

# The role of indigenous women groups in conflict management and transformation in Nigeria: A comparative study of the Umuada and the Jagunmolus

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines the role of indigenous women's groups in conflict management in Nigeria through a comparative study of the Umuada of Igbo society and the Jagunmolus of Yoruba society. While women's participation in peacebuilding has received considerable scholarly attention since the adoption of UNSCR 1325, the contributions of indigenous women's organisation remain underexamined. Drawing on qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with group members and community leaders in southeastern and southwestern Nigeria, this study investigates the mechanisms, strategies, and cultural significance of these groups. Grounded in feminist theory as the analytical framework, the data were thematically analysed using a narrative approach. Findings reveal that both the Umuada and the Jagunmolus uphold social order through culturally embedded practices of dialogue, mediation, and reconciliation. The Umuada primarily engage in familial and intra-communal disputes, whereas the Jagunmolus operate at broader community and inter-village levels. Despite generational shifts favoring formal legal systems, both groups demonstrate resilience by selectively integrating modern practices while preserving their cultural legitimacy. Crucially, the study contributes to global debates on decolonisation by foregrounding indigenous epistemologies and challenging Western-centric models of peacebuilding. It argues that recognising and institutionalising traditional mechanisms, such as those employed by the Umuada and Jagunmolus, can promote more inclusive, contextually relevant, and sustainable approaches to conflict resolution in Nigeria, while affirming the value of indigenous knowledge systems in shaping national peace and security frameworks.

**Keywords:** Decolonisation, indigenous conflict management, Jagunmolus, Nigeria, peacebuilding, Umuada women's groups.

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## INTRODUCTION

The role of indigenous women's groups in conflict management has received limited scholarly attention despite their long-standing contributions to peacebuilding in African societies. Much of the dominant discourse on conflict resolution has been shaped by Western frameworks that privilege state institutions and formal mechanisms, often overlooking grassroots practices embedded in culture and tradition (Richmond, 2011; Zartman, 2000). This gap reflects what scholars describe as the epistemic marginalisation of indigenous knowledge systems within global peace and conflict studies (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). Recent debates on decolonisation in the social sciences emphasise the need to reclaim African

epistemologies and foreground local institutions that have historically sustained order and stability (Mbembe, 2015; Ake, 1996). Within this debate, indigenous women's groups represent a crucial yet underexplored dimension.

In Nigeria, women's collectives such as the Umuada among the Igbo and the Jagunmolus among the Yoruba have historically played central roles in conflict prevention, mediation, and reconciliation (Albert et al., 2013; Ojatorotu, 2018). These groups are not marginal actors but custodians of culture and peace, deriving their authority from moral standing, kinship roles, and spiritual significance within their communities (Folarin, 2013). Their contributions extend beyond domestic matters to

encompass land disputes, inheritance conflicts, and even inter-village crises. Yet, their practices remain largely absent from mainstream analyses of conflict management at both national and global levels (Orimaye et al., 2025; Ozoani-Ene et al., 2024).

This article situates the study of the Umuada and the Jagunmolus within the broader discourse on decolonisation. By foregrounding their culturally embedded conflict management strategies, it challenges the dominance of Western legalistic approaches and demonstrates the continued relevance of indigenous practices in sustaining peace within African societies. The analysis is anchored in structural functionalism, which provides a lens for understanding how these institutions perform stabilising functions within their social systems.

The article is organised into nine sections. Following this introduction, the Statement of the problem outlines the rationale and objectives of the study. The Literature review engages with existing scholarship on indigenous conflict management and the marginalisation of women's roles. The Theoretical framework situates the analysis within structural functionalism and feminism, linking theory to practice. The Methodology describes the qualitative approach employed in gathering data from both groups. The Research findings are presented in two parts, examining first the Umuada and then the Jagunmolus, with a subsection contrasting their approaches with legalistic methods. The Discussion of findings synthesises the results with the wider literature, while the Conclusion highlights the implications for peacebuilding and decolonisation debates.

### Statement of the problem

Conflict remains a persistent challenge in Nigeria, manifesting in forms ranging from inter-ethnic and religious violence to localised disputes within families and communities. The dominance of state-led and formal legal approaches to conflict management has often proven inadequate, largely because such approaches fail to resonate with the cultural realities and lived experiences of many communities (Zartman, 2000; Richmond, 2011). Formal legal systems are typically adversarial and punitive, prioritising judgement and sanctions over reconciliation and social cohesion. This orientation contrasts sharply with indigenous conflict management systems that emphasise dialogue, negotiation, and the restoration of relationships (Isola et al., 2013; Ojatorotu, 2018).

Despite their relevance, indigenous approaches to conflict resolution are not without limitations. Some practices have been criticised for perpetuating gender bias and human rights violations, particularly where women and marginalised groups are excluded from decision-making (Brock-Utne, 2001; Odinkalu, 2006). In other instances, the rigidity of traditional norms may

hinder communities from adapting to new social realities, thereby undermining fairness and inclusivity (Murithi, 2008). Additionally, the simultaneous application of indigenous mechanisms and state judicial processes can sometimes result in double jeopardy, where individuals are punished twice for the same offence (Olowu, 2007). These drawbacks highlight the need for a balanced framework that recognises the strengths of indigenous systems while addressing their weaknesses to ensure justice, inclusivity, and sustainable peace.

Within this context, indigenous women's groups such as the Umuada of the Igbo and the Jagunmolus of the Yoruba remain vital yet underexplored institutions. These groups occupy unique positions as custodians of tradition, mediators of disputes, and guardians of communal harmony (Folarin, 2013; Orimaye et al., 2025). Despite their historical and ongoing significance, their contributions have been marginalised in mainstream academic and policy discourses on conflict resolution, which tend to emphasise male-dominated or formal institutions (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Ozoani-Ene et al., 2024). The neglect of these women's groups reflects a broader epistemic imbalance in peace and conflict studies, where African indigenous practices are often subordinated to Western-centric frameworks (Mbembe, 2015).

Although indigenous women's groups in Nigeria play a critical role in conflict management, they have received limited scholarly attention in peacebuilding discourse and practice. This neglect is compounded by an increasing overreliance on formal legal and political institutions, particularly among younger generations, which threatens the continuity and legitimacy of women-led indigenous mechanisms for conflict resolution. By examining the roles of the Umuada and the Jagunmolus, this study seeks to address this gap by demonstrating how these groups contribute to conflict management and how their culturally grounded practices can inform more inclusive and effective peacebuilding frameworks in Nigeria.

### EMPIRICAL LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on conflict resolution, peacebuilding, and indigenous knowledge systems reveals both the dominance of Western frameworks and the gradual emergence of African-centered perspectives. Much of the existing scholarship privileges state institutions, formal legal mechanisms, and international policy frameworks, often overlooking grassroots practices embedded in local cultures and traditions. Yet, indigenous approaches, particularly those led by women's groups have historically played critical roles in sustaining communal harmony, mediating disputes, and preventing violence.

This review examines key strands of scholarship, highlighting theoretical debates, empirical findings, and the contributions of indigenous women's groups such as

the Umuada of Igboland and the Jagunmolus of Yorubaland. By situating these groups within broader discourses on conflict, gender, and decolonial knowledge, the review identifies both the strengths of existing research and the gaps this study seeks to address.

## Conflict

Conflict arises when two or more parties perceive divergent goals, values, or interests. It is an intrinsic element of human interaction, manifesting at interpersonal, group, and societal levels (Wright, 1990; Thakore, 2013). While often perceived as destructive, conflict can also produce constructive outcomes, such as dialogue, social change, and innovation, when managed effectively (Singer, 1949; Jehn, 2014). Scholars identify multiple forms of conflict, including interpersonal, intragroup, intergroup, and international, each shaped by resource competition, power struggles, and cultural or ideological differences (Folarin, 2013).

The causes of conflict may be immediate, such as resource scarcity or perceived injustice, but they may also be structural, rooted in historical grievances, inequalities, or cultural cleavages (Isola et al., 2013). In African contexts, environmental stressors such as climate change further exacerbate disputes (Libiszewski, 1991). Conflict, therefore, is a dynamic process with potential for both escalation and resolution. When poorly managed, it can produce violence, displacement, and instability (Lischer, 2007). Conversely, when addressed through culturally sensitive mechanisms, it can transform relationships and reinforce social cohesion (Jason, 2023).

## Conflict management and transformation

Conflict management encompasses the strategies and processes designed to address disputes in ways that reduce hostility and foster coexistence. Classical models, such as the Thomas-Kilmann framework, conceptualise conflict management in terms of interpersonal styles, competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, and accommodating (Caputo et al., 2019). Broader institutional approaches, often rooted in Western legal traditions, emphasise negotiation, mediation, and arbitration but tend to remain adversarial and outcome-oriented (Bercovitch and Jackson, 2009). These frameworks frequently prioritise containment and legal sanctioning over reconciliation and social cohesion, reflecting a focus on preventing escalation rather than cultivating enduring peace (Midhio and Madjid, 2015; Fitzpatrick, 2007).

However, a growing body of literature highlights the systematic exclusion of women from formal conflict management and peacebuilding processes across Africa. In many contexts, women's participation is tokenistic or

entirely absent, despite their crucial roles in informal and community-level peace initiatives (Puechguirbal, 2010; Anderlini, 2007). For instance, in post-conflict Liberia and Sierra Leone, formal peace negotiations were dominated by men, even though women's groups such as the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace and grassroots market associations played decisive roles in ending violence and rebuilding social trust (Tripp, 2015). Similarly, in Nigeria, women have been sidelined in national and regional peace committees, including in the Niger Delta and Jos Plateau conflicts, where indigenous women's mediation efforts have often been undervalued or unrecognised (Nwoye, 2011).

This exclusion undermines both the inclusivity and sustainability of formal peace mechanisms while disregarding the gendered indigenous systems that sustain harmony at the grassroots level. In contrast, indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms in African societies embody a different philosophy, one that privileges reconciliation, communal harmony, and restorative justice over punitive measures (Isola et al., 2013; Ojatorotu, 2018). Their goal extends beyond resolving disputes to reintegrating disputants, restoring moral balance, and re-establishing social equilibrium.

Within this context, the concept of conflict transformation, which focuses on addressing the structural, relational, and cultural dimensions of conflict to achieve sustainable peace (Lederach, 1997), is particularly apt for analysing the work of indigenous women's groups such as the Umuada in southeastern Nigeria and the Jagunmolus in the southwest. These groups do not simply manage conflict; they transform relationships, mend fractured social bonds, and rebuild trust through dialogue, ritual, and moral persuasion. Their interventions, grounded in communal values and spiritual authority, ensure that peace is relational and enduring rather than procedural.

Positioning the Umuada and Jagunmolus within a conflict transformation framework thus allows for a deeper appreciation of how indigenous women's agency contributes to peacebuilding beyond formal legal institutions. It underscores that achieving lasting peace in multi-ethnic African societies requires embracing indigenous, gender-inclusive approaches that view peace not merely as the absence of conflict, but as the presence of restored relationships and collective well-being (Murithi, 2008; Brock-Utne, 2001).

## Indigenous women's groups

Indigenous women's groups constitute integral pillars of African socio-political and cultural systems. Historically, they have preserved cultural values, transmitted knowledge, and acted as mediators, peacebuilders, and community leaders (Amadiume, 1997; Tripp, 2015). For instance, the Umuada (daughters of the lineage) in Igbo society, Nigeria, have long served as moral authorities

mediating family and community disputes to enforce social harmony (Okeke-Ihejirika, 2004). Similarly, the Aba Women's Movement of 1929 demonstrated women's collective agency in resisting colonial policies and protecting community rights, fostering unity and post-colonial stability (Van Allen, 1976). In Ghana, Queen Mothers have historically advised chiefs, safeguarded cultural traditions, and mediated disputes to maintain social stability (Steegstra, 2004).

Likewise, in Yorubaland, women's associations such as the *lyálóde* institution and market women's groups exercised political influence, mediated between rulers and the people, and mobilised collective action in times of crisis, thereby reinforcing peace and social balance (Mba, 1982; Awe, 1992). These examples demonstrate that indigenous women's groups were not merely passive custodians of culture but active peacebuilders who contributed significantly to both pre- and post-colonial African societies. Their authority often derives from age, motherhood, and ritual roles, positioning them as respected actors in dispute resolution (Bennett, 2001).

Beyond governance and social cohesion, these groups contribute to economic life through farming, trade, and community development initiatives (Uduji and Okolo-Obasi, 2024). They also serve as custodians of cultural identity, ensuring the intergenerational transmission of norms and values (Caruso et al., 2022). Despite the disruptive impacts of colonialism, globalisation, and modern state structures, which often marginalised or displaced their authority, indigenous women's groups have demonstrated resilience and adaptability, integrating modern practices while safeguarding traditional values (Wisker, 2017).

Positioning indigenous women as peacebuilders challenges the dominance of Eurocentric models in conflict resolution scholarship. It further underscores the importance of decolonising knowledge production by foregrounding indigenous epistemologies that have long sustained social harmony.

### **Women and conflict transformation**

Scholarly discourse on conflict transformation increasingly acknowledges that excluding women's voices limits the depth and sustainability of peace processes. Feminist peace theorists contend that women's participation introduces relational and community-centered approaches that expand the meaning of peace beyond the cessation of violence to include justice and reconciliation (Anderlini, 2007; Puechguirbal, 2010). Their involvement represents a substantive contribution to understanding and resolving conflict, as women's lived experiences highlight the everyday dimensions of peacebuilding often overlooked by formal, male-dominated mechanisms.

Recent scholarship emphasises the importance of indigenous women's knowledge systems, which embody

culturally grounded philosophies of mediation and restorative justice. Chilisa (2012) and Smith (2013) argue that decolonising peacebuilding requires valuing such epistemologies, which challenge Eurocentric assumptions and promote contextually relevant strategies. Including indigenous women's perspectives thus enriches both theory and practice by integrating local legitimacy into conflict transformation frameworks.

Empirical studies substantiate these claims, highlighting the centrality of indigenous women's groups in Nigeria's peace processes. Orimaye et al. (2025) document the Umuada and Zumunta Mata as key mediators in conflicts within protected areas, showing how their consensus-building fosters durable peace. Similarly, Ozoani-Ene et al. (2024) demonstrate that the Igbo Umuada not only mediate disputes but transform them by ensuring inclusive participation and strengthening social cohesion. Ojatorotu et al. (2018) further reveal that the Umuada address land, marital, and inheritance disputes through dialogue and negotiation, extending their influence into wider community affairs. Complementarily, Isola (2013) finds that Yoruba women's groups such as the Jagunmolus leverage cultural authority to prevent and resolve disputes effectively.

Collectively, these findings affirm that indigenous women's interventions are often more culturally acceptable and sustainable than formal mechanisms. Nonetheless, existing studies remain limited to specific groups or regions and rarely engage with broader theoretical debates on decolonisation, leaving unexplored how indigenous women's epistemologies can reshape global frameworks of conflict resolution.

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This study is grounded in a decolonial Afro-feminist framework that draws on African Indigenous Feminist Thought, Sylvia Tamale's (2020) theorisation of decolonisation and Afro-feminism, and Okech's (2020) concept of African feminist epistemic communities. Together, these perspectives illuminate how indigenous women's groups, such as the Umuada and the Jagunmolus, embody alternative epistemologies of conflict management that challenge Western and patriarchal notions of peacebuilding.

African Indigenous Feminist Thought emphasises relationality, communal responsibility, and gender complementarity as the foundation of social harmony. It regards women not as peripheral actors but as custodians of moral authority and mediators of social balance. Within this perspective, groups like the Umuada and Jagunmolus derive their legitimacy from deeply embedded cultural norms that prioritise reconciliation, collective well-being, and restorative justice over adversarial or punitive approaches. Their practices exemplify an indigenous logic of conflict resolution in which peace is understood as the restoration of broken

relationships within the community.

Tamale (2020) advances this decolonial orientation by arguing that African women's knowledge systems, long marginalised by colonial and patriarchal structures, constitute vital sites of epistemic resistance. She contends that decolonisation requires the reclamation of these suppressed forms of knowledge and their recognition as legitimate frameworks for governance, justice, and social repair. The conflict management strategies of the Umuada and Jagunmolus therefore represent decolonial praxis, locally grounded mechanisms that restore justice through inclusion, empathy, and consensus-building rather than coercion.

Similarly, Okech (2020) conceptualises African feminist epistemic communities as networks of women who produce, sustain, and circulate decolonial knowledges that challenge Eurocentric paradigms. From this perspective, the Umuada and Jagunmolus can be understood as living epistemic communities whose authority rests on collective identity and cultural legitimacy. Their work demonstrates how indigenous women's groups function not only as mediators but also as knowledge producers, sustaining indigenous systems of justice through everyday practice.

Drawing from these interconnected theories, the study posits that indigenous women's groups in Nigeria manage conflict through three key mechanisms: cultural legitimacy, relational mediation, and epistemic decolonisation. Their authority emerges from shared cultural values; their methods restore relationships through dialogue and consensus; and their existence challenges dominant notions of justice by centering indigenous women's knowledge. This theoretical orientation forms the foundation for comparing how the Umuada and Jagunmolus uniquely enact these principles within their distinct cultural contexts.

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a case study research design, which is well suited to gaining nuanced insights into the lived experiences and internal dynamics of the Umuada and Jagunmolus in conflict management. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and key informant discussions with five participants each from Anambra State and four participants from Oyo State. Participants were purposively selected based on their extensive knowledge of the activities of the Umuada and Jagunmolus in conflict management, peacebuilding, and conflict transformation.

The interviews were conducted in Enugu and Umuleri (Anambra State), and in Jobele, Fiditi, and Labiran (Oyo State). A semi-structured interview framework was employed to elicit culturally embedded and context-rich data. Interviews were conducted in English and Yoruba, depending on participants' language preferences. Field

notes were also taken to capture non-verbal interactions and contextual observations, enriching the depth of data interpretation and analysis.

Thematic analysis was employed to interpret the data. Following transcription, interviews were systematically coded, revealing themes such as conflict-resolution strategies, cultural legitimacy, negotiation techniques, and adaptations to modern legal structures. These thematic clusters guided a comparative examination of convergences and divergences in the roles and influence of the Umuada and Jagunmolus. Reflexivity was maintained throughout, as the researcher critically reflected on their positionality and potential influence on data interpretation.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

### The Umuada: Structure and Authority

The Umuada represents one of the most influential indigenous women's institutions in Igbo society. Composed of women who are daughters of the community, their authority is rooted not only in gender but also in cultural legitimacy as custodians of peace and social order. Their organisational structure combines hierarchy with flexibility. At the apex are the Umuada elders, women whose age, wisdom, and moral authority confer decision-making power. Beneath them are younger members who contribute to deliberations and assist in implementing resolutions. While the elders hold both symbolic and practical authority, the group functions collectively, providing space for multiple voices, including those of families and the wider community, to participate in dispute resolution.

This structure enables the Umuada to operate effectively across various levels of conflict, from intra-family quarrels to inter-village disputes. Their role is therefore institutional rather than incidental, aligning with structural-functionalist interpretations of social order in which cultural institutions preserve stability through recognised functions (Radcliffe-Brown, 1952). Beyond structuralism, however, their role also resonates with African feminist thought, which situates women as active agents in sustaining community harmony and exercising socio-political power through culturally sanctioned roles (Amadiume, 1987; Nnaemeka, 1997).

### Conflict management and the preservation of communal harmony

The Umuada's central contribution lies in preventing conflict escalation and restoring social harmony across multiple levels of social interaction. They often serve as the first point of intervention in disputes, particularly those originating within families, where their mediation

preserves kinship ties and prevents domestic tensions (Nwoye, 2011). At the community level, the Umuada play a vital role in reconciling neighbours, fostering collective understanding, and maintaining communal cohesion through dialogue and moral persuasion (Isiramen, 2010; Anugwom, 2019). Their influence often extends beyond their immediate communities as they mediate inter-community conflicts involving land boundaries, marriage alliances, or trade relations (Ojukwu and Onuoha, 2016). Through these roles, the Umuada exemplify what Murithi (2008) terms “indigenous peace ethics”, a system grounded in reciprocity, inclusion, and communal accountability.

In March 2019, when two brothers quarreled over their late father’s farmland, we called them together. We reminded them that land does not belong to individuals alone but to the family and the ancestors. At first, they refused to listen. When they ignored our summons, we placed a fine of palm wine and a goat, to be shared with the extended family. That act humbled them, because refusal would mean disgrace before the entire community. They finally agreed to share the land fairly. (*Interview with Lolo Regina Nwokolo, personal communication, October 4, 2025*)

This case underscores the Umuada’s use of ritual sanctions and moral persuasion to enforce communal norms. As Amadiume (1987) documents, such practices illustrate how Igbo women’s groups leverage symbolic authority to preserve kinship solidarity and prevent private disputes from escalating into public conflict. The invocation of ancestral accountability reflects restorative justice principles, in which reconciliation is achieved through moral restitution rather than punishment (Brock-Utne, 2001).

Further reinforcing this, an elder explained:

“The Umuada speak the language of peace and bring all parties to the table... our role is to guide them toward reconciliation, not through force, but through respect and understanding.” (*Interview with Chief [Mrs.] Chioma Ogu, personal communication, January 27, 2023, Enugu*)

This statement highlights the Umuada’s role as moral intermediaries, whose authority is both social and spiritual, grounded in what Nnaemeka (1997) terms “nego-feminism,” or the feminism of negotiation, compromise, and communal responsibility.

Dialogue constitutes their primary method. Rooted in tradition and cultural respect, this approach privileges reconciliation over retribution, aligning with indigenous peace philosophies articulated by Murithi (2008). In

marital disputes, the Umuada emphasise fairness and restoration, creating safe spaces for disputants to be heard. As one middle-aged member observed:

“The Umuada’s strength lies in their ability to create an environment where everyone feels respected... this openness is what makes our approach effective.” (*Interview with Lolo Anita Amadi, personal communication, January 24, 2023, Enugu*)

These findings reinforce the argument that indigenous women’s peacebuilding approaches embody relational and transformative principles, valuing dialogue, empathy, and collective healing. Such methods contrast with legalistic and patriarchal interventions, which prioritise verdicts over restoration (Tripp, 2015). Thus, the Umuada’s role exemplifies a distinctly feminist model of conflict transformation, grounded in moral authority, community participation, and the pursuit of social harmony rather than domination.

### Extending influence beyond the family

The authority of the Umuada extends beyond domestic and kinship disputes into broader community and inter-village relations. Historically, they have mediated larger conflicts such as land disputes, boundary disagreements, and communal tensions. Their interventions combine moral persuasion, social sanction, and cultural legitimacy, reflecting Murithi’s (2008) notion of African indigenous peace ethics, where reconciliation is achieved through communal accountability rather than coercion.

We sat them down, traced the land markers, and recalled oral histories from our elders. When one family refused to concede, we withdrew from their social gatherings. For months, nobody attended their harvest celebration. Eventually, they returned, pleading for settlement—no family can live in isolation. (*Interview with Mrs. Angelica Chilaka, personal communication, October 4, 2025, Umuleri, Anambra State*)

This episode illustrates the strategic use of social ostracism as a non-violent yet powerful enforcement tool. As Ogbomo (1997) observes, exclusion from communal life was among the most severe sanctions in Igbo society, where belonging defined identity and survival. The Umuada’s reliance on such measures underscores their deep understanding of social interdependence as a mechanism of moral regulation.

Similarly, in Obukpa, Nsukka (Enugu State, July 2020), the Umuada averted inter-village violence through dialogue and mediation. Chief (Mrs.) Chioma Ogu explained:

“We made both sides see the value of peace... eventually, the villages agreed to a compromise that prevented further conflict.” (*Interview with Chief [Mrs.] Chioma Ogu, personal communication, January 27, 2023, Enugu*)

These interventions demonstrate the Umuada’s dual role as mediators of immediate disputes and guarantors of communal stability, aligning with Nwoye’s (2011) characterisation of Igbo women’s groups as “social stabilisers” within multilayered governance systems. Their authority, grounded in kinship and ancestral legitimacy, enables them to act across scales of conflict without formal coercive power.

In more intimate contexts, Umuada interventions also address gender-based violence and marital abuse. As one respondent recounted:

A woman came to us, saying her husband beat her. We told him, ‘She is our daughter—when you strike her, you strike us all.’ When he ignored us, we gathered at his compound, clapped, and sang mocking songs until he stopped. He later apologised and brought drinks for reconciliation. (*Telephone interview with Lolo Regina Nwokolo, personal communication, October 4, 2025*)

Here, ritualised public shaming operates as a moral performance that disciplines offenders while reaffirming communal ethics. Okonjo (1991) frames such practices as expressions of female social power, enabling women to enforce justice through culturally sanctioned means. Interpreted through Nnaemeka’s (1997) nego-feminism, this demonstrates how women navigate patriarchal structures through negotiation and moral appeal rather than confrontation.

Across contexts, the Umuada embody Amadiume’s (1987) notion of dual-sex authority, exercising autonomous influence alongside male leadership. Their practices reflect restorative justice principles embedded in indigenous worldviews, seeking not punishment but the restoration of balance, dignity, and relational harmony (Brock-Utne, 2001; Murithi, 2008).

### Challenges encountered by the Umuada

Despite their enduring significance, the Umuada face increasing challenges in sustaining their authority in contemporary Nigeria. One major obstacle is the encroachment of modern legal systems, which have displaced traditional mechanisms of conflict management. As Lolo Regina lamented:

“These days, many of the youths prefer to run to the police or the courts. They say our ways are

old-fashioned, and that weakens our influence.” (*Interview with Lolo Regina Nwokolo, October 4, 2025*)

This reflects Zartman’s (2000) and Richmond’s (2011) critiques of the juridification of peace processes, where externally imposed legal norms marginalise local knowledge systems that are more relational and culturally resonant.

The Umuada also encounter gendered resistance within patriarchal contexts. Although traditionally revered as “daughters of the land,” their interventions are sometimes perceived as intrusions into male domains of authority. As one leader, Lolo Ogechi Maduka, observed:

“Some men say, ‘Why should women tell us what to do?’ They forget that we are their sisters and daughters—the ones who hold this community together.” (*Interview with Lolo Ogechi Maduka, January 21, 2023, Enugu*)

Amadiume (1987) and Nnaemeka (1997) have both documented this contradiction: while women’s institutions such as the Umuada enjoy cultural legitimacy, their authority remains contested under patriarchal systems that privilege male control of public life. From a feminist theoretical perspective, such tensions reveal the limits of symbolic empowerment when structural inequalities persist (Tripp, 2015).

Economic transformations, particularly migration and urbanisation, further weaken their influence. As younger members relocate to urban areas, participation declines, reducing collective efficacy. Lolo Anita Amadi noted:

“Many of our members live in the cities now. When we call for meetings, only a few can come home, and without numbers, our voice loses weight.” (*Interview with Lolo Anita Amadi, January 24, 2023, Enugu*)

This mirrors Brock-Utne’s (2001) and Odinkalu’s (2006) findings that globalisation disrupts traditional social networks, eroding the participatory base of indigenous governance.

Another challenge lies in tensions between customary practices and human rights discourses. Actions such as ritual fines, ostracism, or public shaming, once essential to peace enforcement, are now criticised as degrading or discriminatory. Mrs Omolola Fagbenro reflected:

“They tell us we are violating human rights when we impose fines or shame an offender. But how else do we keep the peace in our way?” (*Telephone interview with Mrs. Angelica Chilaka, October 4, 2025*)

Murithi (2008) cautions that while restorative

practices promote reconciliation, they can also reproduce exclusionary hierarchies if not critically adapted. Thus, the Umuada face a delicate negotiation between maintaining cultural legitimacy and aligning with evolving norms of human rights and gender equality.

Finally, cultural shifts shaped by modernity, Western education, and religion have eroded younger women's identification with traditional roles. As Chief (Mrs.) Chioma Ogu observed:

“Our daughters who grew up in Lagos or abroad do not understand our ways. When they come back, they see our practices as superstition.” (Interview with Chief (Mrs.) Chioma Ogu, January 27, 2023, Enugu)

This generational disjuncture reflects broader critiques by Mbembe (2015) and Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018), who argue that colonial and postcolonial modernity have delegitimized African epistemologies, positioning indigenous systems as “primitive” or incompatible with modern governance.

Taken together, these challenges reveal the precarious yet adaptive position of the Umuada in contemporary Nigeria. Their authority is not extinguished but continually renegotiated amid competing pressures, state institutionalization, patriarchal resistance, economic change, human rights discourses, and cultural transformation. As Isola et al. (2013) and Ojatorotu (2018) argue, this reflects a broader dilemma in African peacebuilding: how to balance the cultural authenticity of indigenous systems with the demands of a globalised and rights-oriented world.

### Role of the Jagunmolus in conflict management

The Jagunmolus occupy a central position in Yoruba systems of peace and governance, performing multifaceted roles across domestic, communal, and inter-community disputes. Their interventions are typically sought when tensions threaten to escalate, positioning them as vital custodians of social stability.

In Jobele, Oyo State (September 2024), a case of domestic violence risked dividing two extended families. The Jagunmolus convened both sides for dialogue, invoking Yoruba values of *ibáṣepò* (kinship) and *àlàáfíà* (peace). Through moral persuasion and ritual mediation, they secured a public apology from the husband, averting retaliation. As Chief (Mrs.) Obafunke Alebiosu explained:

“When peace in a home shakes, the whole town feels it. We must step in quickly, so the anger does not spread.” (Interview, September 30, 2024, Jobele, Oyo State)

This episode underscores the Jagunmolus' recognition that private disputes carry public consequences, a

principle consistent with Yoruba cosmology, where the household mirrors the wider community (Awe, 1992; Oyěwùmí, 1997). Their intervention reflects Murithi's (2008) framework of restorative peacebuilding, which emphasises reconciliation and reintegration rather than punishment.

At the household level, the Jagunmolus mediate marital and inheritance disputes through dialogue anchored in Yoruba ethics of respect (*iyi*) and communal solidarity. As Chief (Mrs.) Alaba Sogbesan observed:

“We don't just sit them down and tell them what to do; we make them understand the value of unity and the importance of family in our culture.” (Interview, September 20, 2024, Labiran, Oyo State)

Their reliance on persuasion and moral reasoning exemplifies Nnaemeka's (2005) concept of *negofeminism*, a feminism of negotiation and relational balance that empowers women within patriarchal contexts without destabilising social harmony. When dialogue fails, the Jagunmolus employ culturally sanctioned measures such as restitution and social sanctions, including ostracism or public shaming. These actions are restorative rather than punitive, symbolising forgiveness and reintegration. As Aluko explained:

“When someone refuses to listen, we do not fight them; we simply turn the town against them. No one will eat their food or answer their greetings until they return to us for peace.” (Interview, September 25, 2024, Fiditi, Oyo State)

Such practices align with indigenous jurisprudence, where moral authority and communal disapproval often carry greater force than coercive law (Odinkalu, 2006; Ojo, 2018). This reflects Oyěwùmí's (1997) and Makinde's (2019) observations that Yoruba gender systems are historically non-hierarchical, granting women collective agency through moral and ritual authority rather than formal political power.

### Beyond the family: Mediating community and inter-community conflicts

The authority of the Umuada extends beyond domestic and kinship disputes into broader community and inter-village relations. Historically, they have mediated larger conflicts such as land disputes, boundary disagreements, and communal tensions. Their interventions combine moral persuasion, social sanction, and cultural legitimacy, reflecting what Murithi (2008) terms African indigenous peace ethics, where reconciliation is achieved through communal accountability rather than coercion.

In Umuleri, Anambra State (October 2020), Mrs. Angelica Chilaka recounted how the Umuada de-

escalated a boundary conflict between two families:

“We sat them down, traced the land markers, and recalled oral histories from our elders. When one family refused to concede, we withdrew from their social gatherings. For months, nobody attended their harvest celebration. Eventually, they returned, pleading for settlement—no family can live in isolation.” (*Interview with Mrs. Angelica Chilaka, personal communication, October 4, 2025*)

This episode illustrates the strategic use of social ostracism as a nonviolent yet powerful enforcement tool. As Ogbomo (1997) observes, exclusion from communal life was among the most severe sanctions in Igbo society, where belonging defined identity and survival. The Umuada’s reliance on such measures underscores their deep understanding of social interdependence as a mechanism of moral regulation.

Similarly, in Obukpa, Nsukka (Enugu State, July 2020), the Umuada averted inter-village violence through dialogue and mediation. Chief (Mrs.) Chioma Ogu explained:

“We made both sides see the value of peace... Eventually, the villages agreed to a compromise that prevented further conflict.” (*Interview with Chief (Mrs.) Chioma Ogu, January 27, 2023, Enugu*)

These interventions exemplify the Umuada’s dual role as mediators of immediate disputes and guarantors of communal stability, aligning with Nwoye’s (2011) view of Igbo women’s groups as “social stabilisers” within multilayered governance systems. Their authority, grounded in kinship and ancestral legitimacy, enables them to act across scales of conflict without formal coercive power.

In more intimate contexts, Umuada interventions address gender-based violence and marital abuse. As one respondent recounted:

“A woman came to us, saying her husband beat her. We told him, ‘She is our daughter—when you strike her, you strike us all.’ When he ignored us, we gathered at his compound, clapped, and sang mocking songs until he stopped. He later apologised and brought drinks for reconciliation.” (*Telephone interview with Lolo Regina Nwokolo, personal communication, October 4, 2025*)

Here, ritualised public shaming operates as a moral performance that disciplines offenders while reaffirming communal ethics. Okonjo (1991) frames such practices as expressions of “female social power,” allowing women

to enforce justice through culturally sanctioned means. Interpreted through Nnaemeka’s (1997) negofeminism, this demonstrates how women navigate patriarchal structures through negotiation and moral appeal rather than direct confrontation.

Thus, across contexts, the Umuada embody Amadiume’s (1987) notion of dual-sex authority, exercising autonomous influence alongside male leadership. Their practices reflect restorative justice principles embedded in indigenous worldviews, seeking not punishment but the restoration of balance, dignity, and relational harmony (Brock-Utne, 2001; Murithi, 2008).

## COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE UMUADA AND THE JAGUNMOLUS

The Umuada and the Jagunmolus represent two distinct yet convergent models of indigenous women’s conflict management in Nigeria. Both operate as culturally embedded institutions that translate moral authority into social regulation. Analysed through the lenses of African feminist theory (Amadiume, 1987; Nnaemeka, 2005) and indigenous peacebuilding (Murithi, 2008), these groups reveal how women’s power in traditional societies is expressed not through coercive force but through negotiation, moral legitimacy, and relational accountability.

### Shared approaches to conflict management

Despite regional and cultural differences, both groups share a foundational commitment to restorative rather than retributive justice. Their methods emphasise dialogue, persuasion, and communal participation, principles aligned with Murithi’s (2008) concept of African restorative peace ethics, which seeks to heal social rifts through reintegration rather than punishment.

For the Umuada, reconciliation is achieved through mediation within kinship structures, where disputes are reframed as collective rather than individual concerns. Similarly, the Jagunmolus pursue negotiated settlements that reaffirm community bonds and prevent escalation. In both contexts, conflict is viewed as a temporary rupture in social relations and an opportunity for renewal.

From an African feminist perspective, these practices reflect Nnaemeka’s (2005) notion of negofeminism, a feminism of negotiation that resists domination through culturally sanctioned influence rather than confrontation. This approach enables women to transform social order from within tradition.

### Differences in roles, scale, and institutional focus

While united in ethos, the Umuada and Jagunmolus differ

in scope, domain, and institutional focus. The Umuada's authority lies primarily in the domestic and familial sphere, consistent with Igbo cosmology where the family is the nucleus of moral order. Their interventions, marital reconciliation, inheritance disputes, and inter-family tensions, sustain *ikwu na ibe* (kinship solidarity) and derive legitimacy from their identity as *umu ada* ("daughters of the land"), symbols of purity, lineage continuity, and moral custodianship (Okonjo, 1991; Amadiume, 1987).

In contrast, the Jagunmolus operate on a broader communal and intercommunal level, mediating land, market, and inter-village conflicts. Rooted in Yoruba traditions that valorise collective female leadership (Awe, 1992; Oyèwùmí, 1997), they function as public moral authorities, *àgbà iyàwó* (elder women), who uphold social equilibrium through wisdom and ritual sanction. This contrast, domestic versus public, reflects differing gender cosmologies: Igbo power is channelled through lineage and spirituality, while Yoruba power is articulated through collective leadership. Yet, in both contexts, women's authority is central to the moral and social fabric, echoing Oyèwùmí's (1997) view of precolonial African gender systems as complementary rather than hierarchical.

### **Cultural sources of authority and legitimacy**

The Umuada derive authority from their ancestral and spiritual status as moral voices of their natal and marital families, exercising symbolic power through ritual, persuasion, and moral sanction. This aligns with Amadiume's (1987) notion of dual-sex institutions, where women wield parallel authority to men through culturally sanctioned mechanisms.

The Jagunmolus, by contrast, draw power from age, seniority, and wisdom, forms of relational authority expressed through deliberation, ritual, and communal enforcement. Both institutions rely on moral legitimacy rather than coercion, embodying what Oyèwùmí (1997) calls relational power, authority grounded in interconnectedness and ethical responsibility rather than hierarchy.

### **Negotiating Modernity: Adaptation and Resilience**

In contemporary Nigeria, both groups face challenges arising from urbanisation, formal legal systems, and generational change. Yet they display adaptive resilience consistent with postcolonial peacebuilding theory (Zartman, 2000; Richmond, 2011). The Umuada reinterpret traditional sanctions within human rights frameworks, framing ostracism as moral accountability, while the Jagunmolus hybridise their mediation by integrating written agreements and formalised procedures into customary practice.

These adaptations exemplify Murithi's (2008) idea of

hybrid peacebuilding, where indigenous and modern systems coalesce to sustain legitimacy amid socio-political change. Viewed through African feminist theory, such evolution embodies *negofeminism* (Nnaemeka, 2005), a feminism of negotiation that harmonises cultural continuity with transformative agency.

The Umuada express a form of familial feminism rooted in kinship and moral suasion, while the Jagunmolus represent communal feminism enacted through civic leadership and public mediation. Together, they constitute part of Nigeria's "indigenous peace architectures" (Isola et al., 2013), integrating spiritual, moral, and relational justice. Their practices affirm that women's roles in peacebuilding are not peripheral but foundational, challenging Western-centric models by demonstrating that effective conflict management in Africa is both gendered and culturally grounded.

## **DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

The findings of this study underscore the indispensable role of indigenous women's groups, specifically the Umuada and Jagunmolus, in grassroots conflict management and transformation in Nigeria. Both are deeply rooted in their respective cultural and historical contexts, employing traditional practices centred on reconciliation, social harmony, and collective responsibility. Their interventions extend beyond dispute resolution to embody processes of conflict transformation (Lederach, 1997), where conflict becomes an opportunity for rebuilding relationships and reinforcing communal cohesion.

### **Cultural legitimacy and indigenous authority**

A key insight from this analysis is the centrality of cultural legitimacy as the foundation of indigenous peacebuilding. The Umuada derive authority from their status as "daughters of the land," symbolising moral purity and ancestral custodianship within Igbo cosmology. The Jagunmolus, in turn, embody Yoruba ideals of communal balance, elder wisdom, and respect for *àgbà* (seniority). Their authority thus rests on moral legitimacy and social trust rather than coercive power.

This supports Ojatorotu et al.'s (2018) argument that African indigenous institutions function not merely as mechanisms of dispute settlement but as expressions of cultural worldviews that sustain moral order and social identity. Viewed through African feminist theory, this moral authority aligns with Nnaemeka's (2005) concept of *negofeminism*, a feminism of negotiation and relational interdependence. The Umuada and Jagunmolus do not confront patriarchy through opposition but transform it through culturally sanctioned negotiation, reasserting women's agency within the moral logic of their societies.

This resonates with Oyèwùmí's (1997) interpretation of

precolonial African gender relations as complementary rather than hierarchical, illustrating a feminism of cultural continuity that harmonises empowerment with social cohesion.

### **Functionalist and transformative dimensions of peacebuilding**

From a structural-functionalist perspective, both groups perform vital stabilising roles within their communities. The Umuada preserve kinship harmony and regulate domestic relations, while the Jagunmolus mediate broader civic and economic disputes to maintain communal equilibrium. Their interventions preempt escalation and restore balance, functions essential for sustaining moral and social order.

Beyond maintaining equilibrium, both groups embody the principles of conflict transformation theory, which emphasises relational change and moral renewal (Lederach, 1997). The Umuada and Jagunmolus not only manage conflicts but transform them into opportunities for healing and reconciliation, thereby contributing to cultural regeneration. They exemplify Murithi's (2008) concept of African restorative peace ethics, grounded in reintegration rather than punishment.

### **Decolonising peacebuilding knowledge**

This study contributes to the decolonisation of peace and conflict studies by challenging Western-centric paradigms that privilege state authority, legal rationality, and adversarial models of resolution. The Umuada and Jagunmolus demonstrate that indigenous women's groups have long practised sophisticated systems of mediation grounded in spirituality, dialogue, and communal ethics.

Their work affirms Nnaemeka's (2004) and Oy w m 's (1997) insistence that African epistemologies are not peripheral but foundational to global peace scholarship. By employing negofeminism in practice, these women exemplify a model of peacebuilding based on negotiation, empathy, and cultural legitimacy, thereby deconstructing colonial binaries between "traditional" and "modern."

Their hybrid approaches illustrate that local systems of justice can be both culturally authentic and normatively progressive, aligning with Richmond's (2011) concept of post-liberal peace, which centres local agency in peacebuilding processes.

### **Comparative insights**

The comparative analysis highlights both convergence and divergence in the roles of the Umuada and the Jagunmolus. While both institutions prioritise reconciliation and communal harmony, their domains of

operation differ. The Umuada function primarily within the familial sphere, mediating disputes related to marriage, inheritance, and domestic relations, whereas the Jagunmolus operate in more public spaces, addressing inter-community and market conflicts. This distinction reflects the structural contrasts between Igbo lineage-based societies and Yoruba hierarchical social systems. Despite these differences, both groups embody adaptive forms of feminist agency. The Umuada represent familial feminism, authority expressed through kinship ties, while the Jagunmolus exemplify communal feminism, authority enacted through civic leadership and ritual sanction. Together, they illustrate Isola et al.'s (2013) concept of indigenous peace architectures: gendered, participatory, and relational systems that integrate justice, morality, and spirituality. Their hybrid approaches, blending customary ethics with evolving legal and socio-economic realities, underscore the enduring relevance of indigenous women's peace institutions in contemporary society.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study demonstrates that the Umuada and Jagunmolus are not relics of a premodern past but dynamic agents of peace transformation. Their practices affirm that indigenous women's authority in conflict management is both structural and transformative, anchored in moral legitimacy, social trust, and cultural continuity. By foregrounding their agency, the study advances feminist and decolonial reorientations of peace scholarship, affirming that sustainable peace in Africa must engage the cultural institutions through which women uphold justice and harmony.

The Umuada and Jagunmolus exemplify what Nnaemeka (2005) describes as negotiated empowerment, a model of feminist peace practice that works with culture rather than against it, transforming both gender relations and conflict dynamics from within.

Theoretically, this research extends feminist and structural functionalist perspectives by demonstrating how women's institutions sustain social order through dynamic moral regulation. It also enriches conflict transformation theory by revealing how relational and culturally grounded approaches foster durable peace. Practically, the study shows that indigenous women's collectives remain integral to Nigeria's peace infrastructures, embodying a synthesis of tradition, adaptability, and moral authority essential for contemporary African peacebuilding.

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