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The Role of Child Caregiver (*Liiwan*) in Nso Cultural Society: Towards Ubuntu as an African Ethics of Care

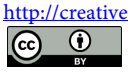
Lavngwa Moses Seemndze

Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Arts, University of Buea, Buea, Cameroon
Email: mskewai1972@gmail.com

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Abstract

In recent times, the role of the child caregiver (*liiwan*) has become significant in Nso cultural society as parental care is gradually decreasing due to involvement in outdoor activities and the abusive attitude of some caregivers poses a threat to the welfare, safety and development of the child. This paper examines the role of child caregiver (*liiwan*) in Nso cultural society through a conceptual analysis informed by normative ethical theories and attachment theory. It argues that Ubuntu's values of interdependence and communal responsibility, can strengthen caregiving practices, encourage male participation, and protect children against neglect and abuse which can cause physical and emotional harm on children who tend to bond more with their caregivers than their biological parents. Its central contribution is a normative proposal for a more inclusive, holistic and accountable caregiving among the Nso people. It concludes that caregiving strategies highlight a socially embedded approach towards collective responsibility.

Keywords

Caregiving, Child Caregiver (*Liiwan*), Ubuntu, Nso, Care Ethics, Bonding

1. Introduction

For any child to develop properly, it needs proper caregiving and rearing from both parents. Caregivers who provide physical protection, good nutrition, love and trust, also ensure bonding and integration of children into the community. In recent times, the role of the child caregiver (*liiwan*) has become significant in Nso cultural society as parental care is decreasing since most parents are involved in other outdoor activities.

Every year, there are about forty-one thousand (41,000) deaths in children under 15 due to maltreatment. These deaths are incorrectly attributed to other causes apart from maltreatment and abuse (Alicia, 2020). Child maltreatment is a social ill that causes physical and mental suffering and stress which may continue to adulthood. In Cameroon, this social ill is difficult to uncover since it takes place in private homes and is hardly reported. However, information on gender-based violence hardly focuses on the maltreatment of children (Takwa, 2022).

The abusive attitude of some caregivers poses a threat to the welfare, safety and development of the child as traditional caregiving practices are evolving in Nso. As parents leave their children with caregivers for long periods, they tend to maltreat them and the children hardly report them out of fear. Child maltreatment is a behaviour towards a child that is outside the norms of conduct and entails substantial risks of causing physical or emotional harm (Alicia, 2020). This is aggravated by the fact that despite this maltreatment, children tend to bond and rely more on abusive caregivers than their parents.

Despite this social ill, accounts of child caregiving in Nso highlight a socially embedded and self-oriented approach towards collective responsibility (Yovsi, 2014). Therefore, caregiving is a communal activity that mirrors Ubuntu as an African care ethics. The Nso expression: *wir dze wir bi wir* (a person is a person through others) reflects Ubuntu's morality of human interdependence, caregiving, solidarity and relationships. This phrase underscores Ubuntu's values of communality, collectivity, and reciprocity, which are the basis of African ethics (Mbiti, 1982).

Similarly, the Western ethics of care focuses on a relational ontology and ethical perspective where we start as disconnected individuals seeking to form real moral relations with others. Caring and compassion are values intrinsic to all humanity. For Gilligan (1982) and Noddings (1984), care as a moral value has either been abandoned or downplayed in ethics. Care ethics implies a relational interdependence in a connected and mutual relationship. Caregiving roles are morally right when they nurture, protect, and enhance children's emotional growth.

The Nso concept of *liiwan* can be loosely translated as babysitter or nanny, yet this study prefers the term caregiver because the role transcends mere carrying, feeding and cuddling of the child, to the general welfare of the child to the extent that the child bonds and identifies more with caregivers than biological parents.

In Nso cultural society, caregiving is a female-dominated duty (Wiysahnyuy, 2018; Lamm et al., 2023). Similarly, Gilligan (1982) and Noddings (1984) argue that female-dominated caregiving is because women embody traits of care as they are naturally attentive, accommodating, and responsive to the needs of the 'cared-for'. The caregiver nurtures, protects, shows love and empathy. She can offer a kind word, listening ear, helping hand, or be fully present to the child. Caregiving provides the environment where children feel secure, connected, nurtured, and accepted. Through socialization processes, children become competent, obedient,

respectful, and responsible. Their traditional and physical duties include feeding, toilet training, cleaning, lulling the child to sleep and ensuring its physical protection. With modernity, caregiving roles have evolved and the mother's role is reduced to breastfeeding (Wiysahnyuy, 2018). Some busy mothers squeeze breast milk and preserve for babies to be fed with in their absence.

Despite these positive roles, the increasing maltreatment of children is a cause for concern. A study by the Central Bureau for the Census and Population Studies of Cameroon to expose the ills of child maltreatment, revealed that various forms of maltreatment are very widespread in all the ten regions of Cameroon. Hence, the memories of this maltreatment stay with the abused children all their lives and hinder their full development and integration into the society (Takwa, 2022). Yet, children stay mute either out of fear or because they are too young to complain. Recently, a disturbing video circulated on social media where a hidden camera captured a wicked caregiver beating and trampling on a baby. This incident raised an unprecedented outrage in public opinion and motivated this author to examine the role of caregivers in Nso society.

Child maltreatment, also known as child abuse and neglect, is a global problem with serious negative life-long consequences (Alicia, 2020). In Cameroon, children are exposed to sexual abuse, neglect, physical and emotional harm, by their caregivers, step mothers, uncles, non-relatives and sometimes their parents (Takwa, 2022). Hence, the children in Nso cultural society are not exempted from these abuses.

The main problem of this study is that some children are neglected and maltreated by their caregivers, yet the children tend to bond more with their caregiver, than their parents. Caregivers focus more on their comfort rather than protecting the children. The neglect and abuse, for which most parents are unaware of, pose a serious threat to the children's welfare, safety and emotional growth. This study seeks to fill this gap since inadequate attention is paid to the maltreatment of children by their caregivers. Sadly, this worrisome social issue has been neglected by most studies in Cameroon (Takwa, 2022).

The main objective of this study is to examine the role of child caregiver (*liiwan)* in Nso cultural society towards proposing Ubuntu as an African ethics of care. This study argues that by integrating core values of Ubuntu philosophy, we can holistically and effectively enhance caregiving practices in Nso. It challenges orthodoxies on feminine caregiving roles and highlights the vital but often underestimated role of men. It uses normative principles and attachment theory to appraise the harm inflicted on children by caregivers.

This study uses a critical and reflective conceptual approach to explore caregiving and socialization practices in Nso from an ethical and psychological viewpoint. It is significant in contributing to the current debate on caregiving roles that align with Ubuntu as an African ethics of care. Its main contribution is a normative proposal for a more inclusive, holistic and accountable caregiving among the Nso people.

2. Background to the Study

The Nso people are grasslanders who hail from Bui Division in the North West Region of Cameroon with a rich cultural heritage including unique customs, festivals, art and oral history. They migrated from Rifem (Bankim) in the Tikari area. They share boundaries with ethnic groups like Kom, Oku, Noni, Wimbum, Babesi, Bamoun, and Bangoran. They speak Lamnso' which is a Bantu language. They are ruled by a Fon (custodian of tradition) in a centralized system of governance. Nso is a patriarchal society with patrilineal succession (Mzeka, 1978).

The Nso people are mostly farmers but social life is strictly separated on gender roles. Boys become part of the male world in hunting while girls are involved in domestic chores, including childcare. Children are highly valued in Nso as they grow with family members and older children and other relatives take care of younger siblings (Yovsi, 2014). Children symbolize a gift and a blessing. From a Nso social lens, the sole aim of marriage is procreation. A childless marriage is a curse. Infertile couples experience loneliness and isolation. During traditional marriage rites, prayerful incantations are made for prosperity, fecundity, and fruitfulness. In like manner, marriage in Africa is not fully recognized without a child (Mbiti, 1982). The value placed on children in Nso makes the role of *liiwan* very significant and worth studying.

The ethics of care is a normative ethical theory where moral actions center on interpersonal relationships and care or benevolence is seen as a virtue. Carol Gilligan (1982) and later Nel Noddings (1984), founded the ethics of care. Gilligan (1982) criticized the application of generalized standards as morally problematic as it breeds moral blindness or indifference. She criticized her mentor, Lawrence Kohlberg's model of moral development where boys are more morally mature than girls. For her, men and women have different moral tendencies. Women stress empathy and compassion over notions of morality privileged in Kohlberg's scale (Gilligan, 1982). This approach provides feminists with a voice to question masculine moral values. Care-focused feminism requires practical application of relational ethics or care ethics (Noddings, 2010).

While consequentialist (utilitarianism) and deontological (Kantian) ethics emphasize generalizable standards and impartiality, the ethics of care focuses on the importance of response to the individual (Gilligan, 1982). Care ethics incorporates traditionally feminine virtues which are absent in traditional ethics (Tong & Williams, 2009). It places caring and relationship over logic and reason in contrast with deontology where actions from inclination are unethical. For Tronto (1993), the ethical qualities of care are attentiveness, responsibility, competence, responsiveness, plurality, communication, trust and respect.

Ubuntu philosophy embraces the interconnectedness between people, the environment, and spirituality focusing on relationality, collective accountability, social justice, recognition, and reciprocity (Udah et al., 2025). The term Ubuntu derives from the Nguni languages of South Africa, loosely translated as shared humanity or belief in *utu* (sacredness of humanity). Ubuntu became prominent in

post-apartheid South Africa in order to foster harmony among racial groups (Broodryk, 2002). It stresses being a person through others. This encapsulates the Mbiti's (1982: pp. 108-109) adage that "I am because you are and because you are; therefore I am." Thus, human individuality is a necessary but not sufficient condition for being a person. Ubuntu is underpinned by social justice and human values of togetherness, solidarity, equity, compassion, and interdependence. Its language, application, and interpretation vary across African cultures, reflecting its rich diversity (Udah et al., 2025). Thus, being an authentic person means being part of a larger community (Mbiti, 1982). This article focuses on Ubuntu as it relates to traditional caregiving roles among Nso people.

3. Methodology

This study applies a critical and reflective conceptual analysis which consists primarily in breaking down or analyzing concepts into their constituent parts in order to gain knowledge or a better understanding of caregiving and socialization strategies in Nso as they relate to or interact with Ubuntu as an African ethics of care. Literature was gathered between the period July and September, 2026, from previous works on Ubuntu philosophy and Nso socialization strategies through a conceptual analysis informed by normative ethical theories as care ethics, egoistic ethics, utilitarianism, principlism and attachment theory to guide the interpretation of concepts. The author also relied on his early experiences as a child caregiver (*liiwan*) and personal observations to provide contextual illustrations or to constitute research evidence.

4. Results

The results of this study are categorized under the traditional roles of caregiving, evolution of caregiving practices and socialization strategies and preferred caregivers in Nso society.

4.1. Traditional Roles of the Child Caregiver (*Liiwan)*

The major traditional role of the *liiwan* in Nso is feeding. The child's food is preserved in *nkaa-wan* (child's basket) or *lang wan* (child's dish), also called *lang Nso* (dish of Nso people). The child's dish is made out of clay. The child's basket or dish constitute part of its paraphernalia and is a symbol of hospitality. Food can be served to visitors from them. The caregiver knows that children cry when they are hungry, sleepy or may have messed up and need cleaning (Wiysahnyuy, 2018). When hard food is prepared, the caregiver chews in their mouth before giving the child. For health reasons, this practice is no longer *en vogue*. It is a taboo for caregivers to help themselves with the child's food.

The caregiver is a custodian of the child's gifts which are safely preserved in *kibam ke wan (child's bag).* The child's bag is sacred. Only biological parents or the child itself can remove something from it. The bag is handed to the infant during the traditional naming rite as a protective charm and spiritual safeguard.

This bag mirrors the modern notion of piggy banks where children preserve money.

Toilet training is another important role of the caregiver. Children are told what to say when they are pressed and how to use the toilet. They also dig tiny holes for them to use as toilets and use leaves to clean them. Similarly, among the Gusii of Kenya, older siblings dig holes for the younger ones to use as toilets (Mweru, 2009). Caregivers can also carry them on their open laps and position them to defecate. When they defecate on the ground, they carry the excreta with hoes or leaves.

Caregivers carry children on their backs and dance to lullabies for them to sleep. Backing a child forms bonds which provide safety, security and protection (Cassidy & Shaver, 1999). These lullabies are Nso traditional magic songs which reflect how caregivers soothe and pamper the children (Wiysahnyuy, 2018). Once asleep, the child is cuddled into a bed (*kikun*), or laid on a mat (*gham*) or basket (*nkaa*) which serve as a baby's cot. Caregivers teach and supervise household chores like sweeping, cleaning, washing of utensils and fetching water. They teach them good manners like being respectful, saying sorry when wrong and appreciating gifts. They engage them in play activities like using ropes as telephone lines, family life, hide and seek games. These activities enhance cognitive skills (Lamm et al., 2023). It is worth noting that these traditional caregiving roles are rapidly evolving in Nso society.

4.2. Evolution of Caregiving Practices and Socialization Strategies in Nso

In urban centres of Nso like Jakiri and Kumbo, caregiving roles and socialization strategies have evolved with the inclusion of foster-care as most parents are engaged in outdoor activities for long hours. Collective caregiving in the spirit of Ubuntu is a normative approach that strengthens mutual-help networks. This reflects the Nso adage that a child belongs to the mother only when in the womb or that a woman's children are not only biological. It is a truism that no woman can single-handedly raise competent and good children (Lamm et al., 2023).

Everyone performs care physical activities as food preparation, feeding, bathing, laundry, discipline, diapering, playing, monitoring, supervision, taking children on walks or visits, and carrying them on their backs. Only the role of breastfeeding is reserved for biological mothers. Socialization strategies imply teaching children the respect for elders, social harmony, conformity, social responsibility, and working for the common good (Yovsi, 2014). Children acquire good character through sharing with others, expressing their ideas, being proud of their accomplishments, and being exemplary in conduct. In Nso ethics, a good child is quiet, calm and peaceful and does not cry unnecessarily (Lamm et al., 2023).

Older siblings are more available than parents to share a common and unique bond. They carry them on their backs and communicate through body contact, stimulation and rhythmic movements or lifting up-and-down technique which is an essential caregiving strategy. Proper caregiving fosters a symbiosis between

kids and caregivers. A loving hug (*koiti)* symbolizes a deep connection and reassures the child about love, dependence and connection. Studies from other parts of Cameroon also reveal similar collective caregiving strategies (Lamm et al, 2023).

Mild discipline through spanking or scolding is recommended for caregivers when children misbehave. However, some caregivers tend to exaggerate by abusing and maltreating children in a bid to settle scores with their parents. Such children are warned not to report to their parents for fear of more reprisals. Some children are too young to complain. For Shane (2020), the harm inflicted by caregivers can be physical, cognitive or emotional.

Physical injury can arise from direct beatings or neglect while the child is playing. Such neglect undermines a child's cognitive development, resulting in postponed speech acquisition, socio-emotional delays and, in extreme cases, the onset of enduring psychopathological disorders till adulthood. Negligent caregivers cause emotional trauma on children especially in the first three years. Such neglect stunts a child's capacity to develop healthy emotional relationships (Shane, 2020).

When a parent fails to react to a child's pain or abuse, it feels abandoned and tends to identify more with the abusive caregiver. This abusive attitude has serious psychological and ethical repercussions on children who end up being violent and defensive as adults. Yet, there is preference for some caregivers in Nso cultural society.

4.3. Preferred Caregivers in Nso Society

In Nso, female-dominated caregiving is a socio-culturally situated practice as the female folk is meant to be initiated into marriage and motherhood (Wiysahnyuy, 2018). As the communitarian spirit of Ubuntu guides family duties including childcare, women remain the engine of society handling house chores, farming or business. Yet, the African family structure hardly gives fathers childcare roles as men who are involved in childcare are considered weak and teased by society (Kah, 2012). While mothers engage in caregiving roles, fathers are influenced by traditional norms that emphasize them as authority figures (Yovsi, 2014).

This preference for female caregivers is not peculiar to Nso cultural society alone. Studies from Kenya reveal that caregiving is a woman's work and girls are considered better caregivers, teachers and nurturers, than boys (Mweru, 2009). These broader gender-based roles cut across most cultures. For Rachels and Rachels (2012), women are more empathetic about personal relationships through psychological conditioning, while men are specialized to care for shallow relationships. Similarly, Gilligan (1982) and Noddings (1984) intimate that women's morality arose from real-life dilemmas, not hypothetical ones. Care-focused feminism depicts a theory of how caring and care ethics are socially gendered to favour women. According to Tronto (1993), care and naturalness refer to socially and culturally constructed gender roles mainly assumed by woman.

Nevertheless, women's capacity for care is a human strength which should also

be expected of men. This proposed paradigm shift in ethics encourages the view that an ethic of caring should become the social responsibility of both men and women (Tong & Williams, 2009). Though Nso parents agree that sibling caregiving roles can be carried out by both boys and girls, they argue that girls are better caregivers than boys and most children prefer female siblings until the age of 12. Interestingly, fatherhood in Nso is gradually undergoing a transition as some fathers are playing an important role as caregivers. This changing perception is due to eco-cultural, geographical, historical, and socio-cultural factors where female outdoor duties are increasing (Lamm et al., 2023) and most women are becoming breadwinners for their families. Thus, the role of caregiving in Nso cultural society is becoming gender-inclusive.

The role of fathers in caregiving is corroborated by Aka fathers of Central Africa who take children to where palm wine is consumed. They also carry, comfort and nurse them at night and offer their nipples temporally to soothe crying infants. They clean the babies and wipe their bottoms (Hewlett, 1991). Some fathers read bedtime stories to their children. This activity keeps them busy and helps to reduce domestic violence, criminality and risky behavior. As modern society continues to preach equal gender roles, there is need for increased male involvement, which might lead to children's proper growth and academic performance (Kah, 2012).

Though Nso fathers are either tacitly excluded or underestimated in caregiving, their involvement provides a secure male model, parental support, supervision and psychological boost to the children. Both parents are better placed to provide better guidance on children than single parents. What are the ethical implications of caregiving?

5. Discussion

This section presents an ethical appraisal of the role of *liiwan* in Nso, the relation of caregiving to Ubuntu as an African ethics of care, and the implications of caregiving on the attachment theory.

5.1. Ethical Appraisal of the Role of Child Caregiver

Here, an ethical appraisal is justified by the maltreatment and negligence of caregivers which cause harm on children. Our focus is on the ethics of care, ethical egoism, utilitarianism, principlism and Ubuntu as African ethic of care.

In care ethics, the caregiver's attitude is morally harmful when it fails to respond to the child's needs and interests (Miller, 2012). An ideal moral agent is a friend who admits that vulnerable children depend on them and all their actions or inactions have moral implications on the children. What matters is how morally appropriate one's response to needs is, and not if actions correspond to universal standards of right (Gilligan, 1982). The one-caring and the cared-for engage in an encounter characterized by attention and motivational displacement. The caregiver is engrossed in the child's needs by putting aside all his projects for the child

(Noddings, 2010).

The child must grow in trust where caregivers can listen, understand, and pay close attention without judging if the child's actions are right or wrong. When physical or emotional harm results from negligence, responsibility must be properly assigned. Negligence undermines the caregiver's responsiveness and exposes their lack of competency. Such caregivers are ineligible on grounds of the ethics of care, to provide caregiving. They violate norms of care ethics by maltreating children.

The problem with care ethics is that it renounces a universalistic pretension and turns towards the unique and particular and makes caregiving arbitrary and relative. Also, some aspects of care ethics are subsumed into Kantian deontology or consequentialism (Miller, 2012). This theory conflicts with the idea of treating everyone with unbiased consideration, which is necessary in certain situations. Care ethics also fails to protect the individual from paternalism, since caregivers mistake their needs for those of children. While care-based ethics may reinforce traditional gender stereotypes, the paradigm based on care-focused feminism is embraced (Tong & Williams, 2009). For Noddings (2010), a mother's care unlike a caregiver's is natural, preferable and superior. Mothers do not require any moral effort or decision making to offer caregiving.

Caregivers who focus on their comfort rather than the safety of the child are ethically egoistic. They escape the drudgeries of caregiving and focus on trivial issues based on self-interest of a transactional nature. Ethical egoism assesses an agent's conduct when it ultimately promotes his self-interest. It contrasts with utilitarianism as it limits moral consideration to the caregiver's interest, while utilitarianism expands the relevant moral community to everyone affected by the agent's actions. Ethical egoists can be family members in caregiving within the ambit of self-interest, in order to make egoism not tantamount to selfishness (Shane, 2020).

Utilitarianism is a consequentialist ethics based on how the caregiver's maltreatment and negligence affect children. An action is right if it produces as much happiness for all affected by it than any alternative action, and wrong if it does not (Mill, 1987). It reflects Ubuntu where good actions affect more people. Failure to pay attention to the child's needs and desires generates less happiness and affects its safety and welfare by causing serious social and ethical problems. Here, we can distinguish between act and rule utilitarianism. Act utilitarianism mandates that one acts to maximize pleasure for others, while rule utilitarianism requires that we follow a rule which maximizes pleasure for those affected by the rule (Mill, 1987).

Therefore, are negligent caregiving and maltreatment, morally objectionable? An act utilitarian could argue that the pleasure from momentary negligence and maltreatment of children justifies its use, while a rule utilitarian may justify generalizing this conduct to all caregivers. For rule utilitarian's analysis, harm on children which is caused by neglect or maltreatment, might outweigh the pleasure

that caregivers receive. It is sadistic and ethically wrong, to derive pleasure from maltreating others. Yet, caregivers' focus on their comfort while neglecting children, also implies that they treat children as a means to achieve their personal comfort.

For Buber (1970), such an attitude of using children as a means to an end reduces their humanity to a functional object in an I-It encounter while failing to recognize their value in an I-Thou connection. Children are treated as objects of utility for comfort. From an ethical perspective, I-Thou is a holistic and authentic encounter where the child is a whole and unique living being. I-Thou exceeds the range of the Cartesian subject-object relation. Caregivers must create a direct, mutual and intimate connection with children. One can become a "true I" only by genuinely recognizing a "Thou" in a dialogical bond (Buber, 1970).

Similar to Buber's relational philosophy is Kant's categorical imperative that prohibits using others merely as a means to an end. Kant grounds his theory on a rational and universal law whereby humanity must always be treated as an end and never as a means (Kant, 1991). Treating children with dignity, helping them flourish and recognizing their autonomy, affirms our humanity and encompasses an absolute constraint. Therefore, if one treats himself or others merely as a means, he acts contrary to certain perfect duties by contravening the formula of humanity (Hill, 1992).

The ethical theory of principlism scrutinizes negligent caregiving on how it creates competing principled moral claims. It addresses dilemmas between moral rules, rights and obligations in determining an appropriate outcome. Thus, it resembles casuistry (Shane, 2020). Beauchamp and Childress (2013) identify four clusters of moral principles: respect for autonomy, nonmaleficence, beneficence, and justice. Here, the moral autonomy to make independent choices is not at stake. Justice is relevant if harm on the child results from a caregiver's negligence and then we can apply corrective justice.

Hence, negligence implicates nonmaleficence (harm avoidance) and beneficence (moral duty to do good). Nonmaleficence expects caregivers to avoid causing cognitive or emotional harm to children. A negligent caregiver violates the norm of beneficence or duty to do good, which requires that caregivers lessen, relieve, prevent or reduce injuries (Shane, 2020).

The ethical theory of principlism from a communitarian perspective of Ubuntu is weak as it is too individualistic and inadequate for addressing some substantive areas of ethical inquiry. This is because Ubuntu as an African ethics of care embraces hospitality, caring about others and being willing to go an extra mile for the sake of others. Ubuntu calls for a liberating social action for children maltreated by caregivers because: 'when I dehumanise you, I inexorably dehumanise myself' (Tutu, 1999: p. 22). Let us examine Ubuntu as an African ethics of care.

5.2. Towards Ubuntu as an African Ethics of Care

While the observed gender roles present a female-dominated caregiving among

the Nso people, gender-inclusive caregiving is the proposed Ubuntu norm for this study. Therefore, the role of *liiwan* in Nso is communal, gender-inclusive, and mirrors Ubuntu as an ideal for an African ethics of care. Thus, Ubuntu philosophy becomes an ethical ideal for the Nso people, although women still possess naturally superior caregiving abilities.

The ethics of any society focuses on what is right or wrong; what is good or bad character; and the forms of behaviours that enhance social harmony, communal living, justice and fairness. What is good or right refers to worthwhile deeds, habits, and behavior patterns, that enhance human welfare. In traditional Africa, the norm of right and wrong is custom; the good is that which receives the community's approval and the bad is disapproved. The right builds up society; the wrong tears it down. One is social and the other is anti-social (McVeigh, 1974).

Ubuntu as an African ethics is social and not individualistic. It is a humanistic ethics that focuses on the welfare and interest of each member of society. It applies to communities living in harmony, homogeneity and interdependence with shared interests in human welfare enabling cooperation and integration. It transcends an ethical philosophy to include ontology, epistemology, axiology and a sociopolitical call for action (Letseka, 2013). Ubuntu is not a mere theoretic construct; it foregrounds on relationality and communal responsibility.

In the context of caregiving, Ubuntu rejects extreme individualism and stresses that human identity is shaped through relationships. It reflects norms of humanness, personhood, justice, fairness and morality which allow caregiving communities to relate with others (Letseka, 2013). The philosophical interpretations of the values of Ubuntu focus on care ethics where children are to be treated with dignity and fairness.

Among the Nso people, the expression: a person is a person through others *(wir dze wir bi wir*) mirrors the concept of Ubuntu and implies the interdependence of human beings on each other. It means the Nso man is social by nature. As mentioned earlier, Mbiti (1982: pp. 108-109) conceptualizes Ubuntu as an ethics of caregiving thus: 'I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am'. Put otherwise, Ubuntu implies that as one is ontologically connected to others, therefore he is obligated to care for their wellbeing.

This is exactly what the *liiwan* represents in Nso cultural society: one who cares for children and is committed to their total wellbeing. It implies that the caregiver's existence is intrinsically linked to that of the child. This view finds a variant in Aristotle's dictum that the human being is by nature a social animal; the human being is by nature a member of the *polis* or human community (Aristotle, 1999). We are radically dependent on the goodwill and solidarity of others to be who we are. The natural sociality and relationality of caregivers to children prescribe a social ethic rather than individualistic ethic.

Ubuntu as caregiving takes place through ethical relations where caregivers embrace values of humanness, sharing, respect, and compassion and mutual concern for the integrity of the children. Caregiving focuses on moral principles that encourage hospitality, compassion, respect for human dignity, sympathy, harmony

and generosity (Letseka 2013). The family is the medium for the concrete and spontaneous expression of communal values such as love, care, cohesion, solidarity, interdependence, mutual sympathy, responsibility and aid for the sake of survival (Chisale, 2018).

We argued that in Nso society, the female folk is preferred as caregivers. In the same vein, Ubuntu as caregiving is mostly feminine. This ties with western feminist ethics of care since the attachment of feelings to responsiveness is a feminine role (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984). Women feel obliged to respond because it is their duty. In the same vein, African women swiftly respond to those in need because they are the anchors of hope. Hospitality is a feminine attribute inherently embedded in African norms and most women are at the forefront of caregiving (Chisale, 2018).

However, Ubuntu's original conceptualization was gender-blind. But there are insinuations of a historical patriarchal bias that Ubuntu subjugates women and submit them to masculine authority (Udah et al., 2025). But if Ubuntu implies healing, sustaining, guiding, reconciling, nurturing, liberating, and empowering, it means care ethics and caregiving favour women.

Nevertheless, Ubuntu can be used to progressively address and correct misconceptions of being a feminine care ethics. This implies linking men and women through mutual obligations to care as a basis of relational ethics. The ethics of care transcends a feminine-only nurturing obligation towards a male-female collective project in shaping our future (Chisale, 2018).

Ubuntu as care ethics may have weaknesses, yet it nevertheless guides the Nso community on how moral life is and ought to be. In traditional Africa, fully human undertakings are done conjointly by men and women where generosity, mutuality, reciprocity and care are norms. Since Nso people are community-oriented, compassionate, and generous towards each other, caregiving should not have any gender distinction or bias. When caregiving is communal, we can avoid harm caused to children by negligent caregivers. How is caregiving linked to the attachment theory?

5.3. Implications of Caregiving on the Attachment Theory

Due to the decreasing maternal involvement in the lives of Nso children, they tend to rely and trust caregivers and foster parents more than their biological parents. Such bonds with multiple caregivers favour communal relationships and cooperative lifestyle of Nso society that make them adapt to different situations, instead of exclusive dyadic bonds (Lamm et al., 2023). Some children end up rejecting their biological parents who hardly understand their needs and desires.

This practice of collective caregiving is similar to childcare arrangements in other African contexts. As children mature, they prefer multiple caregivers like grandparents for education purposes, who would pamper them. In Nso, some children are sent to grandparents in order to hide teenage pregnancies which are seen as a disgrace to them (Yovsi, 2014).

Therefore, lack of stability of maternal presence affects child development and their sense of security. Such disrupted attachment patterns are a risk factor for domestic violence and can adversely affect a healthy way to deal with stress and low self-esteem (Kah, 2012). Children with a dismissive attachment style tend to be emotionally abusive, angry and violent and can engage in sexual crimes in adulthood. These problems arise from absentee parents, breach in communication, emotional unavailability or signs of rejection or abandonment (Cassidy & Shaver, 1999).

The decrease in parental involvement has implications for the attachment theory which posits that infants need to form a close relationship with at least one primary caregiver to ensure their survival and to develop healthy social and emotional functioning skills. They signal that their attachment needs are not being met by use of angry behavior (Bowlby, 1987). Bowlby's interest in human attachment was motivated by disturbed children deprived of their mother's care in childhood.

In fact, attachment to the mother begins in utero through the mother's voice and the scent of amniotic fluid and continues during thumb sucking. Maternal voice and odor can ease the infant's transition into extra-uterine life where it begins searching for the mother's breast. The mutual infant-mother bond is strengthened as they learn about one another. Apart from maternal odors, infants can also recognize their mothers through the perfume they use (Schleidt & Genzel, 1990). High-risk infants (premature) are vulnerable to forming lower quality attachments due to disrupted experience during pre- and post-natal development. Children continue to seek proximity to mothers during illness, danger or stress. Infant security depends on vigilance, responsiveness and caregiving behavioural systems (Keller, 2021).

Attachment to primary caregivers is critical for survival and the initial programming of life-long emotionality and cognitive capabilities. Every bond has four traits: proximity maintenance, separation distress, safe haven, and secure base. Secure bonding is when caregivers are sensitive and responsive in social interactions. Caregivers provide a secure base for infants to return after exploring the world. Separation anxiety arises after the loss of an attachment figure (Cassidy & Shaver, 1999).

For Bowlby (1987), children can attach to abusive or neglectful caregivers regardless of the care quality for survival. There is a biological predisposition that produces rapid and robust learning in nurturing and abusive situations. Although attachment to an abusive caregiver seems contradictory, it occurs because the infant is programmed to ensure its own survival through continued contact to the caregiver, despite the poor quality of care provided. Such emotional ties to caregivers are through feeding, playing, protecting, singing lullabies, carrying and cleaning them. They develop trust when the caregiver is consistent, reliable, and dependable unlike the absentee biological parent with whom the rate of attachment has dropped and there is no proximity to a mother-figure (Bowlby, 1987). Proper emotional bonds help in mental health, stress regulation and the ability for

trust and intimacy when children seek safety, security, comfort, physical proximity and protection through instinctive behaviours as crying, smiling and clinging (Cassidy & Shaver, 1999).

The attachment theory challenges impressions that babies only love parents because they provide food. Yet, the role of food is neglected as a dimension of relationship development in attachment theory, despite evidence that feeding has an affectionate and social function. In Nso, giving food to a child has a soothing effect which is represented by the expression: No one cries who has food in their mouth (Lamm et al., 2023).

Despite this contention of bonding with a single caregiver, there are situations where emotional and physical needs of children are met by a variety of caregivers (Hewlett, 1991). Hence, having a single, dependably responsive and sensitive caregiver, does not guarantee ultimate success in the child's holistic growth. Children with multiple caregivers grow up feeling secure and develop more enhanced capacities to view the world from multiple perspectives. In the context of Ubuntu, bonding with many caregivers contribute to raising a child and provides a variety of relationships and the evolution of many psycho-social attachments (Chisale, 2018). As children require a secure social environment and strong relationships for healthy growth, they also need close relationships to appreciate varied ways to a flourishing adulthood (Keller, 2021).

The problem with this theory is its overemphasis on maternal influence while overlooking genetic, cultural, and broader familial factors that shape adult attachment rather than shared caregiving. The presence of a consistent, available, sensitive caregiver who is responsive to social interactions is still sufficient for a child's development. But nothing here suggests that fathers cannot become principal attachment figures. A secure attachment to a father could also counter possible negative effects of an unsatisfactory attachment to a mother figure.

Yet, extended physical separation can lead to anxiety, anger, sadness and despair. But when the attachment behavioural system is fully formed, separation no longer threatens the child's bond. Bonding is very important for children. Yet, separating an infant from the mother does not irrevocably damage the infant since it has access to other caregivers. In fact, children require a stable and responsive caregiving environment to develop in a holistic manner. However, the role of fathers cannot be underestimated.

6. Conclusion

This study explored the role of the child caregiver (*Iiiwan*) in Nso cultural society and how Ubuntu provides an opportunity for traditional and modern practices to formulate an African care ethics. Caregiving strategies among the Nso people highlight a socially embedded approach towards collective responsibility. By embracing Ubuntu principles, child caregiving can become more holistic, inclusive and effective in addressing the maltreatment endured by children. The study revealed that women are preferred in caregiving than men. It argued that it is ethi-

cally inadmissible for negligent and abusive caregivers to focus more on their comfort, rather than the safety of children. Such attitudes cause physical, emotional and psychological harm on the children. As the attachment theory promotes long-lasting bonds with children, it limits the bond with biological parents. However, all children need a stable and secure environment for their holistic development.

The article recommends that caregivers should be trained on traditional values and practices that blend with good modern strategies. Parents should create time to bathe, feed, and play with children in order to bond with them. Caregivers should be motivated to focus more on the children than their personal comfort. There is need for constant surveillance of caregivers' activities. This can also protect children against external threats from abusers. Child maltreatment by non-natal caregivers can be curbed if appropriate measures like education on the rights of children are implemented. Laws which prohibit various forms of child maltreatment should be enforced.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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