituals.

In response, this study affirms a methodology of critical inculturation that seeks neither to dilute core doctrinal teachings nor to blend divergent beliefs, but rather to foster genuine dialogue where each tradition is respected in its distinctiveness. Following established magisterial guidelines on inculturation (Chupungco, 1992), the proposed model carefully attends to doctrinal integrity and strives to ensure that local cultural forms enhance rather than undermine the theological meaning of reconciliation. By maintaining this critical balance, the approach anticipates and addresses concerns about syncretism while promoting an authentic, contextual expression of Catholic teaching within African realities.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study adopts a qualitative theological-ethical design integrating contextual theology, ritual studies, and ethnographically informed inquiry. Osmer's practical theological framework structures description, interpretation, normative judgement, and pragmatic proposal (Osmer, 2008). Rituals are read as moral performances, enabling a hermeneutic that interprets both Christian liturgy and indigenous rites as embodied ethical narratives (Grimes, 2000; Wepener, 2009). The researcher's positionality as a theologically trained outsider to the Gwong community is addressed through reflexivity and deliberate clarification in interviews, especially regarding boundaries of ritual knowledge and the interpretation of meanings not immediately accessible to outsiders (Headland, Pike, Harris, 1990).

Research Setting and Cultural-Historical Grounding

The focus is the *Gwong* community in Southern Kaduna State, Nigeria. The *Gwong*, speakers of *Gyong* within the Plateau linguistic cluster of the Niger-Congo family, possess a deeply communal moral order historically shaped by village autonomy and elder-mediated governance (Bendor-Samuel, 1989; Blench, 2012; Ibrahim, 1997). Local documentation describes constituent villages as functioning quasi-autonomously, with governance characterised by gerontocratic moral authority (Annexes, 1998). Within *Gwong* tradition, moral and political leadership historically included differentiated roles in certain localities, with responsibility for civic and spiritual order mediated through recognised authorities, reflecting a worldview in which justice and sacred order remain intertwined (Maikarfi, 1983; Danbaki, 2017; Turaki, 1993).

Data Collection

The research employs triangulation through observation of reconciliation ceremonies, semi-structured interviews with elders, mediators, clergy, and community members, and textual analysis of liturgical sources and ecclesial documents alongside *Gwong* oral traditions, proverbs, songs, and culturally preserved accounts of

reconciliation. The study draws on established qualitative standards and ethical guidelines for informed consent and cultural sensitivity (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Strydom, 2002).

Data interpretation proceeds through ritual hermeneutics (reading rites as embodied stories), communitarian virtue ethics, liturgical theology, and inculturation theory. Ritual actions are analysed as ethical narratives that not only represent reconciliation but constitute it (Bell, 1997; Grimes, 2000). Communitarian virtue ethics frames forgiveness as character formation embedded in community practices (Hauerwas, 1981; Metz, 2011). Liturgical theology interprets penance and reconciliation as ethically formative ecclesial events (Schmemmann, 1973; Wepener, 2009). Inculturation theory guides constructive synthesis, arguing for a faithful cultural embodiment of sacramental logic rather than mere external adaptation (Chupungco, 1992).

Ethical Considerations and Limitations

Given the sensitivity of guilt, conflict memory, and ritual boundaries, the study prioritises confidentiality, participant rights, and permissions from relevant authorities when observing or describing sacred rites (Strydom, 2002; Osmer, 2008). Where direct observation of specific cleansing rituals is restricted, methodological robustness is maintained through interviews with knowledgeable participants, the collection of oral narratives, and the documentation of relevant symbolic artefacts, thereby preserving cultural integrity while sustaining ethnographic depth (Churchill & Elliott, 2009). Although the contextual specificity of *Gwong* culture limits generalisability, it strengthens theological and ethical authenticity and offers an adaptable model for comparable contexts (Ezenwa & Nganwuchu, 2025:19-31).

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Ethical Foundations of Forgiveness in *Gwong* Culture

In *Gwong's* moral anthropology, wrongdoing is not reducible to private fault but is understood as a rupture within a relational and spiritually grounded moral order. Harm affects not only the individual but also the integrity of the community and its moral equilibrium. Forgiveness, expressed in the concept of *Thyisyam*, therefore functions as a communal vocation orientated toward the restoration of harmony and the reintegration of persons into the moral community (Danbaki, 2017; Odey, 2018).

This process follows a recognisable moral sequence. It begins with the offender's acknowledgement of harm and an explicit request for forgiveness, articulated through *kyalathyisyam*. This is then formalised through *Hgyèé khítóng*, a culturally intelligible act of seeking reconciliation that situates the process within communal norms and expectations. Such practices presuppose that moral truth must be publicly articulated and that reconciliation requires social recognition rather than mere private remorse. In this sense, *Gwong* reconciliation aligns with broader restorative justice frameworks, which emphasise accountability, truth-telling, and relational repair as central to ethical restoration (Zehr, 2002; Philpott, 2012).

These features also expose a critical tension in many contemporary contexts, where mechanisms for addressing wrongdoing often remain privatised or juridically confined. By contrast, the *Gwong* framework foregrounds the visibility of moral repair, raising important questions about the conditions under which communities are able—or unable—to sustain practices of public truth-telling and communal reintegration. As such, it offers not only a culturally specific model but also a critical lens for evaluating the limitations of individualised approaches to forgiveness and reconciliation.

Gwong reconciliation customs are further illuminated by the historical pattern of governance in which elders serve as custodians of moral order and mediators of conflict. Village-level autonomy, described in local development documentation, does not imply moral fragmentation; rather, it highlights the centrality of elder authority and communal witness as instruments of justice (Annexes, 1998; Ibrahim, 1997). Within such a system, confession before elders functions as a socially credible form of truth-telling. At the same time, cleansing and restitution serve as embodied signs that the moral breach is being repaired rather than overlooked. (Miller, 2000).

Liturgical Penance as Ecclesial Ethics and Moral Formation

Christian liturgical penance, when read through the lens of *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, appears not as a private devotional option but as an ecclesial practice in which divine initiative and human conversion converge in sacramental form. The exhortation's insistence that reconciliation is first God's gift destabilises purely humanistic accounts of post-conflict repair and invites an understanding of forgiveness as participation in divine restorative action: "Reconciliation is principally a gift of the heavenly Father. It is he who takes the initiative and offers forgiveness to humanity..." (*Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, 1984, §31) At the same time, the exhortation binds this gift to ethical conversion embodied in life and relationships, as *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia* states: "Conversion and repentance are not only interior acts; they involve a radical change of life... and reconciliation with one's brothers and sisters." (*Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, 1984, §4)

This ethical emphasis aligns with *Gwong's* expectations that repentance must be enacted through ritual and social repair. Schmemmann's interpretation of liturgy as the Church's formative event elucidates how penitential practice shapes moral agency through embodied participation and communal belonging (Schmemmann, 1973). Within virtue ethics, these repeated practices foster habits of truthfulness, humility, and accountability, thereby transforming character rather than simply resolving transgressions (Hauerwas, 1981; MacIntyre, 1984).

The study, therefore, argues that the privatisation of penance in some pastoral settings is not an inevitable implication of Catholic theology but a contingent practice that can be corrected through inculturated forms consonant with the Church's own communal account of sin and reconciliation (Carey, n.d.). The exhortation in *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia* insists that sin and reconciliation have communal consequences: "Sin is never purely personal; it damages the communion of the Church. Therefore, reconciliation also has an ecclesial dimension, expressed and realised sacramentally" (*Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, 1984, §29).

This doctrinal claim aligns closely with African communitarian ethics and provides a normative ecclesial basis for integrating sacramental penance with communal reconciliation processes in *Gwong* society.

CONVERGENCES BETWEEN *GWONG* RITUAL PROCESSES AND LITURGICAL PENANCE

Comparative ritual analysis indicates that *Gwong* reconciliation and Christian penitential practice share a recognisable structure, thus:

Truth-telling through confession, symbolic purification, reparative action, and reintegration into communion. *Gwong* cleansing and feasting operate as rites of restoration through which the moral community publicly witnesses reconciliation, much as ecclesial reconciliation culminates in restored participation in the Eucharistic communion of the Church (Cooke & Macy, n.d.; Odey, 2018; Wepener, 2009).

While significant convergences are evident, the explicit divergences that follow should not simply be regarded as obstacles or incompatibilities. Rather, these differences can be framed as opportunities for cross-enrichment, offering each tradition new ways to understand and embody reconciliation (Brown et al., 2001). Identifying these contrasts with a view toward mutual gift can diffuse defensiveness and invite creative theological imagination, encouraging both traditions to learn from the other's distinctive strengths. Three key divergences, each carrying potential for reciprocal insight, can be summarised as follows:

Theological Referent

In Christian doctrine, sin is ultimately an offence against God mediated through the Church and its sacraments, whereas in *Gwong* cosmology, wrongdoing disrupts the equilibrium of the community and the sacred order without a consistently articulated concept of individual sin against a personal deity (*Reconciliatio et paenitentia*, 1984; Danbaki, 2017).

Authority and Mediation

Christian penance is mediated by ordained clergy within an ecclesial and sacramental framework, with absolution explicitly conferred by the Church. In contrast, *Gwong* reconciliation is facilitated by elders as representatives of communal moral authority, and legitimacy is established through consensus and visible social participation rather than sacramental ordination (*Reconciliatio et paenitentia*, n.d., Danbaki, n.d.).

Scope and Permanence of Reconciliation

In Catholic practice, sacramental reconciliation is universal in scope and aims to reintegrate the penitent into both divine and communal communion, with effects considered permanent unless undone by subsequent sin. *Gwong* reconciliation, however, is situational and contingent, often requiring ongoing negotiation and

reaffirmation through further ritual and community witness (*Reconciliatio et paenitentia*, n.d.; Danbeki, n.d.).

Where divergence exists, then, it relates not merely to explicit theology but also to patterns of mediation and the lived dynamics of ritual repair. Nevertheless, these differences do not constitute a contradiction. Both frameworks construe wrongdoing as a relational rupture and reconciliation as the restoration of wholeness across human and spiritual dimensions. However, they achieve this through pathways defined by their cosmologies and institutional structures (Nwangwu, 2020).

The Church's articulation that the sacrament of penance reconciles the faithful with God and the Church provides a direct bridge to *Gwong's* communal reintegration: "The sacrament of Penance is the ordinary way... to obtain forgiveness and be reconciled with God and with the Church." (*Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, 1984, §23). When this teaching is brought into dialogue with *Thyisyam* and *Hgyèé khítóng*, it becomes plausible to interpret *Gwong* reconciliation rites as culturally established forms of the moral movements that sacramental penance intends to realise confession, conversion, satisfaction, and restored communion.

TOWARD A CONTEXTUAL MODEL OF ETHICAL RECONCILIATION FOR TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE

Drawing on convergences between Christian liturgical penance and *Gwong* moral anthropology, this study proposes a contextual model of reconciliation for post-conflict reconstruction. Among the *Gwong*, wrongdoing is not understood primarily as the violation of an abstract rule but as a disruption of relational equilibrium within the household and the wider kinship network. Moral failure carries both social and symbolic consequences, often requiring processes of acknowledgement, mediation, and ritual restoration overseen by elders who function as custodians of communal memory and moral order. In this sense, guilt is relational rather than strictly individual, and reconciliation is measured by the restoration of social harmony rather than the mere satisfaction of legal norms.

Rather than merging these cultural logics into Christian sacramental theology, the model promotes constructive dialogue between them. It affirms that confession must be socially accountable, resonating with *Gwong's* expectations that wrongdoing be recognised before legitimate moral witnesses. At the same time, it utilises the Christian rite of penance to frame confession as both communal and theological, orientated towards reconciliation with God (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1994). Reparative action is regarded as essential, reflecting *Gwong's* expectations of restitution and broader restorative justice principles that emphasise repairing harm rather than merely punishing offenders (Zehr, 2002).

Symbolic cleansing plays a central role in *Gwong* reconciliation practices, often involving acts such as ritual washing or shared gestures that represent the removal of moral pollution and the restoration of relational purity. The model combines these practices with Christian penitential prayer, enabling ritual to serve as a link between cultural significance and theological affirmation. Reintegration, therefore, is not assumed but publicly demonstrated through communal participation. When repentance

and restitution are deemed genuine, restoration to Eucharistic communion becomes not only a private spiritual act but also a visible sign of renewed belonging within both the ecclesial and social body (Philpott, 2012). Designed as a flexible and participatory framework, the model remains open to continuous community discernment. This reflects both *Gwong's* decision-making patterns, which are usually dialogical and elder-mediated, and modern peacebuilding theory, which emphasises locally rooted, adaptive processes (Lederach, 1997).

At the parish level, this model can be applied within a *Gwong* community recovering from inter-household conflict. Following pastoral engagement, a priest works with a reconciliation committee composed of elders and lay leaders, reflecting the dual authority structures of the church and the community. The offender publicly admits wrongdoing before recognised witnesses, carries out clearly defined acts of restitution, and takes part in a ritual of symbolic cleansing that combines traditional handwashing with prayers from the rite of penance. This process exemplifies what anthropologists call “ritualised moral repair,” where symbolic acts strengthen ethical change (Turner, 1969).

The process culminates in a communal meal, a culturally significant act that reaffirms restored social bonds and mutual recognition. Where appropriate, renewed participation in the Eucharist acts as a theological ratification of reconciliation already enacted at the communal level. Structured documentation and communal feedback enable the process to be refined over time, ensuring that reconciliation remains both culturally intelligible and ethically robust. In this way, the model demonstrates that sustainable reconciliation emerges not from abstract universals alone but from the integration of local moral worlds, religious meaning, and participatory social practice. Such a model challenges the common assumption in transitional justice that forgiveness and justice are mutually exclusive. (Saunders, 2011) Instead, it reconceptualises forgiveness as the moral completion of justice, since repair, restitution, and reintegration restore the relational order disrupted by wrongdoing. (Restorative Justice - Catholic Prison Ministries Coalition, n.d.) In this sense, liturgical reconciliation becomes not merely a religious supplement to legal mechanisms but a form of sacramental justice, wherein divine grace and communal accountability converge in ritual practice (Tutu, 1999; *Villa-Vicencio*, 2009; Metz, 2011).

THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

This study advances a sacramental account of justice in which reconciliation is understood not merely as the juridical resolution of guilt but as the restoration of moral and relational belonging. In contrast to individualised interpretations of the sacrament of penance, it argues that reconciliation is inherently social in both its meaning and effects. Sacramental action, therefore, does not simply signify forgiveness; it participates in the reconstitution of relationships through divine grace mediated within the ecclesial community.

This claim becomes more visible when the rite of penance is brought into dialogue with *Gwong's* moral anthropology. Within *Gwong* contexts, wrongdoing is construed as a disruption of relational equilibrium rather than solely as individual fault.

Consequently, reconciliation requires processes that are public, mediated, and communally verified. When these patterns inform sacramental practice, confession emerges not as a private encounter alone but as an act oriented toward the restoration of communion within both the Church and the social body. This is consistent with the teaching of the Catechism of the Catholic Church (1994), which affirms that reconciliation entails reintegration into ecclesial life, not merely absolution from sin.

From this perspective, inculturation is not an optional pastoral strategy but a theological imperative. As Anscar Chupungco (1992) argues, liturgy must take concrete form within the symbolic and cultural worlds of the people who celebrate it. Similarly, Cas Wepener (2009) demonstrates that African ritual practices offer critical resources for rethinking the communal dimensions of Christian worship. By engaging *Gwong* categories such as communal witnessing, elder mediation, and symbolic cleansing, this study extends these insights into the domain of reconciliation.

Theologically, this integration challenges reductive accounts of penance that prioritise interior disposition over social transformation. It repositions the sacrament within a broader ethical horizon in which forgiveness, restitution, and reintegration are inseparable. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing debates on the relationship between liturgy, ethics, and social repair, particularly within post-conflict contexts.

Pastoral Implications: From Sacrament to Social Practice

If reconciliation is both sacramental and social, then pastoral practice must reflect this dual character. The gap often observed between liturgical absolution and lived social reintegration is not merely a practical failure but a theological inconsistency. Accordingly, the following strategies operationalise the proposed model within parish contexts:

Reconciliation Committee Formation

A structured body composed of elders and lay leaders should accompany reconciliation processes, ensuring that both cultural legitimacy and ecclesial accountability are maintained.

Public Welcome Ritual

Rituals of reintegration, including shared meals and symbolic acts, should follow confession and restitution. These practices make visible the transition from exclusion to restored belonging and align with African communal ethics (Gbule & Nwaka, 2021).

Healing Circles

Facilitated spaces for narrative exchange allow victims and offenders to articulate harm and responsibility within a theologically grounded framework, reflecting principles of restorative justice (Lederach, 1997).

Communal Liturgy of Reconciliation

The incorporation of penitential rites into communal worship enables the congregation to participate actively in processes of moral repair, reinforcing the ecclesial nature of reconciliation.

Ethical and Transitional Justice Implications

Ethically, the integrated model treats forgiveness as moral praxis inseparable from accountability and reparative action (Jaycox, 2019). It enables transitional justice mechanisms to embody truth-telling, restitution, and reintegration, thereby strengthening social credibility and addressing moral and spiritual wounds that legal processes alone often leave unresolved (Llewellyn & Philpott, 2014; Villa-Vicencio, 2009). Its transferability, however, is conditioned by local authority structures: where gerontocratic mediation is absent, communities may adapt the model by identifying alternative custodians of moral authority capable of witnessing confession and reintegration, such as local councils, interfaith bodies, youth or women's representative groups, and trusted civil-society peace-builders (Nganwuchu et al., 2021).

By empowering a range of actors beyond traditional elders, communities can maintain the essential ethical logic of truth-telling, reparative action, and communal acknowledgement, while revising the style of public ritual to align with local customs. (Aina, 2025) By outlining these specific pathways for adaptation, this study invites practitioners to exercise prudent discernment and creative contextualisation when applying in new environments and encourages attention to local cultural forms and sources of legitimate authority.

CONCLUSION

The study has shown that *Gwong* forgiveness, *Thyisyam*, is a ritual-ethical vocation oriented toward communal restoration, requiring confession, cleansing, restitution, and reintegration through practices socially recognised as credible repair (Danbaki, 2017; Odey, 2018). It has also demonstrated that Catholic liturgical penance, particularly as interpreted through *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, is inherently ecclesial and relational rather than merely private and that it presupposes embodied conversion and restoration of communion. The primary ecclesial teaching is decisive in grounding this claim: reconciliation is a divine gift continuously mediated by the Church, conversion is not merely interior but enacted in life, penance is the ordinary sacramental path of reconciliation after baptism, and sin wounds communion and therefore demands communal repair (John Paul II, 1984, §§4, 23, 29, 31).

Further research should expand comparative analysis to include other Nigerian and African communities, empirically assess the integration of indigenous liturgies into peacebuilding efforts, and explore gendered participation and moral authority in reconciliation rites. Although existing scholarship rarely documents fully developed models, some notable empirical cases offer preliminary insights into practice. For instance, Scott and Wepener (2017) provide ethnographic accounts of South African parishes where reconciliation services have been intentionally structured to blend Catholic rites of penance with indigenous cleansing ceremonies and public storytelling, seeking to reinforce both spiritual and communal reintegration. In the Nigerian Middle Belt, Catholic parishes in Jos and Kaduna have begun piloting "healing rites" that incorporate traditional acts such as symbolic handwashing and communal feasting alongside sacramental confession, aiming to bridge customary expectations of visible restitution with the Church's doctrine of reconciliation (see Wepener, 2009).

These cases, though limited in formal documentation and systematic analysis, demonstrate the potential for creative synthesis in contexts grappling with post-conflict divisions. As an immediate next step, the study proposes comparative fieldwork in the *Atyap* community of Southern Kaduna, whose reconciliation traditions share historical links and cultural proximity with the *Gwong*, making them an especially fruitful context for examining similarities and divergences in ritual justice. Collaboration will be sought with local *Atyap* elders and the Centre for Peace Advancement in Kafanchan to facilitate community engagement and joint data collection. Such targeted work would enhance an intercultural model of liturgical ethics that could support a wider range of African transitional justice practices.

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