

Journal of Somali Studies (JoSS)

Research on Somalia and the Greater Horn of African
Countries

Indexed by: SCOPUS, IBSS, EBSCO, COPENICUS, ProQuest, J-Gate and
SABINET

Volume 13, (Number 1), April, 2026

Pp 109-124

Cultural Syncretism and Crime: Exploring the Blending of Indigenous Practices and Modern Criminality in Uganda

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31920/2056-5682/2026/v13n1a6>

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Abstract

The article explores how traditional beliefs and modern criminal behaviour interconnect in Uganda through a process known as cultural syncretism. In many communities, people still rely on ancestral rituals, spiritual practices, and customary justice, even though they engage with formal laws and modern institutions. Sometimes, this blending creates harmony. Other times, it leads to confusion, conflict, or serious crimes like ritual sacrifice. Using the theory of legal pluralism, the article examines how indigenous systems and state laws coexist and sometimes diverge in opinions. It draws on secondary data, including academic studies, legal reports, news articles, and government publications. Four major issues are discussed: colonial-era laws that criminalise traditional practices; the rise of ritual crimes such as child sacrifice; the ongoing use of reconciliation rituals like *Mato Oput*; and the role of vigilantes in community justice. The findings show that cultural beliefs remain strong, shaping how people commit, understand, and

respond to crimes. While modern laws may punish harmful traditional practices, they often fail to engage with the cultural norms behind them. The article calls for a more balanced approach that protects human rights while respecting Uganda's rich cultural heritage. The recommendations include legal reform; stronger enforcement of new laws; better community-police partnerships; public education, and the inclusion of traditional leaders in crime prevention. The study highlights the need for policies that work with, not against, local cultures in the fight against crime.

Keywords: *Cultural syncretism, Legal pluralism, Ritual crime, Traditional justice, Vigilantism, Witchcraft*

Introduction

Human societies are built on culture; furthermore, culture, like people, evolves. As communities come into contact with different traditions, beliefs, and institutions, they often blend old ways with new ones (Jensen, 2021), a process known as cultural syncretism. This blending is most visible in religion, language, clothing, and food, but it also plays a powerful role in how societies understand and respond to crime (Block, 2018). In many parts of Africa, people live with a mixture of belief systems: indigenous customs passed down through generations, formal state institutions introduced by colonial powers, and global ideas spread through religion, education, and media. This mix can lead to harmony, but it can also create confusion, contradictions, and conflict.

A country of over 50 ethnic groups and deep historical traditions (Roy, 2024), Uganda today operates with a complex legal and moral order. On one hand, it has a formal criminal justice system modelled after British colonial structures, complete with police, judiciary and written laws (Ajah et al., 2025). On the other hand, many Ugandans continue to rely on customary justice, traditional healers, ancestral rituals, and spiritual beliefs to address wrongdoing (Waldorf, 2020). Everyday life incorporates these indigenous systems without hiding them. From village disputes to national politics, the boundaries between culture and crime, custom and law, frequently become blurred. What emerges is a unique form of cultural syncretism, where indigenous practices are not simply pushed aside but are adapted, revived, or reinterpreted in modern contexts.

This is especially true in matters involving crime and punishment. For instance, people may commit crimes like fraud or even murder with the belief that traditional rituals will protect them from consequences. In other

cases, communities bypass the police altogether and rely on elders or vigilantes to discipline wrongdoers (Innocent, 2023). Still others combine church teachings with traditional charms or use prayers and sacrifices for protection or revenge (Quinn, 2010). In all these examples, we see modern criminality and ancestral beliefs intertwining. This blending is not always peaceful or accepted. Sometimes, it leads to ritual killings, such as child sacrifice, rooted in ancient beliefs but driven by modern desires for wealth and power (Ajah et al., 2026; Bukuluki et al., 2018). Sometimes, it creates legal conflict, as when traditional healing is prosecuted under colonial-era witchcraft laws still in force. And sometimes, it causes tensions between formal institutions and community justice systems, where state courts and police may be considered distant, corrupt, or untrustworthy (Scharbatke-Church & Chigas, 2019), while local systems may be viewed as more accessible, legitimate, or spiritually binding.

The article explores these tensions and interactions. The purpose is not to condemn tradition or glorify the past but to understand how Uganda's criminal landscape is shaped by both heritage and change. By analysing the following core issues: (1) the clash between colonial-era laws and indigenous beliefs; (2) the persistence of ritual crimes like human sacrifice; (3) the use of traditional justice systems like reconciliation ceremonies; and (4) the role of vigilantes and community enforcement, the study aims to show how cultural syncretism influences both the practice of crime and the responses to it. The article draws on the theory of legal pluralism, which recognises that more than one set of rules can exist within a society. It uses a qualitative approach based on secondary data—analyzing laws, academic research, reports, and news sources. It asks: how does Uganda's unique blend of tradition and modernity shape crime and justice? And what can be done to protect rights, ensure safety, and respect culture in such a complex setting?

Theoretical Framework

Legal pluralism provides a robust perspective for the study. John Griffiths (1986) introduced legal pluralism to describe societies where more than one legal or normative system operates simultaneously. In other words, people often follow state law while also respecting customary rules, religious laws, or traditional dispute systems. Legal pluralism recognises that customary and state laws can coexist, even in the same community (Griffiths, 1986). In Uganda, this means colonial-era laws and Uganda's criminal code operate alongside traditional practices and beliefs. Applying

legal pluralism to Uganda helps explain many dynamics. For instance, Griffiths notes that legal pluralism recognises the normative authority of non-state systems, like customary law, religious law, and dispute mechanisms that are community-based. This information is directly relevant to this study. In Uganda, an accused criminal might simultaneously invoke a customary ritual and also face the modern courts. Policing and courts are relatively recent imports, but traditional authorities and beliefs have deep roots. The theory suggests that these systems interact and sometimes conflict. It predicts, for example, that people may choose informal traditional remedies for certain crimes and later involve state courts if needed.

A major weakness of purely legal-pluralist thinking is that it can understate power imbalances. In practice, formal state law often dominates indigenous systems. The colonial and post-colonial governments have treated many indigenous beliefs as inferior or even criminal. For example, the colonial Witchcraft Act, which still exists, criminalises traditional healing practices (Kabumba, 2023). As Kafeero (2023) notes, the Witchcraft Act was introduced by colonial rulers to suppress indigenous customs, and its language is stained with the political considerations of the colonial state. This law continues to conflict with constitutional rights to religion and culture in modern Uganda. Thus, one weakness of legal pluralism here is that it may romanticise coexistence without addressing the fact that one "legal order" (the state) often overrides another (custom). This tension shapes our study: it means we must examine not only how systems coexist but also how one can marginalise the other. Therefore, this study uses legal pluralism (Griffiths, 1986) as its main theoretical framework. It highlights how Uganda's multiple normative systems interact. That framework is tied to the case because Uganda features overlapping formal and customary laws.

Methodology

The article follows a qualitative case-study design based on secondary data. It draws on existing sources. These include scholarly articles, legal analyses, news reports, organisational studies, and relevant official documents. Data were gathered from academic databases (e.g., JSTOR, Google Scholar), NGO reports, government publications, and reputable media outlets (Onah et al., 2024; Osadebe et al., 2024; Onyegbu et al., 2024; Chinweze et al., 2024; Ajah & Magadze, 2026). For example, statistics on crimes like

human sacrifice come from news agencies and reports. Details on laws and indigenous justice come from legal journals and NGOs.

For each substantive issue, the research relied on a range of documents. Laws and court cases were reviewed to understand the formal legal context (e.g., the Witchcraft Act and child sacrifice laws). Anthropological and news accounts were used to document local beliefs and practices. The comparison of multiple sources enabled the study to triangulate information. This approach guarantees that multiple types of evidence support claims, such as the prevalence of certain rituals. Where available, NGO field reports provided context on community attitudes.

The data analysis employed thematic content analysis methods. Collected texts were coded for themes related to culture and crime, such as witchcraft, ritual sacrifice, traditional justice, and vigilantism. From these codes, four main issues emerged (see below). For instance, multiple sources discussed witchcraft laws, so that became one theme. Others repeatedly mentioned human sacrifice or community policing. The analysis focused on how each theme illustrates a blending of tradition and modernity. For example, the theme of “traditional justice” was analysed by comparing descriptions of the Acholi reconciliation ritual *Mato Oput* with the state’s criminal justice process.

This qualitative design is appropriate because the goal is to explore and interpret complex cultural phenomena, not to measure them quantitatively. The study uses secondary data to draw upon existing detailed accounts instead of starting from the beginning (Ajah & Magadze, 2026; Ilo et al., 2025; Anierobi et al., 2024; Obasi et al., 2024; Ugwuoke, Ajah & Onyejebu, 2020). All sources are from recent years, which ensured relevance. Classical references (like Griffiths, 1986) are used only for theory. The next sections present substantive issues found through this methodology.

1. Colonial Laws versus Indigenous Beliefs

A key issue is how old colonial laws clash with living traditions. Uganda still enforces the 1957 Witchcraft Act (inherited from colonial times), which criminalises many indigenous practices. Under this law, practices labelled as “witchcraft” can be punished, though what exactly counts as a crime is vague. Scholars argue this law is unconstitutional today. For example, experts note that the Witchcraft Act “stands in direct contradiction to numerous constitutional guarantees, including freedom of religion and culture” (Kafeero, 2023; Lubogo, 2022; Solomon, 2020).

Kafeero (2023) explains that the law was originally a tool to control resistance against colonial rule. Thus, the law reflects colonial bias: it treated traditional healers and spiritual practices as criminal.

This tension shows cultural syncretism at work. On one hand, most Ugandans follow Christianity or Islam publicly (Ward, 2015). On the other hand, many privately hold traditional beliefs (Mwaka et al., 2021). Still, the old law threatens those beliefs. Today, courts in Uganda don't use the Witchcraft Act as harshly as they used to, but it still exists. Critics argue the law should be repealed to respect cultural rights (de Silva de Alwis, 2024; Kabumba, 2023). Meanwhile, some people labelled as “witches” are prosecuted under it, while others simply ignore it by blending beliefs. For example, Harding (2023) observed that many Christians quietly maintain ancestral shrines at home. Christian leaders warn that mixing church teaching and ancestral worship is problematic. Nevertheless, some churchgoers admit they still use amulets or prayers from traditional healers (Muhumuza, 2025). The persistence of these practices shows cultural syncretism: people have not abandoned their traditions even under an unfriendly law.

This issue reflects the weakness of legal pluralism noted above. The state law claims authority over belief, but indigenous culture remains resilient. The colonial law marginalises traditional religions, even though they are widespread. In practice, the legislation creates legal grey zones. For example, if a crime is linked to “witchcraft”, villagers might handle it themselves. Meanwhile, activists have pushed the government to repeal or revise the Act. In late 2023, Ugandan media reported calls to annul the law as part of decolonising the legal system (Kafeero, 2023). Until then, however, the law remains a symbol of tension between imported legal concepts and enduring local customs.

2. Ritual Crimes and Superstitions

Another issue is the rise of so-called ritual or occult crimes. Recently, Uganda has seen a surge of shocking incidents linked to traditional beliefs (Meinert & Whyte, 2020). The most notorious ritual is human sacrifice. Police records and media reports document hundreds of cases where people killed others (often children) to perform rituals for wealth or success. For example, one report shows Uganda recorded 22 ritual sacrifices in 2019, 45 in 2020, and 65 in 2021 (Olukya, 2022). Most victims were children, considered “pure” and thus powerful offerings. Police accounts show that witchdoctors or traditional healers often advised

clients to commit these crimes (Olukya, 2022). Police say business people or individuals paid for sacrifices to bring good luck (Roberts, 2019). These ritual crimes blend modern motives with ancient beliefs. The desire for money or success is a modern goal, but the means come from tradition. Child sacrifice in Uganda is grounded in the belief that spilt blood will appease spirits and confer power. A child sacrifice is thought to “bring health, wealth and good fortune” because children are “pure” (Children on the Edge, 2024). This belief is centuries old, but its victims and perpetrators now live in cities and towns. News stories often describe how accused “witchdoctors” lure clients with promises of easy blessings. The contrast is striking – individuals driven by today’s economy still turn to ancestral rituals.

Communities are alarmed by these crimes. Villagers sometimes respond with mob violence, bypassing courts. For instance, when police discovered a headless 5-year-old's body in a witchdoctor's land in the eastern district of Bugiri, enraged locals immediately beat the accused healer to death (Olukya, 2022). This extrajudicial response is itself a fusion of tradition and contemporary justice. People felt ancestral anger justified taking action outside the modern legal system. Authorities have since enacted stronger laws, like the 2021 Human Sacrifice Act, which imposes harsh penalties. But officials acknowledge that superstition still drives these crimes. As one police leader noted, even though the law now mandates death sentences for human sacrifice, “the weird practice continues unabated” in rural areas where beliefs remain strong (Human Sacrifice Act, 2021).

Other ritual crimes occur too. People have reported stealing body parts for amulets and paying for “love charms” that promise to win a spouse (Olukya, 2022). Newspapers and NGOs warn of traffickers using witchcraft to control victims (Nagle & Owasanoye, 2015). These sensitive and sometimes sensationalised topics demonstrate the misuse of cultural beliefs. Criminals may exploit social superstitions to manipulate victims or intimidate communities. In each case, the crime itself (rape, murder, trafficking) is modern, but the cover story involves invoking spirits or curses. This syncretism makes detection harder, as police must navigate local beliefs when investigating.

3. Traditional Justice and Reconciliation

Many Ugandans still use indigenous justice rituals alongside formal courts. One well-known example is the Acholi *Mato Oput* ceremony. Acholi elders

created this elaborate reconciliation rite after a killing. They believe that shedding human blood is religiously dangerous; it must be atoned for so spirits do not cause communal harm (Mwaka & Obol, 2023). In traditional practice, if someone commits homicide, the victim's clan and the offender's clan undergo *Mato Oput* together (Tshimba, 2015). The killer is exiled until the ceremony. The clans exchange a ram, a goat, and a bull, and perform rituals under elders' guidance (Storer, 2020). This is presumed to restore peace as the offender's clan offers compensation and a formal apology to the victim's clan, as agreed by "ancestors". The spirits are appeased, and both sides promise not to seek revenge.

This Acholi example shows a syncretic system of justice: the crime (murder) is handled through a deeply cultural process rather than state courts. Instead of imprisonment, reconciliation is achieved through a ritual. The Ugandan criminal code formally punishes murder severely. Still, in practice, many Acholi families still prefer *Mato Oput* (Fosu & Gordon, 2025). It may be undertaken before or even instead of a court case (Jendia, 2019). Such behaviour reflects syncretism because people combine formal laws (which now often allow traditional ceremonies as part of sentencing) with customary expectations. Human rights advocates note this process can help achieve peace after conflict, but they also warn it may ignore modern ideas of individual culpability or victims' rights (Andre, 2018).

Similar indigenous methods exist elsewhere in Uganda. In many rural areas, clan elders settle land and family disputes through traditional councils (Joireman, 2018). Joireman also mentions the use of shamanistic methods or divination in determining the causes of crime. For instance, an elder might solve a theft by revealing the culprit through traditional rites. These practices coexist with police investigations and courts. Often, communities will first try to resolve an issue internally. Only if that fails do victims go to the formal justice system. This dual-track approach is a clear case of legal pluralism. It shows how cultural syncretism operates: people value both ancestral customs and the written law. In effect, justice in Uganda is pluralistic – each system influences the other.

However, theoretical weakness emerges here: legal pluralism works well if state law and custom respect each other. But sometimes they clash. For instance, *Mato Oput* rests on beliefs about curses and spirits that have no place in secular courts. Yet some courts have tried to incorporate it for the sake of community peace. Such an arrangement can be controversial. Critics contend that rituals should not settle all crimes, particularly politically motivated killings (La Fontaine, 2017). Others worry it burdens victims' families with obligations they should not have (Maynard, 2022).

This issue illustrates that while pluralism allows coexistence in justice systems, it may also complicate notions of crime and punishment.

4. Vigilantism and Community Enforcement

In many parts of Uganda, informal community justice is common. Local "vigilantes," or defence groups, often handle petty crimes and disputes without involving the police (Divon et al., 2021). These groups have deep roots in Ugandan society (Tapscott, 2017). In some cultures, every adult male was once expected to bear arms and protect the community (Tapscott, 2023). Today, vigilante groups still exist in rural areas and even suburbs. They may not always follow national law, but they tap into tradition's expectations of communal defence.

Tapscott (2023) further shows that Uganda's vigilantes and police often operate side by side. Police focus on serious crimes (like terrorism or large-scale fraud), whereas vigilantes handle everyday issues (petty theft, quarrels). For example, if someone steals a bicycle in a village, neighbours or a local security team might chase and capture the thief, using customary rites (binding oaths, enquiries) to resolve the issue. The police might only be called if the crime is major (Tapscott, 2017). These community groups are a modern form of age-old practices. In the past, local councils and clans would enforce rules. Now, many such groups have informal ties to the government, and sometimes they share intelligence with police or hand over suspects.

This blending is evident in how people view vigilantes. Some see them as saviours who fill gaps left by under-resourced police. Others see them as a threat to proper law enforcement. But either way, these groups combine traditional legitimacy (they have local backing) with modern functions (they deal with crime). They illustrate syncretism: the state no longer wholly monopolises security. Instead, a mix of formal and informal actors provide protection. Allen (2015) notes that in Uganda, vigilantes grew out of long-standing societal responses to local insecurities. They are now locally embedded institutions that work alongside the police.

Not all community enforcement is benevolent. Sometimes suspicion of witchcraft or misfortune triggers mob justice. For example, if a villager believes someone cursed their crops, they may form a mob to attack the accused without trial. In cases of suspected ritual murder, villagers beat the accused witch doctor to death after discovering a sacrificed child (Olukya, 2022). This extreme action combined modern outrage (child murder) with traditional fear (witchcraft) to bypass courts entirely. These killings are

illegal under state law, but they occur because people trust their customs more than distant courts. Therefore, vigilantism in Uganda is a syncretic phenomenon. It is driven by traditional norms of communal responsibility, but it addresses crimes that arise in a modern context.

Conclusion

Uganda's story of crime and culture is one of constant mixing and negotiation. Indigenous beliefs about spirits, ancestors and justice have never fully disappeared; they have adapted alongside modern influences. Today, many Ugandans are Christian or Muslim, yet most still believe in ancestral blessings or curses. This amalgamation of faiths influences the commission and handling of crimes. We have seen that colonial-era laws like the Witchcraft Act clash with people's continued traditional practices. We also saw that new criminal behaviours, like ritual child sacrifice, stem from ancient superstitions but use modern goals (wealth, success) as motivation. Traditional reconciliation rituals continue to play a role in resolving serious crimes, often in parallel with formal courts. And communities often handle minor crimes through local groups and customs rather than relying solely on the police. These examples illustrate how cultural syncretism influences both perpetrators and victims in Uganda.

In all these issues, a common theme is the tension between two worlds: formal law and customary belief. Uganda's legal pluralism means neither world can be ignored. People and policymakers must navigate both. The modern state and traditional culture have fused in complex ways. Moving forward, Uganda's challenge will be to manage these mixtures constructively. Laws like the Witchcraft Act are being questioned, and new laws against human sacrifice show the state adapting to reality. At the same time, many community elders and religious leaders are calling for dialogue between systems. Identifying the value of local customs while ensuring they do not undermine rights or justice is key. The blending of tradition and modernity in crime is not going away. When the concept is understood fully, as we have espoused in this article, Ugandan society can work toward safer, fairer solutions that respect both ancestral wisdom and universal human rights.

Recommendations

- a. *Legal reform is necessary:* It is important to repeal or amend laws that unduly criminalise indigenous practices. For example, updating the

Witchcraft Act to respect religious freedom would acknowledge cultural rights while still addressing harm. Clarify legal definitions so that genuine traditions are not punished by default.

- b. *There is a need to strengthen enforcement:* The government should ensure new laws (such as the Human Sacrifice Act 2021) are implemented effectively. This requires training police and judges about the cultural context of crimes. Communities should trust that serious crimes, even those wrapped in superstition, will be fully prosecuted. More importantly, the government should formalise partnerships between police and local vigilante or defence groups. Joint patrols or community liaison officers can help integrate knowledge of local customs into police work. Training community patrols on legal procedures can reduce cases of vigilante abuse while keeping their valuable local insight.
- c. *Justice systems should be integrated:* It is necessary to create formal channels to incorporate traditional reconciliation processes in the state legal system. For example, courts could allow *Mato Oput* and similar rituals as part of sentencing for murder, ensuring it meets human rights standards. Such an arrangement would respect culture while maintaining accountability.
- d. *Community education is important:* There is a need to promote public awareness campaigns that explain the laws clearly and debunk harmful myths. Educational programmes can demonstrate that modern medicine and development offer better solutions than dangerous rituals. Working with local leaders, NGOs should teach children and families about legal rights and the value of the individual.
- e. *The government should support victims:* It is critical to establish protection networks for vulnerable people at risk of ritual crime. This could include hotlines, emergency shelters, and community watch groups trained to intervene safely. Empowering communities to report suspicious behaviour anonymously can prevent crimes like child sacrifice.
- f. *Traditional healers should be engaged:* Respected traditional healers in crime prevention efforts should be included. If some traditional leaders publicly condemn violent rituals, they can influence followers.

Dialogues between government and healer associations could help identify and discourage dangerous practices.

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