

When the Suspect Becomes the Crime: Personhood, Community and the Ontology of Jungle Justice in Nigeria

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Abstract

Amnesty International has documented at least 555 victims of mob violence in Nigeria between 2012 and 2023 alone, and the toll has continued to rise till date. This article argues that jungle justice is best understood not merely as a failure of law enforcement or a symptom of socio-economic frustration, but as an ontological error. That is, a metaphysical collapse in which a person, a being with inherent moral status, is reduced to a single alleged predicate. In jungle justice, the accusation, is treated as though it exhausted the totality of that person's being. The article makes two original theoretical contributions. First, it develops the concept of the ontological non-disposability of the person, arguing that even a genuinely guilty person retains an ontological status that punishment must work through rather than annihilate. Second, it develops justice as relational preservation, arguing that justice is not merely the correct distribution of punishment but the restoration of the normative relations constituting community, so that jungle justice fails doubly. It may harm the innocent, and even where guilt is real, it forecloses the only processes capable of restoring those relations. Engaging four distinct scholarly conversations on jungle justice in Nigeria, and drawing on Western and African philosophy alike, the article argues that jungle justice is self-defeating as justice, since the community's attempt to restore normative order through the destruction of a person simultaneously destroys the relational, epistemic and institutional conditions that make justice possible.

Keywords: Jungle Justice, Personhood, Ontology, African philosophy, Mob Violence, Restorative Justice.

1. Introduction

A young man is accused of stealing a telephone. Within minutes, a crowd gathers. Nobody asks to see the telephone. Nobody asks whether he was the only person in the room, or whether the accusation might be mistaken, exaggerated, or manufactured to settle an unrelated grudge. The accusation itself becomes certainty, and the certainty becomes a licence. The young man is stripped, beaten, and in many cases killed, often within the same hour in which the accusation was first voiced, and frequently before any police officer, elder, or court has had the opportunity to ask a single question. This is the anatomy of jungle justice in Nigeria, and it repeats itself with grim regularity.

On 26th of July 2026, Ibrahim Mbaya, a 25-year-old graduate of the University of Jos, was tortured and killed at an off-campus

residence in Jos Plateau State, Nigeria, after his friend accused him of stealing an iPhone. The telephone was never recovered from him (allafrica.com, 2026a; Guardian Nigeria, 2026). Three weeks later, on the 15th of August 2026, Professor Ifeanyi Odinye of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State was stripped naked and beaten by a crowd of students after a female student emerged from his office carrying his clothes and alleging attempted sexual assault. A university Special Investigative Panel subsequently confirmed the assault but, after weeks of investigation, could neither establish nor rule out the harassment allegation itself, while separately finding that Odinye had failed to report an act of examination misconduct by the same student, a finding that opened the possibility, still under investigation at the time of writing, that the accusation and the assault were

entangled with a prior, unrelated dispute between accuser and the accused (Vanguard, 2026; The ICIR, 2026a). These two cases, separated by discipline, by the gravity of the underlying allegation, and by the identity of the accused, share a single structure. A person is accused. A crowd assembles. The accusation is treated as though it were already proved. The accused is assaulted or killed before any investigation, let alone any trial, has taken place.

Such episodes are not aberrations. They belong to a documented and escalating national pattern that includes the killing of the "Aluu Four" university students in Rivers State in 2012, the lynching of Deborah Samuel Yakubu over a blasphemy allegation in 2022, and the killing of sixteen travelling hunters wrongly profiled as bandits at Uromi, Edo State, in March 2025 (Amnesty International, 2024; Zikoko, 2026). Amnesty International (2024) has documented 363 incidents of mob violence between January 2012 and August 2023 alone, resulting in at least 555 victims, a figure that independent monitoring suggests has continued to rise in the years since (The ICIR, 2026b).

The recurrence of this pattern presents a philosophical puzzle that runs deeper than questions of policing capacity or judicial delay, questions that are real but insufficient on their own. The puzzle is this: how does a human being, a bearer of moral status simply in virtue of being human, become, in the eyes of a community, an object that may be legitimately destroyed? What has to happen, metaphysically, before a crowd of ordinary people, who would not otherwise regard

themselves as murderers, can set fire to another human being with a clear conscience? The explanation offered in this article is that jungle justice is sustained by an ontological error: it collapses the person into the alleged offence, and it treats an unverified allegation as though it disclosed the whole of what that person is. The suspect, in effect, becomes the crime.

1.1 Thesis Statement and Original Contributions

This article argues that jungle justice in Nigeria enacts an ontological reduction of the human person: it substitutes a single, unverified predicate (the alleged act) for the whole of a person's being, and it treats that substitution as though it settled, once and for all, the question of what the accused deserves. Beyond this diagnostic claim, the article advances two further, closely related original contributions. The first is the concept of the ontological non-disposability of the person: the claim that a person cannot become ontologically disposable merely because they are accused of wrongdoing, and, more strongly, that even a person who has genuinely committed a serious offence does not thereby forfeit the moral status in virtue of which punishment, as opposed to mere destruction, remains conceptually possible. The second is the account of justice as relational preservation: the claim that justice consists not merely in the correct distribution of deserved punishment but in the restoration and preservation of the normative relations that constitute a community, from which it follows that jungle justice fails doubly, whether or not

the accused is guilty. Synthesising these arguments, the article proposes, as its central original thesis, that jungle justice is self-defeating as justice: the community's attempt to restore normative order through the destruction of a person simultaneously destroys the relational, epistemic and institutional conditions that make justice, of any kind, possible.

1.2 Research Questions

This article addresses: (i) what conceptual boundaries distinguish jungle justice from vigilante justice, legitimate self-defence and lawful arrest; (ii) what is the precise ontological structure of the reduction jungle justice performs upon the accused; (iii) whether the moral status protected by the non-disposability thesis depends upon the accused's innocence, or survives even genuine guilt; (iv) whether African communitarian conceptions of personhood license or resist treating an accused person as disposable; (v) what distinguishes mere power from genuine authority to judge and punish; and (vi) what a relational conception of justice implies for the practical and institutional response to jungle justice in Nigeria.

1.3 Aim, Objectives and Methodology

The aim of this article is to provide a rigorous metaphysical framework of jungle justice in Nigeria that complements existing sociological, criminological and legal analyses of the phenomenon, situating that framework explicitly within, and against, the wider scholarly conversation on the subject. Its objectives are to clarify the concept of jungle

justice; to articulate the ontology of personhood it violates; to develop the non-disposability thesis and the relational account of justice as original theoretical contributions; to distinguish authority from mere power; and to synthesise these strands into a single analytical framework. The article proceeds by philosophical argumentation grounded in documented empirical cases, employing conceptual analysis and comparative reading of Western and African traditions rather than quantitative method. Empirical material is drawn from Amnesty International's case data, Nigerian journalism, and Nigerian constitutional provisions, and is used illustratively to ground and test the argument. Primary philosophical sources are read in standard scholarly editions, and African philosophical literature is engaged directly, in order to preserve genuine internal disagreements upon which a central argument of this article depends.

2. Literature Review: Four Conversations on Jungle Justice in Nigeria

Existing scholarship on jungle justice in Nigeria is not a single, homogeneous body of work but at least four partly overlapping conversations, each asking a different question of the same phenomenon. Distinguishing them clearly, rather than blending them into a generic review, is necessary to see precisely where this article's contribution is located.

2.1 The Institutional-Failure Conversation

The dominant conversation in Nigerian criminology and sociology explains jungle justice as a response to institutional

collapse: a distrustful public, confronted with slow courts, corrupt or absent policing, and pervasive impunity, takes the administration of justice into its own hands. Shodunke et al. (2023), examining the nexus between mob justice, human rights violations and the Nigerian state, argue that jungle justice thrives precisely where public distrust of state institutions creates a vacuum that crowds fill with summary judgement. Amnesty International's (2024) landmark report situates the phenomenon similarly, as a symptom of "law enforcement failures." This conversation is empirically indispensable, and this article draws on it throughout, but it is explanatory rather than normative: it tells us why jungle justice occurs, without settling what, precisely, is wrong with it beyond its practical costs.

2.2 The Human Rights and Legal Conversation

A second conversation, conducted largely by human rights organisations and legal scholars, frames jungle justice as a violation of specific, enumerable rights: the right to life, the right to dignity, the right to fair hearing and the presumption of innocence, each protected under Chapter IV of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999, ss. 33, 34, 36). This conversation is doctrinally powerful and practically necessary for litigation and advocacy, but, as Section 6 of this article argues, it is normatively thinner than it appears. A purely rights-based objection identifies boundaries that must not be crossed, without explaining what positive good,

beyond the boundary itself, a lawful response to crime would have achieved.

2.3 The African Philosophical Conversation on Personhood

A third, largely autonomous conversation, conducted within African philosophy, concerns the ontology of personhood as such, independently of jungle justice. Menkiti's (1984) "maximal," processual account of achieved personhood, Gyekye's (1997) moderate communitarianism, Chimakonam's (2018) defence of individual autonomy within Afro-communitarianism, and Ikuenobe's (2016, 2021, 2023) correlative account of communal duties, rights and dignity, together constitute a rich and genuinely unresolved debate over whether community is ontologically prior to the individual. This literature rarely addresses jungle justice directly; where it is invoked in Nigerian public discourse at all, it is often invoked loosely, and sometimes precisely backwards, as though communitarian philosophy licensed the community's judgement over the individual's standing.

2.4 The Missing Conversation: An Ontological Reading, and a Research Gap

What is largely absent across the first three conversations, and this is the specific gap this article addresses, is a sustained ontological reading of jungle justice: an account of the metaphysical structure of what a mob does to a person's being, rather than an account of why mobs act, or which rights they violate, or what personhood consists in as a separate philosophical question. The institutional-

failure literature explains the causes; the human-rights literature names the violations; the African-philosophy literature theorises personhood in the abstract; but none of the three, on its own, explains why jungle justice fails even when every institutional cause is granted its full explanatory weight and even when every relevant right is, for argument's sake, bracketed. This article's central and original claim fills precisely that gap: jungle justice is self-defeating as justice, because the community's attempt to restore normative order through the destruction of a person simultaneously destroys the relational, epistemic and institutional conditions that make justice possible. This claim, developed fully in Sections 5, 6 and 8, does not compete with the institutional-failure or human-rights conversations; rather it supplies the ontological ground that both presuppose but do not themselves articulate. It is also, as Section 4.4 and Section 6 argue, a claim for which a properly developed, rather than a loosely invoked, African relational conception of personhood turns out to be a resource rather than an obstacle. Contrary to a natural first impression, a relational conception of personhood does not weaken the case against jungle justice; properly developed, it makes the case stronger.

3. Jungle Justice in Nigeria: Context and Conceptual Clarification

Before the philosophical argument proceeds further, the central concept must be defined with sufficient precision to withstand the objection that "jungle justice" is a loose, moralised label applied indiscriminately to

any collective response to crime. Not every collective intervention against a suspected offender is jungle justice, and the argument of this article depends on that distinction.

3.1 Conceptual Clarification

Jungle justice, as used here, denotes the summary infliction of punishment, typically beating, torture, mutilation or killing, upon a person suspected of an offence, by a crowd acting spontaneously and without investigation, hearing, or lawful authority to punish (Shodunke et al., 2023). Its defining features are the absence of verification prior to punishment, the compression of accusation and execution into a single event, and the crowd's assumption of a judicial function no member of it individually possesses. Mob justice is used near-interchangeably, though "jungle justice" carries the additional connotation of reversion to a pre-legal condition in which might substitutes for right. Vigilante justice, by contrast, typically involves some organisation, continuity and, in many cases, informal community recognition; it may still be unlawful and excessive, but it is not, by definition, spontaneous or wholly unaccountable, and this is part of what distinguishes its ontological structure from jungle justice's characteristic collapse of deliberative interval. Extrajudicial punishment is the broader genus of which jungle justice is a species.

Two further distinctions guard against conceptual overreach. Legitimate self-defence, reflected in section 33(2)(a) of the 1999 Constitution, permits proportionate force to repel an ongoing unlawful attack; it is not

retrospective or punitive, and ceases when the threat ceases. A crowd that continues to beat a disarmed, restrained suspect minutes after any danger has passed is not exercising self-defence but administering jungle justice. Legitimate arrest, including citizen's arrest under Nigerian criminal procedure, permits a private person to apprehend a suspect and hand them to the police; it does not permit that person, still less an assembled crowd, to try, sentence and punish the suspect themselves. The transition from lawful arrest to jungle justice occurs precisely where restraint gives way to punishment. These distinctions matter because the ontological argument developed below turns on the absence, in jungle justice specifically, of any interval in which the accused's personhood might be attended to, an interval that self-defence and lawful arrest, whatever their other faults, still preserve.

3.2 The Nigerian Evidence

Amnesty International's (2024) report, documented 363 incidents of mob violence between January 2012 and August 2023, involving at least 555 victims, of whom 57 were instantly killed, 32 burnt alive, two buried alive, and 23 tortured to death, including at least thirteen women, six children, and two persons with actual or perceived psychosocial or intellectual disabilities. Crucially, documented incidents occurred across all six of Nigeria's geopolitical zones, with recurring but regionally variable accusatory patterns: theft (telephones, motorcycles, livestock) predominating in many southern and middle-belt cases, including Ibrahim Mbaya's (2026) and the earlier "Aluu Four" (2012); blasphemy

predominating in northern and mixed-faith communities, as with Deborah Samuel Yakubu (2022) and Usman Buda (2023); and witchcraft, disproportionately alleged against older women, recurring in rural communities nationwide, as with Martina Okey Itagbor (2023) (Amnesty International, 2024). The killing of sixteen travelling hunters at Uromi in March 2025, wrongly profiled as kidnappers, illustrates a further variant in which the allegation involves not a specific act but a suspected category of identity (Zikoko, 2026). What unites these heterogeneous cases, cutting across region, religion and the nature of the accusation, is not its content but its treatment. In each case, an accusation, however unverified, however later disproved, as with Ibrahim Mbaya's telephone, never found, or however entangled with an unrelated grievance, as the ongoing UNIZIK investigation into Professor Odinye's case suggests may be true there too, was treated by an assembled crowd as sufficient warrant for the accused's immediate, irreversible destruction. It is this structural feature that the remainder of this article subjects to philosophical analysis.

4. The Ontology of Personhood

4.1 The Human Person as More Than an Alleged Act

The central move performed by a jungle-justice crowd can be stated with logical precision. A person, *P*, is a substance: a persisting bearer of properties, relations, a history and, on most accounts, a capacity for reason and moral agency. An alleged act, *A*, is at most one predicate that might, if verified, be

truly asserted of P: "P did A." Jungle justice infers, from "P is alleged to have done A," that "P simply is A," and hence that "P may be treated exactly as A, and nothing else, warrants." This inference is invalid on two independent grounds. Aristotle's *Categories* distinguishes substance, that which exists in its own right, from accident, that which exists only as a modification of substance (Aristotle, trans. 1984); a crime, even a proven one, is an accident of the person who commits it, not identical with that person. The more general mere logical or part-whole fallacy, related to the classical fallacy of division and to the rhetorical figure of *pars pro toto*, names the same structure differently: a part of a person's biography, frequently an unverified and false part, is made to stand for, and to license action against, the whole of that person's being (Fallacies Online, n.d.). The ordinary intuition that a person "is more than the worst thing they have done" is not merely a plea for mercy but a correction of a category error; the article's title names exactly this collapse, the becoming, in the crowd's eyes, of a substance into one of its alleged accidents.

4.2 Personhood and Moral Status

Kant's formula of humanity holds that a rational being must never be treated "merely as a means" but always "at the same time as an end" (Kant, trans. 1997). On this view, jungle justice's wrong is not only that it may punish the innocent, but that it treats the accused, guilty or not, as a mere instrument for the crowd's catharsis or deterrent signalling, never as a being whose own standing to explain, defend and be judged is consulted. Locke's

discussion of personal identity ties personhood to the continuity of consciousness across time, a continuity that grounds both moral responsibility and the very possibility of just punishment, since punishment presupposes that the person punished is the same person who acted (Locke, ed. 1975). Jungle justice's own logic requires this continuity while denying the accused the deliberative interval, investigation, defence, appeal, through which the correctness of that identification could ever be verified.

4.3 African Communal Personhood

Ifeanyi Menkiti's "Person and Community in African Traditional Thought" argues that African conceptions of personhood are "maximal" rather than "minimal". Personhood is achieved through "a long process of social and ritual transformation" by which an individual, initially a "mere dangler," becomes incorporated into community and thereby attains the "full complement of excellencies" (Menkiti, 1984, 171). On this processual view, "it is the community which defines the person as person," and personhood is "something at which individuals could fail" (Menkiti, 1984, pp. 172–173), a view often summarised in Mbiti's maxim, "I am because we are" (cited in Bayuo et al., 2025).

4.4 Menkiti, Gyekye and Ikuenobe: A Contested Terrain, and Its Strategic Value

It would misrepresent African philosophy, and weaken rather than strengthen this article's argument, to present it as speaking with one voice on the relationship between individual and community. Gyekye's (1997)

"moderate communitarianism" accepts the social constitution of much of what makes a good life possible while insisting that individuals retain autonomy and rights not reducible to communal grant. Chimakonam (2018) presses the debate further, asking whether individual autonomy and rights can be coherently defended within Afro-communitarianism at all. Ikuenobe occupies an instructive middle position: African communalism grants a Menkitian "priority of duties" without denying substantive individual rights, since duties and rights are correlative, and communal structures exist substantially in order to secure the conditions under which individual dignity can be actualised (Ikuenobe, 2021, 421–422). Ikuenobe's (2016) account of moral dignity as communally grounded but not communally exhausted, and his (2023) account of communal punishment, which requires that punishment respect the dignity of the person punished, follow communal deliberation, and remain proportionate and corrective rather than annihilating, are especially pertinent (Ikuenobe, 2016, 437–438; 2023, 43–46).

This internal debate strengthens rather than embarrasses the present argument. If one adopts Menkiti's strong, processual communitarianism, jungle justice fails on Menkiti's own terms: it substitutes an instantaneous, unverified accusation for the patient, communally supervised process of moral demonstration his account requires before any judgement about personhood can properly be rendered; a crowd cannot, in minutes, perform an office Menkiti reserves for a lifetime of communal discernment, and even his account treats the community's

authority to judge as a normative, structured process, not a spontaneous seizure of judgement. If one adopts Gyekye's moderate communitarianism, or Ikuenobe's correlative account, jungle justice fails still more directly, since these hold that individuals possess rights, including at minimum the right to be heard, that no communal process may simply override (Ikuenobe, 2023). Whichever horn of this unresolved debate one takes, neither licenses treating an accused person as ontologically disposable. This is a more modest, and for that reason more defensible, claim than the assertion that African philosophy uniformly condemns jungle justice; it is also argumentatively stronger, since it does not depend on resolving the underlying debate.

5. The Ontological Non-Disposability of the Person

5.1 Beyond the Question of Innocence

The previous section argued that jungle justice performs an illicit inference from accusation to identity. That argument, however, leaves an important question unanswered, one that a sceptical reader is entitled to press: what if the accused really did do it? Is the wrongness of jungle justice merely a function of the epistemic risk that an innocent person might be destroyed, so that a mob which happened, by chance, to seize the actually guilty party would have done nothing philosophically objectionable, only something procedurally irregular? This article's answer is no, and the argument for that answer is this section's original contribution: the ontological non-disposability of the person. The claim is

not that everyone accused of crime is innocent; that empirical claim would be false, and irrelevant to the deeper point. The claim is that even a person who has genuinely committed a serious offence remains a person, and that this residual, ineliminable status is precisely what makes punishment, as distinct from mere destruction, conceptually available as a response to wrongdoing in the first place.

5.2 Responsibility Presupposes, Rather Than Cancels, Personhood

The argument turns on an asymmetry between the concepts of accountability and disposability that is easily overlooked. To hold someone accountable, to blame them, to demand an explanation, to punish them, is already to treat them as a certain kind of being: one capable of understanding a moral demand, of having failed to meet it, and of being addressed about that failure. P. F. Strawson's (1962) influential analysis of the "reactive attitudes," resentment, indignation, gratitude, forgiveness, argues that these attitudes, and the practices of holding responsible that they constitute, belong to our participation in personal and social relationships with other agents whom we regard as fellow participants in a moral community. Strawson contrasts this "participant" stance with the "objective attitude," the stance we take toward something to be managed, treated, avoided or, in the limiting case, neutralised or eliminated, a stance appropriate to a dangerous animal, a malfunctioning machine, or a person whose derangement places them, in this respect, outside the moral community altogether (Strawson, 1962, 9–11).

The crucial point for present purposes is this: wrongdoing, however serious, does not by itself move a person from the participant stance to the objective stance. On the contrary, it is only from within the participant stance, only by continuing to regard the offender as a responsible fellow member of the moral community, that resentment, blame, and, ultimately, punishment make sense at all. A community that responds to an accusation by adopting wholesale the objective attitude, treating the accused as a dangerous object to be eliminated rather than a responsible agent to be held to account, has not intensified its moral response to wrongdoing; it has stepped outside the very practice of holding responsible in which any moral response to wrongdoing consists of.

This point can be sharpened with Kant's retributive theory of punishment, developed in *The Metaphysics of Morals*. For Kant, to punish a wrongdoer according to law is precisely to honour them as a rational, self-legislating agent, capable of having willed a maxim and of being held to the consequences of having willed it. Kant's often-misread insistence on retribution is, at bottom, an insistence that punishment must track desert precisely because the wrongdoer is a person, not a thing to be managed for social convenience (Kant, trans. 1996). Kant's retributivism and Strawson's participant/objective distinction converge on the same structural point from different directions: punishment, properly conceived, is not the negation of personhood but an institution that presupposes it, indeed that honours it, since only a being capable of

responsible agency can be a proper object of the specific kind of moral address that punishment, as opposed to mere disposal, constitutes.

5.3 Punishment Cannot Be Conceptually Reduced to Destruction

From the above, the central conceptual claim of the non-disposability thesis follows. Punishment, in the sense relevant to justice, is not simply the infliction of suffering upon a wrongdoer. It is the infliction of a specific kind of burden, communicated to and, in principle, comprehensible by, a surviving responsible subject, as a response to a wrong that subject is held to have committed (a point that will be developed further, from a different angle, in the next Section). Destruction, by contrast, eliminates the very subject to whom punishment, on this understanding, must be addressed. It follows that killing or torturing a suspect is not an extreme or excessive form of punishment; it is not a species of punishment undergoing degree at all. It is a different kind of act altogether, one that forecloses, rather than executes, the moral relation that punishment presupposes. This is why the language mob participants themselves frequently use, describing their act as "giving him what he deserves," or as a rough species of justice, is not merely euphemistic but conceptually confused in a precise sense. It borrows the vocabulary of desert and punishment for an act that has already exited the space in which desert and punishment can intelligibly operate, because it has eliminated the very party who would need to survive in order to be, in Strawson's sense, addressed.

5.4 The Ontological Floor

The upshot is what this article terms the ontological floor beneath which no accusation, and no degree of actual guilt, can push a person. The status of being a 'being' to whom moral addresses, and therefore accountability, and therefore, where warranted, punishment, remains conceptually possible. Guilt changes a great deal about what a person may justly be made to bear; it does not, and by the argument above cannot, remove the floor itself, since removing it would remove the very possibility of the person being justly made to bear anything at all, collapsing punishment into indistinguishable destruction. The ontological non-disposability of the person is, in this context, not a generous concession to the accused, still less a claim that accusations should never be believed or acted upon. It is a conceptual precondition of there being any such thing as justice, rather than mere violence, available as a response to crime in the first place. Jungle justice, whatever its participants believe themselves to be doing, does not administer a harsher justice than the courts would allow; by destroying the subject punishment requires, it exits the space of justice altogether.

6. Justice as Relational Preservation

6.1 Beyond Distribution and Beyond Rights

The two most familiar ways of explaining what is wrong with jungle justice are, respectively, retributive and rights-based. The retributive objection holds that jungle justice distributes punishment incorrectly, disproportionately, or without adequate

evidence of desert. The rights-based objection, canvassed in Section 2.2, holds that justice crosses boundaries, the right to life, to dignity, to fair hearing, that no collective anger may permissibly cross. Both objections are true, and neither is this article's central argument, because both remain, in a specific sense, individualistic: both assess the wrong done to one person, considered largely in isolation from the community of which that person is a part. This section develops a third, explicitly relational account: justice as relational preservation, the claim that justice consists not merely in the correct distribution of deserved punishment, nor merely in respecting individual rights as side-constraints, but in the restoration and preservation of the normative relations, of trust, mutual accountability and recognition, that constitute a community as a community rather than a mere aggregate of mutually wary individuals.

This relational conception has resources in both Western and African thought. Nils Christie's (1977) influential argument that "conflicts are property" holds that a wrong done is, before anything else, a rupture in a relationship belonging to those involved, victim, offender and their community, a rupture that professionalised, summary or purely punitive responses tend to "steal" from the parties rather than help them resolve (Christie, 1977, 1–3). R. A. Duff's (2001) communicative theory of punishment develops the same relational insight from the perspective of the offender. Punishment, on Duff's account, is properly understood as a communicative process, addressed to a

responsible member of the political community, calling that member to recognise and repent a wrong, with a view to their eventual reconciliation with, rather than permanent exile from, that community (Duff, 2001). Both accounts converge with Ikuenobe's (2023) African communal account of punishment, on which punishment compatible with communal dignity must itself preserve the possibility of the offender's continued, if chastened, place within the community (Ikuenobe, 2023, pp. 43–46).

6.2 The Argument

The positive argument can be stated formally.

Premise One: Persons exist and flourish through relationships; personhood is realised, sustained and enriched through relations of recognition, obligation, care and mutual accountability with other persons (Menkiti, 1984; Ikuenobe, 2016, 2021).

Premise Two: Community is constituted, not merely populated, by such relationships; a community is just a structured web of relationships among persons who recognise one another as persons, bearing duties and, correlatively, entitled to consideration (Ikuenobe, 2021, 422).

Premise Three: The destruction of a person, or their treatment as ontologically disposable, through arbitrary and unverified collective violence, damages the relational conditions that constitute community. It withdraws recognition from the destroyed person, demonstrates to every other member that their own standing is equally contingent upon whichever crowd happens to assemble,

and substitutes fear for the recognition and accountability identified in Premise One as constitutive of communal flourishing.

Conclusion: A community cannot authentically preserve or defend itself through practices that negate the personhood of its own members; jungle justice, whatever short-term catharsis it offers, is an act of communal self-erosion, not communal self-preservation.

6.3 The Double Failure, and the Distinction from Rights-Based Objections

The relational account, unlike the rights-based objection, explains why jungle justice fails even when the accused is guilty, which is the crucial respect in which it is distinguished from, and goes beyond, a purely rights-based framework. A rights-based objection, taken to its logical limit, is largely silenced once guilt is stipulated. If the accused truly did commit the offence, talk of a violated right to fair hearing can seem to name only a procedural technicality that a correct outcome, reached by the wrong method, has rendered moot. The relational account yields a different and stronger verdict. On this view, jungle justice fails twice over, and the second failure survives the stipulation of guilt. First, it may harm an innocent person, severing a relation of recognition and trust for no cause at all, the failure the rights-based objection already captures. Second, and independently, even where the accused is genuinely guilty, mob killing destroys the possibility of a procedurally legitimate and socially restorative response, precisely the response through which the ruptured relationship, between offender and victim, and between

offender and community, might have been addressed, and through which the community itself might have learned something about the conditions that produced the offence.

Killing forecloses confession, restitution, reconciliation and reintegration outright; it does not even secure proportionate retribution, since it is inflicted by parties with no authority to judge proportion. The mob's violence, in other words, is not a shortcut to the same destination the courts would have reached by a slower road; it is the permanent foreclosure of every relationally restorative destination available. This is precisely why the article's central thesis, stated in Sections 1 and 2, holds without equivocation that jungle justice is self-defeating as justice. This is because the community's own attempt to restore normative order through the destruction of a person simultaneously destroys the relational, epistemic and institutional conditions. The conditions can be likened to Christie and Duff's, where each show that a legitimate process alone can secure and make justice, of any kind whatsoever, possible.

6.4 Why Relational Personhood Strengthens, Rather Than Weakens, the Case

A natural objection now presents itself, one already anticipated in Section 4.4. If personhood, on Menkiti's (1984) strong reading, is achieved and communally conferred, does this not imply that community may also, in the appropriate circumstances, withdraw or suspend it, so that the relational conception of personhood, far from opposing

jungle justice, actually supplies its licence? This article's African philosophical contribution is to show that this inference is precisely backwards. Genuine relationality, on the more careful readings offered by Gyekye (1997) and Ikuenobe (2016, 2021), is not a power the community wields unilaterally over the individual. Instead, it is a structure of reciprocal recognition and obligation, in which the community's own standing to judge is itself relationally, not unilaterally, constituted, exactly as the next will argue regarding authority more generally.

A community that revokes personhood by fiat, without process, has not exercised relational authority; it has abandoned relationality for domination, since domination is precisely what one-sided, non-reciprocal power over another person's standing amounts to. Properly developed, then, a relational conception of personhood does not weaken the case against jungle justice; it strengthens it, because it is exactly the relational bonds, of mutual recognition, obligation and accountability that jungle justice claims to be defending, that its own arbitrary violence is what most directly destroys.

7. The Ontology of Authority

The three previous sections of this paper establish that jungle justice performs an unwarranted reduction of the person and is self-undermining as an act of communal preservation. A further question concerns the crowd itself: what could entitle any person or body to judge and punish another? This section argues for a single proposition: the mere capacity to exercise violence does not, by

itself, generate the authority to administer justice.

Thomas Hobbes held that in the absence of a common power capable of enforcing agreements, force and fraud become the two "cardinal virtues" of a state of nature, a war of every man against every man (Hobbes, ed. 1996). Judgement and punishment, Hobbes says, comes from the covenant as individuals and communities give up their private power to judge and punish to a sovereign, so that they can avoid an endless cycle of private judgements and punishments. The words jungle justice in the context in which they are being used are not those of an alternative order, but rather a momentary descent into, and foreshadowing of, a state of nature, packaged and dressed up in words of justice.

John Locke's *Second Treatise* clarifies this further--even in the state of nature, people have the executive power to "punish" but an impartial individual in his or her own case or in inflamed cases is a biased judge, and that is the purpose of civil society: to remove people's role of judging for themselves and to entrust it to settled establishments. The image of the biased judge that Locke was mindful of in his mind is exemplified in a crowd, "fanned with rumour and the flaring war goal of public accusation."

In his sociological work on domination, Marx Weber distinguished between three 'pure types of legitimate authority' – namely traditional authority, based on custom, charismatic authority, based on exceptional personal qualities, and legal-rational authority, based on the belief in the legality of enacted rules and the right of those

who are elevated under the authority of these rules to command (trans.). 1978). There is no assembly of the people that has these characteristics: they act contrary, rather than in place of, the established rules of the game; they have not got a recognised charismatic position to call on—they do not have any laws that make anything they assemble itself as a court of law. What a crowd has is a force that is combined together in the physical form and not in the form of authority in any of Weber's three meanings.

On Violence by Hannah Arendt gives the best formulation. On its own, power is the absence of humans; but it does come into existence "as long as people act together" – it requires consent, it requires legitimacy, it requires the capacity even to operate together as human beings for a common and recognised end. But violence, on the other hand, serves a purpose, needs tools and arises exactly because of the lack of authority and power (Arendt 1970). Power and violence are at a semantic distance from each other; and while violence can undermine power, it can never produce it; indeed, the act of choosing to resort to violence shows absence of institutional respect for this power which is deeming the crowd to have.

A jurisprudential improvement is added by H.L.A Hart's concept of law: the rule of law is based on the existence of secondary rules, particularly of a "rule of recognition" that is, an agreement among a community as to which primary rules and which officials are authoritative; that is, they recognize some rules and reject others (Hart 1961: 74-81). It is not to say that a crowd can (or should) pretend

to be his own rule of recognition, but it is to say that a crowd cannot be his own rule of recognition in the moment, and can only, illegitimately, assume, on his own, the appearance of the rule of recognition, which it mimics when it mimics law, namely the appearance of judgement and sentence, and the apparent or brittle authority of the legality it then poses.

These are the resources which converge with Nigerian constitutional theory. The Constitution guarantees the right to life (schedule 4, section 33(1)) which only permits that one's life could be taken, in execution of the sentence of a court in respect of a criminal offence of which he is found guilty. Dignity and no tolerance of torture are guaranteed under section 34, and fair hearing, presumption of innocence until a court or a tribunal finds someone guilty under section 36 and 36(5) of the Constitution of FRN, 1999 (cfr. Article 19 soon). 33, 34, 36). In positive law they are just the proposition which is described in the immediately preceding pages, and also that which is challenged here. That is, collective anger that is merely protest against a failed justice system is no substitute for the process required by that judgement and punishment if it is to be institutionalized and authorised. Both in Arendt's meaning—and in Weber's and Hart's—they are not derived from power: for both these are what force poises when it occupies their pragmatic place.

8. Jungle Justice as an Ontological Error: The Fourfold Ontological Reduction

The preceding sections have argued, from four converging directions, personhood,

non-disposability, relational justice and authority, that jungle justice is indefensible. This section draws these strands into a single original framework, the Fourfold Ontological Reduction of Jungle Justice, comprising four distinct, tightly interlocking distortions.

A. The Epistemic Distortion: Suspicion Becoming Knowledge. An allegation is, by its logical nature, defeasible. Jungle justice erases this defeasibility at the moment of utterance: the accusation is treated, instantly, as already established knowledge. Amnesty International's documentation of cases in which the underlying allegation was subsequently shown to be false or entangled with an unrelated dispute, Ibrahim Mbaya's telephone, never found; Usman Buda's blasphemy accusation, later traced to a market dispute; Professor Odinye's case, in which the university panel's preliminary findings suggest a prior, unrelated examination-misconduct grievance, demonstrates that this distortion is structural, not accidental (Amnesty International, 2024; Vanguard, 2026).

B. The Personal Distortion: A Person Becoming an Offence. As elaborated fully in Section 4, this is the collapse of substance into accident: the person is replaced, for the duration of the assault, by the single predicate alleged of them.

C. The Political Distortion: The Crowd Becoming Sovereign Judge. Elaborated in Section 7, the crowd assumes a standing to judge and sentence that no quantity of numbers

or anger can confer, a usurpation not merely of a legal office but of an entire ontological category, that of entities capable of bearing judicial authority.

D. The Juridical Distortion: Violence Becoming Justice. The crowd does not experience itself as murdering but as executing a sentence. This is the most dangerous distortion, because it forecloses the moral self-correction that recognising an act as mere violence would otherwise prompt.

These four distortions are mutually reinforcing: A licenses B, B supplies the target C presumes standing to judge, and C supplies the pseudo-legitimacy that lets D reclassify violence as justice, foreclosing the hesitation that might have allowed A to be corrected. The framework developed in Sections 5 and 6 of this article adds a fifth, synthesising observation that the Fourfold Reduction alone does not fully capture: even where distortions A through D are somehow avoided, where the allegation happens to be true, the crowd happens to identify the actual offender, and the community's anger happens to be proportionate, jungle justice remains self-defeating, because the ontological non-disposability of the person means that what the crowd inflicts still cannot count as punishment rather than destruction, and because justice as relational preservation means that the relational, epistemic and institutional conditions for any restorative response are destroyed along with the person. This is the precise sense in which this article's central thesis exceeds a catalogue of distortions. Jungle justice is not simply four ways of

getting the case wrong; it is, even in the counterfactual case where the crowd gets everything right, a structure that consumes the very possibility of justice in the act of pursuing it.

9. Implications and Conclusion

The analysis has implications which extend beyond the philosophical argument. The propositions defended here are institutional expressions of Nigeria's obligations under Sustainable Development Goal 16 of the United Nations which pledges states to promote peaceful, inclusive societies, "make access to justice for all" and build effective and accountable institutions. In other words, everyone is entitled to a reasoned appraisal, everyone has a right to not lose their personhood to an accusation, and the community is harmed by the random use of violence against its own citizens (the United Nations, 2015).

Three implications follow. Public legal education should make this distinction economically loud and clear; often popular acceptance of mob action robs itself of this distinction and sees no distinction between legitimate self-defence and lawful arrest and jungle justice. Second, policing and judicial reform address primarily the epistemic and juridical distortions (A and D); they are necessary but insufficient, since the personal and political distortions (B and C), and the deeper failures identified by the non-disposability and relational-preservation theses, are ontological and moral failures institutional reform alone cannot correct. Third, civic and moral education, in schools,

religious institutions and traditional structures of authority, has an indispensable role in cultivating the recognition that no accusation, and no proven guilt, ever renders a person disposable, and that a community which destroys its own members' personhood erodes rather than defends the relational fabric that makes it a community.

Apparently, this article has argued that jungle justice in Nigeria is an ontological error, the reduction of a person to a single, frequently unverified, alleged act. Engaging four distinct scholarly conversations, institutional-failure, human-rights, African-philosophical and, the gap this article fills is 'ontological. It has shown that this reduction survives neither Menkiti's demanding account of achieved personhood nor Gyekye's and Ikuenobe's more moderate, rights-inclusive accounts. It has developed the ontological non-disposability of the person, showing that punishment cannot be conceptually reduced to destruction even where guilt is real, and justice as relational preservation, showing that jungle justice fails doubly, whether or not the accused is guilty. It has distinguished mere power from genuine authority, and shown that Nigerian constitutional law encodes exactly that distinction. Finally, it has synthesised these arguments into the Fourfold Ontological Reduction and its capstone claim that jungle justice is self-defeating as justice, because the community's attempt to restore normative order through the destruction of a person simultaneously destroys the relational, epistemic and institutional conditions that make justice, of any kind, possible. Ibrahim Mbaya, Deborah Samuel Yakubu, the Aluu

Four, Professor Odinye, and the sixteen travellers of Uromi and many other victims are, in this context, not simply victims of a broken system; they are evidence that in Nigeria today, a suspect can still, in the eyes of a crowd, become the crime, and that the crowd, in making them so, defeats the very justice it believes itself to serve.

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