



## **INDIGENOUS CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN WEST AFRICA: LESSONS FROM BEL-SHO AND ZARAZONG COMMUNITIES**

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### **Abstract**

This paper investigates the role of indigenous conflict management (ICM) mechanisms in addressing unconventional armed conflicts and insecurity in West Africa, using a comparative analysis of the Zarazong and Sho communities in Plateau State, Nigeria. Employing Structural Functionalism theory and mixed methods including interviews, focus group discussions, household surveys, and observation, the study found that while Bel-Sho experiences high levels of militarized violence, fractured inter-group relations, and over-reliance on state intervention, Zarazong demonstrates stronger internal cohesion, effective dialogue practices, and a functional blend of indigenous and formal security mechanisms. The paper argues that indigenous communities possess established conflict management mechanisms that, when functional and adequately institutionalized, can contribute to peace and stability, and that these mechanisms can be applied to complex modern armed conflicts such as terrorism through effective national and local collaborations. However, the failure to institutionalize and support ICM within national, regional, and international policy frameworks remains a critical gap. The study recommends restructuring traditional institutions, integrating indigenous models into conflict resolution frameworks, strengthening local capacity, and establishing legal integration and structured collaboration between traditional institutions and the state. The paper concludes that peace is most sustainably built when rooted at the grassroots, where conflict is first felt and where communities can act as first responders.

**Keywords: Indigenous, Conflict Management and Indigenous Conflict Management**

### **Introduction**

Armed conflicts are increasing becoming the twenty first century world normal despite decades of efforts aimed to achieve global peace. This questions the intentions and willingness of nations in achieving global peace. Accordingly, the 2024 Global Peace Index has shown the deteriorating nature of global peace with almost 97 countries declining in peace at an average level of 0.56

percent, indicating the inclining nature of armed conflicts globally. Although there are various dynamics to these conflicts, however, threats posed by the increasing presence of guerrilla groups and non-state actors, shows that these form of insurgency and unconventional warfare are increasingly gaining significance and continues to shape the dynamics of twenty first century armed conflicts.

According to the 2025 Global Terrorism Index, more countries have deteriorated from the activities of terrorist groups. Africa, accounts for almost half of the most impacted countries, with terrorism increasing significantly in the Sahel region accounting five of the ten counties most impacted by terrorism. The activities of terrorist groups have continued to shape the security dynamics in the west Africa sub-region. There have been various efforts to manage these conflicts, however, these efforts have mainly involved the use of western system of conflict management only. The continued relapse of conflicts in the region is evident to the limitation of this style of conflict management (Bello & Olutola, 2016) and has instead made the region even more vulnerable to diverse security threats. Hence, the alignment of the study focusing on the argument that, the challenge confronting Africa is not the occurrence of conflicts, but how it is resolved in a manner that prevents its occurrence, avoids relapses, escalation and degenerations (Bello & Olutola, 2016).

Post-colonial security architecture in Africa were previously efficient based of the nature and realities of the time, example, shortly after Nigeria's independence, there was an uprising of a religious fundamental sect known as the Maitasine sect that began in 1980, this sect is indicated as Nigeria's first record of terrorism (Bello, 2022). To address the violent extremist threat, the Nigerian military was deployed, the swift military deployment was effective as the crisis was suppressed within days (Bello, 2022). The operational effectiveness of the military to neutralize violent extremism during that period was demonstrated. In contrast, Boko Haram terrorist group has existed in Nigeria since 2002. Like the Maitasine, the first response of government was the deployment of state security apparatus to address the crisis at the initial stage, however, instead of curtailing the situation, it instead escalated into a full-blown national and regional security challenge since 2009 after Abubakar Shekau took over the group's leadership (Bukarti, 2020). Since the escalation, successive military operations have been deployed with various mandates all in an effort to defeat the escalation of these terrorist groups, instead the group keeps mutating based on the impact of the military operations without any far-reaching end. This therefore shows the character of contemporary conflicts and how it is evolving from what used to be. Complex factors shape the nature of present-day conflicts, and cannot be effectively managed using only formal security architectures while neglecting pre-existing traditional conflict management systems.

It is notable that, armed conflicts have existed in Africa for centuries, however, there were likewise the existence of indigenous systems of resolving them, depending on the nature, extent and magnitude of such conflicts (Adjei & Adebayo, 2014 as cited by Ibrahim, Adjei & Boateng, 2019). But the advent of colonialism and the legacy colonialism left (Bello & Olutola, 2016) resulted in the subsequent centralization of the African society into nation states and weakening of the traditional powers. This is further exacerbated by the changing nature of societies from small,

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simple, communal, agrarian and monotonous systems to complex, polarized, globalized, multicultural and industrialized modern systems. The changing dynamics of the African systems can also be alluded to the changing dynamics of armed conflicts in the region. According to Wickham-Crowley (1992) as cited by Silverburg & Brown (2017), the essential element required for guerrilla or unconventional warfare to thrive are; rural peasantry support, substantial fighting force and a lack of government support at the grassroots. Shiferaw & Debela (2024) also notes that violence and armed conflict are common in remote areas due to limited access to central authorities, thus highlighting the increased dependence of insurgency and unconventional warfare on local communities.

Accordingly, Community or local levels conflict management systems, are known to already exist. These indigenous systems have been used to resolve conflicts since the existence of communities as decentralized entities. This indigenous conflict management process is what Briggs, Memmott, Venables & Zondag (2017) referred to as informal systems. The informal system has been lauded by some scholars through their works, among them is Fry (2006 as cited by Lundy, Collette & Downs, 2022) noted that, western academics and culture perpetrates the idea of violence and war to be tied to human nature while relegating human potential for peace that highlights the roles of indigenous communities. Additionally, Indigenous Conflict Management empowers people at the grassroots, results in innovation and creativity, thereby advancing social cohesion (Tamirat & Lemi, 2023) necessary in addressing insecurity and advancing peace. More posits that it can be used as a mechanism for extending state control to the grassroots when institutionalized to align with the goal of the State (Abel, 1982; Briggs, 2003 as cited by Briggs, Memmott, Venables & Zondag, 2017). However, other opposing arguments and critics argued the lack of clear legal frameworks that indigenous community management systems can operate (Ayenew & Pandey, 2020), and absence of clear policy director that act as inhibiting factors (Tamirat & Lemi, 2023). Likewise, the limited capacity of ICM to address complex conflicts and insecurity challenges (Sabala, 2019) are provided.

Consequently, Tamirat & Lemi (2023) put forward that, despite the significance of indigenous conflict models, it is hardly a priority for nations and the international community. Regardless of these views, the uncontending reality is that the declining nature of global peace, particularly in West Africa, challenges existing international, regional and national frameworks for conflict management and peace. It also heightens the argument for assessment of the effectiveness of existing alternatives for conflict management and peace. Although Shiferaw & Debela (2024) argues the presence of element of incompatibility between indigenous systems in contemporary nation-states, however, the determinant of the extent of these incompatibility in the West Africa context in response to conflict management have not been demonstrated.

Therefore, while formal security mechanisms inspired from colonial histories have been deployed to address the conflicts in Plateau state, the mechanisms have not been effective, using comparisons from Bel-Sho and Zarazong in Plateau State, Nigeria, the paper posits that indigenous conflict management is an effective and efficient tool for conflict management and prevention in west Africa. The argument of the paper was presented using findings from fieldwork

conducted among communities in Bel-Sho and Zarazong in 2024. The paper was structured with an overview of indigenous conflict management, and its argument grounded on three theories, methodology, background of the study area, presentation of findings, discussion, conclusion and recommendations.

### **Indigenous Conflict Management in Perspective: Regional, National and Communal Contexts**

The term “indigenous” is a colonial notion, developed in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and used as an identification means in referring to colonies and dependencies of states (Gosart, 2012). In contemporary time, the legal idea of the concept is derived from the development of international law based on the idea of the protection of the rights of indigenous colonies, communities or minorities and the roles of the state (Cunningham & Stanley, 2003). Hence, the concept, indigenous connotes to existing traditional and social arrangements of ethnic colonies within a nation state. Meanwhile, the term conflict may not necessarily be evil or negative (Olanrewaju, 2013) it is part of fundamental human and social trait except instances of deployment of violence as main line of action with less diplomacy. Accordingly, Lundy, Collette & Downs (2022), every conflict is local, as long as the local environment sets the stage and the local people endure the consequences. Reversibly, it can be argued that conflict management are local using conflict management approaches that better account and align with local security context. In this context, conflict management is not limited to settlement of disputes, but rather is encompassing of prevention, containment, settlement, resolution, transformation, creation of conflicts as well as the prevention of solution (Hamad, 2005). Conflict management is thus, a process involving an integrated and extensive approach through collaborative efforts to achieve best result.

Indigenous communities across regions have historically developed mechanisms for managing social order and responding to disputes in ways that reflect their cultural values and lived realities. Lundy, Collette and Downs (2021) argue that these systems are inherently culture-bound and local, making them particularly effective in grassroots contexts where shared norms guide processes of managing, resolving and transforming conflicts. This was demonstrated using case studies from the Kpelle Moot of Liberia, the Semai non-killing society in Malaysia, and the Waorani and Yonamani communities in Latin America to argue that mainstream conflict management approaches do not always translate seamlessly into indigenous settings.

This perspective aligns with Tanirat & Lemi (2023) view that effective responses to conflict require flexibility rather than strict adherence to a particular style. For them, indigenous conflict management (ICM) is not only vital for preventing escalation into violence, but remains central to the entire conflict process (Hamad, 2025), particularly in post-colonial societies where imposed colonial structures have struggled to prevent, manage or transform conflicts. The enduring influence of traditional institutions across African societies reinforces the potential of ICM to shape the region’s peace and stability landscape, they argued (Tanirat & Lemi, 2023).

Bello and Olutola (2016) similarly highlight the age long nature of ICM in Africa, emphasizing its role in addressing both immediate disputes and the deeper structural causes of conflict. Its grounding in familiar socio-cultural environments where members are known, identifiable and

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traceable, which allows it to promote healing and communal restoration. Application of this context to Boko Haram insurgency, despite the group emerging from within communities that had accessible traditional institutions, the early response to the group failed to leverage existing indigenous systems, methods and techniques. Had their grievances about governance and dissatisfaction with western structures been channeled through traditional authorities at the earlier stage, or had those authorities countered the early spread of extremist ideology more decisively, the group's formative mobilization might have been significantly weakened. This underscores the contemporary relevance of ICM and its capability to intervene at inception before conflicts escalate beyond community control.

Examples from other regions reinforce both the potential and the limitations of ICM in modern contexts. Among the Aboriginal Gununa community of Mornington Island in Australia, conflict was traditionally viewed not as a disruption but as a mechanism for self-regulation. The use of Guided violence, rather than dialogue was used to restore balance under the supervision of clan Elders (Briggs, Memmott, Venables & Zondag, 2017). However, missionary presence from the 1910s and subsequent colonial and state influences led to the erosion of this system, contributing to rising uncontrolled violence by the 1990s. The eventual creation of the Mornington Island Restorative Justice Project (MIRJP) in 2007 reflects an attempt to reconstruct an indigenous like mechanism, though significant limitations remain in addressing contemporary conflicts.

In Ethiopia, the Oromo Gada system is similarly an indigenous governance and conflict management institution that manage disputes like farmer-herder clashes to kidnapping and robbery. Its legitimacy derives from community trust, transparency and its historically proven role in promoting harmony (UNESCO, 2015; Shiferaw & Debela, 2024). Yet, like many ICM systems, it faces challenges arising from lack of formal legality and inadequate institutional integration. Even so, the Gada's resilience is attributed to its complementary, not competitive interaction with state structures.

Similarly, in Northern Ghana, indigenous systems in Bunkpurugu-Yunyoo and Gonja Districts remain central to managing persistent conflicts around chieftaincy, land and inter-ethnic tensions. Mechanisms such as the Nayiri court, traditional arbitration committees and spiritual interventions like Ademang continue to mitigate violence and preserve communal stability. However, these systems are not without limitations; biases and the potential abuse of authority by chiefs and elders pose ongoing concerns.

In summary, these cases illustrate that indigenous conflict management remains very relevant regionally, nationally and communally, offering mechanisms that draw from shared cultural norms, communal legitimacy, community trust, knowledge of local realities and established social networks. Yet their effectiveness in contemporary settings depends largely on how they adapt to evolving conflict dynamics and how they interface with formal state systems.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Following the argument of structural functionalism as provided by Talcott parsons (1902-1979), he notes that contemporary nations are complex, hence for a nation to be functional, it must be

structured with interdependent parts from macro to micro systems. He gave four prerequisites for a functional society, to include its ability to be adaptable to its environment, attaining consensus goals, must be integrated of every part by ensuring coordination and cohesion and lastly, it must have a management system. Furthermore, he highlights that each part of the society must perform their function in order to maintain the system, and ensuring of social order and stability.

In application, Bel-Sho and Zarazong communities form part of functional subsystems, as a micro society within the broader Plateau State and Nigerian at large. To function effectively particularly in the area of peace and conflict management, conflict management and peace frameworks should be structured in like manner both from the macro level which is the broader national conflict management architecture to the micro levels which is at the community or local levels. And every level must play their role towards ensuring the general goal of attaining stability at the local, national, regional and international levels.

### **Methodology**

This is a primary study informed by a fieldwork conducted in January 2024. The study is based on both quantitative and qualitative data collection using observation, Key Informant Interview (KII), Focused Group Discussions (FGDs) and House-Hold Questionnaires from both Zarazong and Bel-Sho communities.

The Samples used for the study are; twelve (12) Key Informant Interviews (KII) conducted with traditional heads, youth leaders and community leaders of both Sho and Zarazong communities of Plateau State, Nigeria. Two (2) FGDs conducted in both communities involving demographics including men, women and youths and other considerations including ethnicity and religion. Respondents includes those that have been directly impacted from incidences of conflicts or experienced any conflict. A total of one hundred and two (102) House Hold questionnaires were administered and 88 returned (35 Zarazong and 53 Bel-Sho). The HH Questionnaire was designed using multiple choice questions for head of households to select most suitable options while analysis for quantitative data was done using multi-variate analysis and content analysis used for qualitative data. The tools for this analysis are both Excel and SPSS. Figure 1 was analyzed with Python and visualized with Matplotlib to illustrate comparative dynamics between the study communities. Radar charts were used to depict multidimensional conflict-related indicators.

### **Background of Sho and Zarazong Communities of Plateau State, Nigeria**

#### **Bel-Sho**

Bel-Sho is a rural and isolated community situated under Ropp District in Barkin Local Government Area of Plateau State, Nigeria. The community is not a single settlement, it is formed by a group of villages popularly called Sho. Barkin Ladi LGA covers about 1,032 kilometers square including Bel-Sho, while Ropp District under which Bel-Sho is situated is located at 9°32'00"N latitude and 8°54'00"E longitude. The area is characterized by undulating terrain with numerous rock formations and fertile soils, making it conducive for agriculture. The area experiences a tropical highland climate, with temperatures ranging from 49°F to 96°F throughout the year. Although the exact population and demographics of Bel-Sho is undocumented, however,

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the 2006 census noted a total population of 175,267 for the entire Barkin Ladi LGA. While the inhabitants of Bel-Sho are predominantly Berom ethnic group alongside the Fulani minority tribe. Religion affiliations are predominant Christian adherents and minority muslim adherents from the Fulani population, thus reflecting inter-ethnic and inter-religious landscape of the community.

The economic activities of Bel-Sho are primarily agrarian, including farming activities and cattle rearing. The popular crops cultivated in the villages are potatoes, maize and vegetables. The insecurity in Bel-Sho is critical with various attacks that began since the inception of the 2001 Jos crisis. Some major incidence includes the 2010 massacre of over 500 people in Dogo Hawa village of Bel-Sho community (Resilient Plateau Project, 2025).

Zarazong is a community under Fubur District located in Jos East Local Government Area of Plateau State, Nigeria. The community is predominately occupied by the Afizere (Jarawa) ethnic group with a minority Fulani population which is also reflected in the religion adherence with a largely Christian believers and minority Islamic adherence. For lack of specific documentation of Zarazong, the Jos East LGA within which Zarazong is has a 1,020 kilometers square and situated at 9°55'0.01"N latitude and 9°6'0.00"E longitude. The community is characterized by the Jos Plateau's highland terrain, featuring rolling hills and granite outcrops. The area experiences a tropical highland climate with two distinct seasons: a wet season and a dry season with an average temperature ranging around 28°C, and the region receives an annual rainfall of approximately 1,750 mm.

According to the 2006 Nigeria census, it documented the entire population of Jos East to be 85,602 including Zarazong. The economy in Zarazong is primarily agrarian including farming activities and cattle rearing. Popular crops cultivated are millet, maize, yams, and vegetables. The area is also heavily known for irrigation farming due to the presence of the Jos Lake. The community has experienced isolated episodes of conflicts and other security threats; however, conflicts are generally minimal in the area.

### Composition of Respondent

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents

Variable	Bel-Sho	Zarazong (%)
Respondent (Male)	55.6	40.3
Respondent (Female)	29.2	31.4
Age Below 40	69.9	51.4
Secondary Education & Above	60.4	79.9
Households with 5+ Members	58.5	37.1
Common Religion (Christianity)	88.1	84.3

**Source: Ndabula, C.C. (2025). Original table from fieldwork**

Respondents were predominantly male in both communities and younger, with nearly 70% of heads of households below 40 years. Zarazong had a higher proportion of females (31.4%) and more heads of households in the 31–60 age range. Educationally, Zarazong reported a significantly

higher percentage (79.9%) of respondents with secondary education and above, compared to 60.4% in Bel-Sho. Larger households (5+ members) were more common in Bel-Sho (58.5%).

### **Findings**

This presents key differences in conflict exposure, indigenous conflict management, and social resilience structures between Bel-Sho and Zarazong communities in Plateau State, Nigeria.

### **Conflict Prevalence**

The study found Bel-Sho experiences more frequent and broader forms of conflict, including religious, ethnic, and militarized attacks as compared to Zarazong, which reports fewer but still significant incidents such as farmers-herders clashes.

They take their cows to completely eat farmlands, we are only being patient. Either cows eat the farm or they cut down the crops flat with cutlass when the plants have not matured, they let it become condemn. Even with that, it is God that is helping use to farm little that helps use eat with our children, they don't cut down farms around the house but for farms afar. So sometimes we get to enjoy peace, some other times it becomes bitter (Community Member, Bel-Sho)

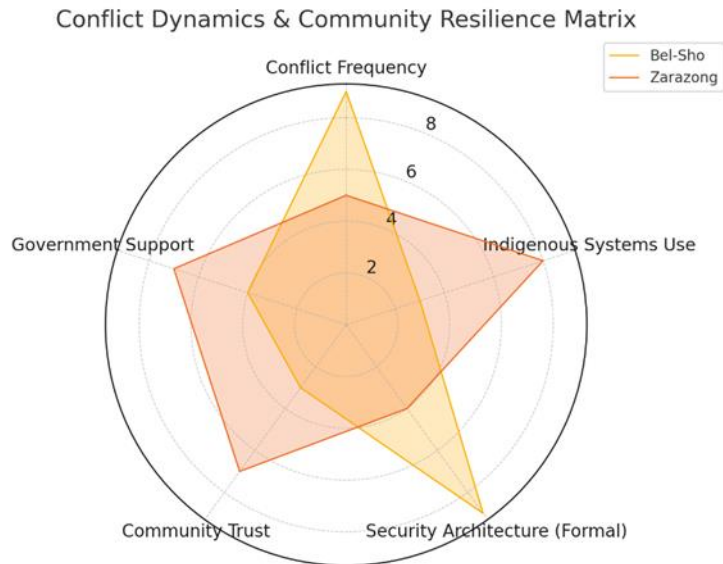
The above statement shows that, the prevalence of conflicts in Bel-Sho is the incapacity to manage, remote issues that continues to culminate, leading to the relapse of conflicts in the area.

We relate, we have a good relationship since they've showed us. It is not like what we hear outside, we hear about the ones outside, but for us here, we don't have any problem only that since it is happening to others, we fear it doesn't come to us here. We have only few cases. With the Fulanis, we've never had any confrontation or conflict. Even though we've had issues where they will say the natives poisoned the river, we will go and check, the Ardo (Fulani Elder) will even drink from the water in the river and say it's a lie, we don't have any problem with the Afizere people, that issue wanted to cause conflict (Traditional Ruler, Zarazong)

The above statement by the traditional ruler in Zarazong indicates low incidences of violence in the community.

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## Conflict Dynamics and Resilience



Representation: 0 = below 19%, 20% above, 4 = 40% and above, 6 = 60% and above, 8=80% and above

**Source: Ndabula, C.C. (2025). Original visualization based on field data, created using Matplotlib (Python).**

From the matrix presented above, it shows that, the frequency of conflicts is higher in Bel-Sho where it is above 80%, while in Zarazong it is below 40% and above. The use of indigenous systems for conflict management is within 80% in zarazong, but Bel-sho stands slightly above 20%. Bel-sho is more reliant on formal security architecture at above 80% while Zarazong's reliance on formal security architecture is within 40%. Zagazong has built a stronger community trust among the different groups above 60% while Bel-sho stands slightly above 20%. In respect to government support, Zarazong enjoys more government support at above 60% while Bel-sho gains minimal government support around 40%.

### Indigenous Community Management Mechanisms

It was found that Zarazong actively uses indigenous methods such as community dialogue and vigilante systems and cultural mediation more actively. They successfully integrate both formal and informal approaches to conflict and insecurity thereby showing healthy institutional collaboration and functionalism at the local level.

If there is an issue, we call them, that is the Ardos, we all sit in this palace, this is where we resolve the issues, like if someone farm was destroyed, he will report it here, even if he reports it to the police, it will still be brought here to be resolved, but if it is beyond us, we push it to the police and from there, they send to the court (Traditional Ruler, Zarazong).

Also, we instituted community police, vigilantes and allied security corps, and also hunters' association, civilian Joint task force, they are many. Like, the Army have also help us, like if there is an issue that looks like it will be serious, they will intervene. They've been coming, not once or twice, anytime, they help us very well (Community Elder, Zarazong).

The above shows there is an existing collaboration between the traditional ruler, the elders and community members in Zarazong that assists them in managing conflicts within the community. In contrast, Bel-Sho exhibits low inter-group trust and low collaboration with a greater dependence on formal security systems.

Presently, we are only managing to live with the Fulanis, we are living like yam and oil, one minutes we are living in peace, the next something will happen. But we, we are trying and forcing to live in peace now, but sometimes, something will now happen. Like yesterday, 2 boys were coming back from Barkin Ladi and their bikes was snatched, this is not the first, people have been blocked on the road and their bikes snatched (Youth Leader, Bel-Sho)

They (Fulanis) start to attack us without any form of disagreement. We kept living with them like that until the government intervenes, then they pause, with time again they start fighting again. We kept going to make settlement, it got to the extent Soldiers were stationed in our place. The Soldiers and Police stayed for a while, that was when there was peace a bit, gradually we kept going for meetings with the District Head, Me and the people and the youth leaders, all of us, we had people that, then we were under sector 7, they had not yet brought sector 4, that was how we were managing to live in peace, sometimes, they kill people, sometimes, we stay in peace like before another time, the killings return. When it happens and the Soldiers come, they call us and the Fulanis to settle. Before, I used to call all the Fulanis, to talk with them, then we will have a meeting, but since this problem started, they don't come when I call them (Traditional Ruler, Bel-Sho)

The above highlights the presence of distrust and lack of cooperation in Bel-Sho which continues to entrench unending violence in the community.

### **Security Architecture Preference**

The study observed that Bel-Sho relies more on formal security architecture and exhibits militarized conflict responses such as the use of sophisticated weapons showing that indigenous systems are underutilized. From observation, Bel-sho showed less confidence in physical demeanor, there was an appearance of dejectedness and lack of confidence among the leadership.

Bel-Sho is three of the wards, no police, only Soldiers, before there used to be a Police station but because of all the crisis, it became condemned, police no longer work now, except Soldiers, they are the ones they post (Community Elder, Bel-Sho).

We depend on God. Also, we have Soldiers, although initially, many Soldiers were sent, but over time, as the conflict was reducing, they started withdrawing the Soldiers. We don't have a means of protecting ourselves but God made us to have rocks in our villages, if we see them, we go to the rocks to hide and call for rescue. If there is an encroachment on a farmland, we go to plead with the Soldiers, and the Soldiers will go and check together with the youth leaders. They have a leader, I have 3 Madakis under me from 3 regions, but the Ardo who is the Fulani Elder is just 1, they also have youth leaders (Traditional Ruler, Bel-Sho).

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However, Zarazong leverages on indigenous mechanisms and community-organized vigilance thereby fostering self-reliance. The community showed confidence in their speech and actions, they had positive perception to handle security issues. This implies that, the more involved communities are in managing conflict, the more likely they are to manage other forms of security dynamics. The less confidence communities are to manage conflicts and security, the more reliant and dependent it becomes on mainstream security. The more dependence on mainstream security, the more it weakens and malfunctions just as the structural functionalism theory proposed.

### **Lack of Trust and Perceived Abandonment**

Another finding of the study shows that Bel-Sho has higher levels of reported abandonment by government institutions and less trust in political structures, which correlates with lower internal cohesion and higher violence frequency. Zarazong, though not immune to injustice, shows stronger local mechanisms and confidence in its local self-help.

The politicians come for campaigns and we give them our votes, we have a ward, we have a Councilor too, he is also Berom. The Fulanis also come to vote, because politician go to them to campaign. We all vote for our Councilors and the government we want. But when crisis happens, the politicians are nowhere to rescue us (Traditional Head, Bel-Sho)

This buttresses the point that the reliance only on formal security architecture when inadequate results in perceived abandonment by communities and lack of trust in the system.

It is left to the government, as for we, we live peacefully, without problem, even if a farm is destroyed, we resolve it, if the young people, because most if the problems start from them. We just want to continue living in peace because some other places they suffer from these conflicts but here, we don't have such and we want the government to help. The only major problem is for the government to assist in respect to the vigilantes and community police for the government to empower them because they are one of our major protectors in the community, if they empower with money to fuel their bikes, because the local government gave some of them bikes but fuel and cartilage for their local guns the government should assist. Also, they should be assisted with little allowances at the end of the month or maybe after two months to assist their movements because we have plenty hamlets here that are not accessible with cars except bikes, they should assist to help us continue living peacefully, but for now we don't have much problem (Traditional Ruler, Zarazong).

The above highlights that, although there is still gap in government security provisions in the community, there is still an existing collaboration and trust for improvement for government by the community.

### **Local leadership**

Additionally, the study observed that, the capacity, foresight and philosophy of traditional heads and leadership is reflected in the behaviors of members of the community. For instance, in Bel-sho, the demeanor of the traditional leadership exhibited powerlessness and helplessness which was observed to be reflected on the leaders under him and members of the community under his care.

In contrast, the traditional leader and elders in Zarazong showed high levels of confidence and positivity. Thus, insinuating that leadership can shape the extent or outcome of conflict situations in local communities.

## **Discussion**

The findings of indigenous conflict management in Bel-Sho and Zarazong is done using four major parameters; It's strengths, Limitations, legitimacy and Adaptability.

### **Strengths of Indigenous Conflict Management**

**Community Trust and Local Legitimacy:** The study shows that Zarazong community actively practices indigenous conflict management through dialogue, cultural mediation, and community-led vigilance. Conflict is first of all local, and the grassroot should be the first contact of response. The practice in Zarazong therefore, highlights strong internal trust in the traditional mechanisms for quick response. This aligns with Fry (2006, as cited by Lundy, Collette & Downs, 2022), who emphasized that indigenous systems are rooted in human potential for peace, countering the Western emphasis on violence as human nature. The importance of integration into community and harmony between parties are noted as crucial in overcoming conflicts and approaches for conflict management in Africa (Lundy, Collette & Downs (2022)

**Self-Reliance and Operational Resilience:** The effective use of relevant community structures in Zarazong, despite limited state presence (only 14.3% reported state response) underscores the resilience and capacity of indigenous conflict management. This is an indication that, it's integration with formal conflict management system will provide better and enormous results. This complements the position of Talcott Parsons' structural functionalism theory, which posits that subsystems like communities must perform their functions to maintain societal stability.

**Cultural Embeddedness:** Both Bel-Sho and Zarazong place high value on cultural beliefs and norms, showing reverence of cultural values by members of the community. This reinforces the cultural legitimacy of indigenous conflict management to be acceptable, accessible and trusted. Cultural legitimacy further enhances internalization of peace ownership and improves compliance outcomes which are key factors for sustaining peace.

### **Limitations of Indigenous Conflict Management**

**Mismatch with Modern Conflict Dynamics:** The most critical limitation is that indigenous conflict management systems are not designed for modern, asymmetric conflicts such as terrorism or organized armed group. Complex systems like African similarly operates in clans with peculiar beliefs, values, bloodline, customs, traditions, religion and leadership that differ from one another and can inform dynamics of actions and attitudes towards conflict management in an inter-group environment. For instance, in Bel-Sho, where sophisticated weapon use is reported by 84.9% of respondents and violence is often militarized, traditional methods prove insufficient for such high-intensity, complex violence. As noted by Sabala (2019), that indigenous mechanisms are limited in their ability to address complex, state security threats. This reflects a structural gap in applying ICM to contemporary West African conflicts involving non-state armed groups.

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In reverse, the claim that ICM proved to be insufficient in the case of Bel-Sho doesn't prove that the limitation come from its application in complex Armed conflict context, in fact, even smaller conflict situations like farmers-Herders conflicts in Bel-Sho could be resolved using ICM. Hence, the argument that ICM is insufficient for modern conflict dynamics was disputed by Bello & Olutola (2016) who believe even complex modern day Armed conflict like terrorism can be applicable in ICM through quick and early interventions of traditional and community leaders at the early inception of terrorism and other insurgency could prevent the possibility of its incubation and maturity into an organized group.

**Local Leadership Influence:** In Bel-Sho, the observed dejection and helplessness of traditional leaders correlates with community fragmentation, distrust, and higher conflict exposure. ICM systems are highly dependent on the strength and attitude of local leadership, and leadership failure translates into dysfunctional ICM practices. Similarly, when there is a distrust which questions the integrity of local authorities, ICM process becomes broken.

**Influence of Politics, Education, and Media:** Globalization and democratization are promoted through these systems. The effect is, it has also limited and degraded the effectiveness of other alternatives and have gradually eroded the authority of traditional systems. Modern education and media often promote formal legal frameworks while portraying indigenous systems as outdated or unscientific, creating an ideological disconnect between younger generations and traditional methods (Briggs et al., 2017). Likewise, the promotion of western thoughts, where security is seen as a designated responsibility of the central government has heightened dependence in only formal conflict management architecture.

### **Legitimacy of Indigenous Conflict Management**

**Informal Legitimacy vs Formal Recognition:** At the grassroots level, ICM remains legitimate due to deep cultural roots and shared values, especially in Zarazong. However, despite global recognition such as UNESCO's listing of the Oromo Gada system in Ethiopia, indigenous conflict management still lacks consistent formal legal status and necessary institutional support within international, regional and national peace and security architectures (Shiferaw & Debela, 2024; UNESCO, 2015). Although these frameworks provide a community-based conflict management and grassroot peace initiatives, however, there are limited supports at the grassroots level, in the areas of funding, capacity building and confidence in indigenous mechanisms. Therefore, the friction between cultural legitimacy and legal informality limits the wider application of ICM, funding access, and integration into official peace processes.

**Undervalued in National Frameworks:** Even where policy acknowledges indigenous conflict management, there is limited structural support from the national system in terms of capacity building, funding, and legitimacy enforcement. As the study observed in its finding that ICM operates with minimal state engagement, which weakens its influence and continuity in high conflict scenarios.

**Potential for Hybridization:** Zarazong offers a working model of hybrid conflict management, where traditional institutions can engage and collaborate with formal systems to address conflicts

and security threats. The community's frequent dialogue practice and integration of vigilante efforts demonstrate how ICM can be adapted to fit modern conflict dynamics without undermining traditional authority. This echoes findings from Ethiopia's Gada system, where complementary, not competition, between traditional and formal institutions has enabled the relevance of ICM in modern era (Shiferaw & Debela, 2024) which is been greatly untapped or under tapped.

## **Conclusion**

This study explored indigenous conflict management (ICM) mechanisms application in Bel-Sho and Zarazong communities in Plateau State, Nigeria, highlighting their strengths, limitations, and contextual applications within the broader West African security landscape. It employed a comparative methodology grounded in structural functionalism to assess how community-based systems contribute to conflict management, and peacebuilding. The study found that the incidences and nature of conflicts in both communities varies, while Bel-Sho experiences higher levels of militarized violence, religious and ethnic conflicts, Zarazong faces fewer, more structurally driven issues like injustice and economic competition. On community engagement and dialogue, Zarazong demonstrates a higher degree of community cohesion and indigenous led peace mechanisms such as dialogue, mediation, and collaborative vigilance with formal authorities. Bel-Sho, in contrast, shows reliance on militarized state interventions with little local cohesion or trust. The study also found that, local leadership influence has strong impact on the application of ICM. In Zarazong the local leadership demonstrated confidence in its capacity which is in contrasts with a lack of confidence and helplessness among Bel-Sho's leadership, impacting conflict outcomes and resilience. Generally, the conflict management approach and security architecture in Zarazong's demonstrated that a hybrid approach integrating traditional and formal mechanisms leads to better local stability. Whilst Bel-Sho, reliant on formal security without internal conflict management systems, keeps it vulnerable.

The study concludes that indigenous communities possess the inherent capacity to prevent, de-escalate, and manage conflicts if empowered. Indigenous mechanisms must not be viewed as alternatives to modern systems but as foundational pillars upon which resilient, inclusive, and sustainable peace structures can be built. Their marginalization weakens national conflict management architectures and perpetuates cycles of violence.

Even in complex modern armed conflicts like terrorism and insurgency, ICM can be helpful to monitor and manage these conflicts at the local levels before it escalates into bigger threats national, regional or international threats. Indigenous communities are therefore relevant in the broader conflict management and peacebuilding frameworks by complementing formal systems. Conflict management is complimentary not competitive and security is owned by the community. Every conflict management approach should thus, be modelled around existing community structure. Newer and modernized security architecture and conflict management frameworks should be complimentary rather than replacing.

## **INDIGENOUS CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN WEST AFRICA: LESSONS FROM BEL-SHO AND ZARAZONG COMMUNITIES**

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### **Recommendations**

To strengthen indigenous conflict management systems and enhance their contribution to national and regional peacebuilding, the following actionable recommendations are proposed:

- a. **Policy Formulation and Legal Integration:** At the National Level, states should enact or amend national peacebuilding and security policies to formally recognize ICM as a component of National conflict management architecture. Furthermore, they domesticate Article 9 of the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance, which promotes local participation in governance, and integrate it with grassroots conflict resolution. And states should establish legal provisions under their Constitutions or customary courts acts to protect and institutionalize the roles of traditional leaders and community-based mechanisms in conflict Management. At the regional Level, the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (ECPF) should be reviewed to incorporate localized ICM structures, making them strategic pillars for early warning systems and community dialogue. Furthermore, it should strengthen the ECOWAS Early Warning Mechanism by integrating indigenous institutions as first-level responders and information sources. At the international level, states should leverage instruments such as the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and the UN Sustainable Development Goal 16 to build institutional bridges between formal and informal peace structures. For instance, Nigeria should partner with UNESCO to a develop country level initiatives inspired by Ethiopia’s Gada system, offering formal protections and recognition for effective indigenous models.
- b. **Capacity Building and Institutional Support:** While adaptable, ICM’s sustainability depends on its ability to interface with national security structures. This requires legal frameworks that formalize traditional authority, training for traditional leaders, and strategic partnerships with state and civil society actors. Without such integration, ICM’s relevance may decline in rapidly urbanizing and politically fragmented contexts. This can be achieved by developing targeted training and sensitization programs for traditional leaders, youth groups, and community elders on modern conflict prevention, gender-sensitive peacebuilding, and human rights. Furthermore, through the establishment of a community conflict management support fund that is accessible through local government and monitored by traditional councils, to support mediation, reconciliation, and community policing efforts. And the provision of material support and ethical trainings to community-led security outfits such as vigilante groups including protective gear, mobility, and stipends to reduce vulnerability and burnout.
- c. **Structural Reforms and Hybrid Systems:** States should design a hybrid conflict management framework where traditional systems work in tandem with formal police and judicial institutions, clearly defining roles, escalation protocols, and areas of jurisdiction. They should likewise institutionalize community peace councils at local government levels, composed of traditional leaders, civil society, youth and women’s representatives, linked to local government peace and security committees.
- d. **Community Empowerment and Leadership Development:** States and stakeholders should promote grassroots civic education campaigns to reinforce the value of ICM, counter narratives

that discredit traditional systems, and build trust in both traditional and formal mechanisms. And invest in youth mentorship through traditional leadership structures to foster intergenerational leadership and sustainability of ICM practices.

e. Research, Monitoring, and Data Integration: States should create a national observatory on indigenous peace practices. For instance, in Nigeria, this can be done under institutions like the Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution (IPCR) or Nigerian Institute of Policy and Strategic Studies (NIPSS), to document, evaluate and share best practices. They can also integrate community-level data into the National Conflict Early Warning and Response System (CEWERS) operated by the Office for Strategic Preparedness and Resilience (OSPRES) to enhance state responsiveness.

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