

THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS LEADERS AS IDENTITY BROKERS: A THEORETICAL AND COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE AGULERI-UMUERI CONFLICT IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper examines the essential role of religious leaders in mediating the Aguleri-Umuleri intercommunal conflict in Anambra State, Nigeria, with particular focus on their roles as peacebuilders and identity brokers. Using Social Identity Theory, Conflict Transformation Theory, and Peacebuilding Theory as frameworks, the study investigates how religious leaders mediated disputes, reshaped communal identities, and encouraged reconciliation in a highly divided society. Based on qualitative fieldwork, which includes interviews, focus group discussions, and archival reviews, the paper highlights the strategies religious leaders used to de-escalate violence, promote dialogue, and mend fractured relationships. By placing the Aguleri-Umuleri conflict within the broader African context and comparing it with other similar cases, the study underlines the broader significance of religious mediation in identity-related conflicts. The paper concludes with practical recommendations for enhancing the capacity of religious leaders to contribute actively to grassroots peacebuilding efforts, stressing the importance of neutrality, cultural legitimacy, and ongoing engagement in conflict resolution.

Keywords

Religious leaders; intercommunal conflict; Aguleri-Umueri; peacebuilding; Nigeria; identity; mediation

Introduction

Communal conflicts are a persistent aspect of Nigeria's socio-political landscape, often resulting in violence over land, identity, and political recognition. While some conflicts stem from struggles over economic resources, others originate from intergenerational disputes and narratives of belonging that intensify over time (Best, 2007; Osaghae & Suberu, 2005). The Aguleri-Umueri conflict in Anambra State demonstrates this complexity. Although both communities share a common ancestor, disagreements over boundaries and political identity have triggered repeated clashes for decades, with serious consequences for social unity and development (Afigbo, 1981; Okafor & Emeka, 2008).

Nigeria's history is filled with violent clashes between different groups, but scholarship has mainly focused on larger ethno-religious conflicts in places like Jos, Kaduna, or the Niger Delta (Ibrahim, 2000; Kukah, 1999). In contrast, fewer studies have examined "micro-level" community disputes such as those between Aguleri and Umueri, even though they offer important insights into how identity, kinship, and faith intersect in shaping peace and conflict dynamics. Focusing on these cases enhances our understanding of conflict transformation at the local level, especially in areas where government interventions have often been insufficient.

This paper addresses this gap by analysing the role of religious leaders in the Aguleri-Umueri conflict, focusing on how they act as "identity brokers" — reshaping conflicting narratives and promoting reconciliation through moral and spiritual authority. Religious leaders are not neutral bystanders in such conflicts. They embody traditions of moral guidance, hold high levels of trust, and often serve as intermediaries between divided communities (Appleby, 2000; Ellis & ter Haar, 2004). However, their roles can be ambiguous, especially when partisan alignments weaken their credibility (Ikelegbe, 2005). Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing peacebuilding strategies that are grounded in the local context.

Three interconnected theoretical perspectives guide the study. Social Identity Theory (SIT) explains how in-group and out-group boundaries intensify communal conflicts (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Conflict Transformation Theory emphasises the importance of relational change and grassroots participation in peacebuilding (Lederach, 1997). Peacebuilding theory emphasises the importance of long-term structural interventions to sustain peace (Galtung, 1996). Together, these perspectives allow a nuanced understanding of how religious leaders mediated the Aguleri-Umueri conflict.

The paper aims to accomplish three main objectives: to explore the historical and contextual aspects of the Aguleri–Umueri conflict, to evaluate the role of religious leaders as mediators and identity brokers in the conflict, and to compare the Aguleri–Umueri case with other African contexts to derive broader lessons for theory and practice.

The research uses a qualitative design, combining semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and document reviews. Interviews were held with religious leaders (Catholic priests, Anglican ministers, and Pentecostal pastors), traditional rulers, elders, youth leaders, and women's groups in both Aguleri and Umueri. FGDs offered insights into grassroots perceptions of the conflict and the role of clergy in reconciliation. Archival sources and secondary literature were also examined to add historical context.

Data were thematically analysed using the frameworks of Social Identity, Conflict Transformation, and Peacebuilding theories. This method enabled perspective triangulation, ensuring that interpretations were grounded in both theory and real-life experience. To protect confidentiality, participants are referred to as Interview, Aguleri, 2025, or FGD, Umueri, 2025, instead of by name.

By combining theory, empirical evidence, and comparative analysis, the paper makes both scholarly and practical contributions. It emphasises how religious leaders can mediate identity-based disputes in fragile settings while also highlighting the structural and institutional reforms needed to maintain peace in Nigeria's communal areas.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Across Africa, religion has historically influenced both the dynamics of conflict and opportunities for peace. Religious leaders possess spiritual legitimacy, moral authority, and social capital, which make them uniquely influential in conflict situations (Appleby, 2000; Ellis & ter Haar, 2004). In many communities, they are trusted mediators who resolve disputes not only between individuals but also among entire groups. Their influence comes from their ability to invoke sacred stories, mobilise large groups, and support rituals of reconciliation.

In Nigeria, scholars have demonstrated that both Christian and Muslim leaders play vital roles in peacebuilding. Kukah (1999) notes that religious leaders often serve as conscience-keepers of society, speaking out against injustice while rallying communities for nonviolent change. Best (2007) documents how interfaith councils in Jos reduced violence through organised dialogue between imams and pastors. Similarly, Haynes (2009) contends that religious peacebuilding depends on the ability of clerics to combine theological teachings with practical mediation strategies.

However, the roles of religious leaders are not always positive. Ikelegbe (2005) warns that when clerics become partisan or aligned with political elites, their credibility is damaged, and they may unintentionally inflame tensions. Appleby (2000) describes this as the "ambivalence of the sacred": religion can either heal or divide, depending on how one uses it. This tension is especially relevant in Aguleri and Umueri, where most residents share the same Christian faith, but interpret kinship and communal identities in conflicting ways. Therefore, examining religious leaders as "identity brokers" helps us understand both their potential to influence change and their vulnerabilities.

Social Identity Theory (SIT)

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) provides a strong framework for understanding the Aguleri–Umueri conflict. SIT suggests that people derive their sense of identity from group membership, which creates distinctions between "in-groups" (us) and "out-groups" (them). Conflicts become worse when these identities are seen as mutually exclusive, inflexible, and under threat.

In Aguleri and Umueri, oral traditions, historical accounts, and boundary disputes have shaped group identities that foster suspicion and hostility. Although both communities are mainly Catholic, their sense of belonging depends on whether someone identifies as "Aguleri" or "Umueri." During interviews, elders recalled how community stories reinforced differences: "We were told from childhood that Aguleri people would always claim our land. We grew up with that fear" (Interview, Umueri, 2025).

Religious leaders intervened by reframing these rigid identities. By preaching shared faith, brotherhood in Christ, and biblical narratives of reconciliation, they aimed to reduce the prominence of "Aguleri versus Umueri" and promote a higher-order identity: Christian kinship. This aligns with SIT's insight that intergroup hostility can be lessened when superordinate identities are emphasised (Brewer, 2001).

However, SIT also warns that identity shifts are delicate. When trust is broken, communities may return to hostile boundaries. This was clear in the 1999 conflict, when, despite years of church-led dialogue, violence broke out after a land dispute. Therefore, SIT explains both why the conflict continues and the difficulties religious leaders face as mediators of identity change.

Conflict Transformation Theory

While SIT explains identity dynamics, Conflict Transformation Theory (Lederach, 1997) focuses on how conflicts can become opportunities for relational and systemic change. Lederach maintains that effective peacebuilding must extend beyond resolving immediate disputes to transforming relationships, attitudes, and structures that perpetuate violence.

For Aguleri and Umueri, this perspective is vital. Temporary ceasefires and government interventions offered relief but seldom addressed the root causes of mistrust. Religious leaders, therefore, engaged in long-term efforts: organising joint worship services, encouraging inter-parish youth exchanges, and delivering sermons that reframe historical grievances. These actions align with Lederach's (1997) model of multi-level peacebuilding, where grassroots actors (such as churches, women's groups, and youth) support mid-level leaders (including clergy and traditional rulers) and top-level elites (government officials).

Conflict Transformation also emphasises building trust and repairing relationships. One priest explained, "We knew that unless the people of Umueri and Aguleri could eat together, pray together, and bury their dead in peace, the conflict would not end" (Interview, Aguleri, 2025). These initiatives show how religious leaders helped foster relational change through everyday peace rituals. At the same time, Conflict Transformation underscores the limits of agreements driven by elites. Peace cannot last unless ordinary people personally embrace reconciliation. This is why some state-brokered pacts fell apart, while religiously centred dialogues lasted longer — they connected with people on a cultural and spiritual level.

Peacebuilding Theory

Johan Galtung's (1996) Peacebuilding Theory further deepens the analysis. Galtung distinguishes between "negative peace" (the absence of violence) and "positive peace" (the structural and cultural conditions that make peace sustainable). Religious leaders in Aguleri and Umueri contributed to both. On one hand, their interventions helped de-escalate violence by organising ceasefire prayers and persuading youths to withdraw from attacks — a form of negative peace. On the other hand, by institutionalising inter-parish dialogue, preaching forgiveness, and encouraging joint development projects, they promoted structural conditions of coexistence — elements of positive peace.

Peacebuilding Theory also emphasises the importance of culture and values. In Igbo society, religion, kinship, and land are deeply connected. By incorporating peace messages into cultural rituals such as community feasts, harvest celebrations, and ancestral remembrances, religious leaders turned abstract ideas of peace into practical, lived experiences. This cultural integration gave their efforts legitimacy. However, Peacebuilding Theory also highlights limitations. Without formal recognition from the state, the clergy lacked resources to maintain programs. Additionally, structural inequalities, such as disputes over land titles and local government allocations, remained unresolved, jeopardising long-term peace. Therefore, while religious leaders promoted cultural peace, their efforts needed additional institutional reforms to address the underlying structural causes of conflict.

Integrating the Three Theories

Together, Social Identity Theory, Conflict Transformation, and Peacebuilding present a multi-layered framework. Through SIT, it is explained why the identity boundaries between Aguleri and Umueri are so rigid and how religious leaders can soften them through stronger Christian identities. Conflict Transformation highlights the relational and grassroots aspects of peacebuilding. It shows how clergy move beyond ceasefires toward deeper reconciliation. Peacebuilding Theory places these efforts within larger structural and cultural contexts, showing both successes and limitations. By combining these theories, the study shows that religious leaders are not just mediators but also active brokers of identity, relationships, and social structures. Their work reveals the link between symbolic authority and practical peacebuilding in highly divided societies.

Historical and Contextual Background of Aguleri-Umueri Conflict

The Aguleri-Umueri conflict is one of the longest-standing and most deeply rooted communal disputes in southeastern Nigeria. Unlike resource-based or religious conflicts in northern and central Nigeria, this dispute mainly revolves around historical identity claims, ancestral land ownership, and traditional authority rivalries. However, its ongoing cycle of violence shows that it is not just about local grievances but also reflects broader patterns of communal identity formation and competition in Nigeria (Uchendu, 2010; Egwu, 2011). This section

situates the Aguleri–Umueri conflict within its historical, social, cultural, and political context, examining its origins, key flashpoints, and the experiences of those directly affected.

Origin of the Conflict

Accounts of the origins of the conflict are deeply contested. Both Aguleri and Umueri trace their ancestry to Eri, the mythical progenitor of the Igbo people, whose settlement along the Anambra River basin is celebrated in oral history (Achebe, 1983; Uchendu, 2010). While Aguleri people claim to be the direct custodians of Eri's stool and the sacred shrines, Umueri contest this exclusivity, asserting their own rights as descendants with legitimate entitlements to the ancestral land.

During focus group discussions (FGDs) in Umueri (August 2025), participants emphasised: "Aguleri wants to monopolise Eri's legacy. But we are also children of Eri, and we cannot allow ourselves to be erased from history." (FGD with Umueri Youth, 12 August 2025) Conversely, elders in Aguleri (Interview with Chief O., 10 August 2025) insisted: "We are the first sons of Eri, custodians of the sacred ground. Umueri people are our brothers, but they came later. The truth is simple: the land belongs to us." These divergent narratives illustrate how myth-history functions as a driver of social identity (Tajfel, 1978), reinforcing in-group pride and out-group exclusion.

Land Disputes and Communal Boundaries

At the material level, land constitutes the most visible source of conflict in the area under study. Colonial land policies exacerbated tensions by attempting to fix boundaries between Aguleri and Umueri without adequately accounting for fluid precolonial arrangements (Nwosu, 1998). Disputes over farmlands and fishing zones along the Omambala River have been especially contentious. One respondent, a 72-year-old farmer from Umueri, recalled: "Our fathers farmed that land freely. However, from the 1950s, every season came with quarrels. The colonial officers left us with boundaries that were never clear, and today our youths fight because they inherit the quarrels." (Interview, 15 August 2025). This aligns with Egwu's (2011) observation that poorly defined communal land demarcations across Nigeria often ignite cycles of communal violence.

Colonial and Postcolonial Politics

The role of colonial and postcolonial governance cannot be overstated. British indirect rule relied on warrant chiefs, often imposing leaders without regard to indigenous legitimacy (Afigbo, 1972). In Aguleri and Umueri, colonial recognition of certain chiefs as "paramount rulers" deepened rivalries. Post-independence, the situation worsened. Politicians frequently manipulated the conflict for electoral gain. For example, the 1970s Anambra East local government creation exercise saw elites from both communities lobbying for administrative headquarters, inflaming tensions. Field interviews revealed a consensus that politicisation intensified violence, as politicians often funded youth militias to assert territorial claims. "They used us as foot soldiers during elections. After the campaigns, we were left with the bitterness, and the guns remained in the villages." (FGD with Aguleri Youth, 14 August 2025). This resonates with Ikelegbe's (2005) warning that political manipulation frequently transforms latent communal disputes into violent crises.

Violent Flare-ups and Cycles of Conflict in Aguleri and Umueri

The conflict has experienced periodic violent eruptions, as listed below:

- **1933–34** - documented skirmishes over farmland rights.
- **1964** - clashes intensified during the regional elections.
- **1975–76** - land disputes escalated into killings and displacement.
- **1995–1999** - the deadliest phase, marked by widespread arson, killings, and destruction of property, drawing state and national attention (Uchendu, 2010; HRW, 2001).

The 1999 outbreak is particularly significant. Hundreds were displaced, and both Aguleri and Umueri were virtually militarised. An interview with a Catholic priest in Aguleri (Interview, 16 August 2025) reveals: "The crisis of 1999 was apocalyptic. Churches became refugee camps, and priests were the ones feeding and comforting the displaced." This testimony highlights the entry point for religious leaders into peacebuilding roles—a theme developed in later sections.

Cultural Dimensions: Identity, Rituals, and Sacred Spaces

Cultural and ritual dimensions also sustain the conflict. Both communities celebrate Ovala festivals and maintain shrines tied to Eri's legacy. Contestation arises when rituals overlap or when one group claims exclusive rights. From the perspective of Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), these cultural markers serve as boundaries distinguishing "us" from "them." For example, during an FGD in Aguleri, a participant stated: "*Our masquerades do not enter Umueri. If they cross, it is seen as provocation.*" (FGD, 13 August 2025). Thus, rituals that should serve communal cohesion become instruments of differentiation and hostility.

Humanitarian Consequences

The cyclical violence has had devastating humanitarian impacts: displacement, destruction of schools, markets, and places of worship, and long-term economic stagnation. Women and children are disproportionately affected. A women's group in Umueri reported (FGD, 17 August 2025): "We lost our farms, our children dropped out of school. Even when peace is declared, fear remains in our hearts." This aligns with Galtung's (1996) concept of structural violence, where the aftermath of physical conflict perpetuates economic and social suffering long after hostilities subside.

The Aguleri–Umueri conflict is not merely a quarrel over land or ancestral pride; it is a deeply layered identity conflict shaped by historical narratives, contested land ownership, political manipulation, and ritualised cultural boundaries. The persistence of this dispute reflects both local identity struggles and the broader Nigerian challenge of managing communal diversity. The evidence from interviews and FGDs underscores how lived experiences mirror theoretical insights: narratives of origin reinforce identity cleavages (Social Identity Theory), politicisation escalates latent disputes into violent cycles (Conflict Transformation Theory), and the humanitarian aftermath necessitates multi-level peacebuilding (Peacebuilding Theory). This background sets the stage for analysing how religious leaders intervene as peacebuilders in such a complex, identity-laden environment.

Comparative Analysis: Aguleri-Umuleri in Perspective

Conflict studies emphasise the value of comparison for identifying both the uniqueness and generalisability of cases (Collier, 2004). The Aguleri–Umueri conflict, though geographically localised in Anambra State, Nigeria, exhibits features that resonate with broader African patterns of identity-based violence. Situating this case alongside others highlights how religious leaders serve as peacebuilders and identity brokers across various contexts. In particular, comparative analysis highlights the dual nature of religious authority: capable of either fuelling sectarianism or transforming antagonisms into reconciliation (Appleby, 2000).

Aguleri-Umuleri and Jos Crisis

The protracted ethno-religious violence in Jos, Plateau State, bears instructive parallels with Aguleri–Umueri. In both cases, questions of land ownership and indigeneship intersect with identity boundaries, making disputes especially resistant to resolution (Krause, 2011). However, while Jos conflicts pivoted around Christian–Muslim divides, the Aguleri–Umueri conflict occurred within a largely homogenous Igbo Christian environment. This underscores the role of sub-ethnic identities—such as clan, lineage, and ancestral claims—over broader religious distinctions.

Religious leaders in Jos often found themselves compromised by accusations of bias, given the Christian–Muslim cleavage (Higazi, 2011). By contrast, in Aguleri–Umueri, Catholic and Anglican clergy could appeal to shared Christian identity to frame peace as a religious obligation, while still negotiating sub-ethnic differences. This comparative insight strengthens the argument, grounded in Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), that *even shared superordinate identities may not dissolve conflict unless actively invoked and ritualised through peacebuilding practices*.

Kaduna Sharia Crisis and Religious Brokage

The Kaduna Sharia riots of 2000 illustrate how religion can escalate rather than defuse conflict. The contestation over Sharia implementation hardened Muslim–Christian boundaries, polarising identities (Suberu, 2001). Here, religious leaders were sometimes political entrepreneurs, reinforcing narratives of conflict and division. In Aguleri–Umueri, the risk of religious leaders amplifying divisions was less pronounced, though denominational rivalry between Catholic and Anglican factions occasionally mirrored competitive dynamics (interview with Anglican priest, Umueri, 2025). This contrast suggests that the effectiveness of religious leaders depends on their perceived neutrality and ability to transcend their institutional loyalties (Ikelegbe, 2005). It also illustrates Lederach's (1997) call for leaders to function as "middle-range actors" capable of linking grassroots suffering to elite decision-making.

Acholi Religious Leaders' Peace Initiative in Northern Uganda

Northern Uganda's Acholi Religious Leaders' Peace Initiative (ARLPI) provides a more positive comparative model. During the Lord's Resistance Army insurgency, ARLPI leveraged ecumenical cooperation among Catholic, Anglican, and Muslim leaders to build legitimacy across divides (Khadiagala, 2001). Their strategies—community dialogues, trauma healing, advocacy—echoed many of the interventions observed in Aguleri–Umueri, including inter-village prayer services and the symbolic sharing of land for joint farming (FGD with Aguleri elders, 2025). A key lesson is the importance of multi-religious coalitions. Whereas ARLPI bridged faith divides,

Aguleri–Umueri peacebuilding worked within an intra-Christian space. Both cases demonstrate that *the legitimacy of religious leaders flows not only from doctrine but also from their rootedness in community trust networks*.

South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission

South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) underscores how religious symbolism and moral narratives can underpin national healing (Tutu, 1999). Archbishop Desmond Tutu infused the TRC with theological notions of forgiveness and Ubuntu, translating spiritual language into a framework for political reconciliation. While Aguleri–Umueri lacked a state-led reconciliation mechanism, the clergy acted as local truth commissioners, organising forums where victims narrated their grievances and offenders sought communal pardon (personal communication with the parish priest, Aguleri, 2025). The comparison highlights both scale differences—national versus local—and similar strategies of leveraging spiritual authority to legitimise reconciliation.

Sierra Leone and Post-War Reintegration

Post-war Sierra Leone involved significant religious participation in disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR) efforts. Religious leaders played central roles in reintegrating former child soldiers, offering rituals of cleansing and community reacceptance (Pham, 2004). Aguleri–Umueri communities, though not facing armed insurgency, utilised similar ritual-symbolic practices to reintegrate displaced persons after the 1999–2001 violence. Traditional shrines and church rituals functioned as cultural technologies of reintegration, blending religious and indigenous reconciliation practices.

Synthesis: Cross-Case Insight

A comparative analysis demonstrates that:

1. **Religious leaders are double-edged actors:** capable of exacerbating or mitigating conflict depending on credibility and neutrality.
2. **Shared religious identity is insufficient** to guarantee peace; it must be mobilised through intentional peacebuilding strategies.
3. **Symbolic and ritual practices**—from sermons to forgiveness ceremonies—are essential in transforming identity antagonisms.
4. **Coalitional leadership**, whether ecumenical or interfaith, strengthens legitimacy.
5. **Context matters:** the same strategies (dialogue, rituals, mediation) play out differently depending on whether conflict lines are interfaith (Jos, Kaduna, Uganda) or intra-ethnic (Aguleri–Umueri).

Thus, the Aguleri–Umueri case contributes to comparative scholarship by demonstrating how religious leaders, as identity brokers, can mediate even intra-Christian, sub-ethnic disputes, challenging the assumption that shared faith alone ensures harmony.

Findings

Drawing on qualitative data from interviews, focus group discussions, and archival records, and interpreted through Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), Conflict Transformation Theory (Lederach, 1997), and Peacebuilding Theory (Galtung, 1996), the analysis demonstrates that religious actors wield unique resources of moral legitimacy, community trust, and symbolic authority. These resources position them to influence both conflict escalation and resolution.

The findings highlight several interrelated dynamics. First, although the Aguleri–Umueri conflict unfolded within a relatively homogenous Christian Igbo context, religious leaders were indispensable in reframing the dispute away from zero-sum territorial competition toward narratives of shared belonging. This underscores a key insight from Social Identity Theory: sub-ethnic cleavages can remain salient despite overarching religious or ethnic unity. Religious leaders mediated this by reasserting superordinate identities rooted in Christian fellowship, kinship, and neighbourliness.

Second, religious leaders in Aguleri and Umueri not only facilitated dialogue but also employed ritual and symbolic practices to rebuild broken relationships. These included joint prayers, reconciliation ceremonies, and ritual cleansing of contested land, all of which served to reconstitute community trust. This aligns with Lederach's conception of conflict transformation, which emphasises that sustainable peace requires healing relational ruptures, not merely signing peace accords.

Third, comparative analysis reinforced the double-edged nature of religious leadership. Cases such as Jos and Kaduna show that religious leaders can exacerbate tensions when credibility is compromised. By contrast, examples from Northern Uganda and South Africa demonstrate how ecumenical cooperation can lend legitimacy

to peace efforts. The Aguleri–Umueri case contributes to this comparative literature by showing how intra-Christian conflicts also demand delicate brokerage, even where denominational rivalry is subtler than interfaith polarisation.

Finally, the study underlines the structural constraints faced by religious leaders. They often lacked material resources and state backing, limiting the scope of their interventions. Nonetheless, their grassroots embeddedness gave them a resilience and legitimacy that formal state institutions frequently lacked. This tension—between resource scarcity and moral authority—defines much of religious peacebuilding in African contexts.

Overall, the Aguleri–Umueri case demonstrates that religious leaders are not peripheral actors but central agents in the peacebuilding process. They transform conflicts not by replacing political or judicial processes, but by embedding reconciliation within community moral and spiritual frameworks. Their brokerage of identity—reframing antagonistic identities into inclusive narratives—remains one of their most powerful contributions.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The conflict between Aguleri and Umueri, a dispute over land and lineage, highlights how religious leaders act as key identity brokers in Nigerian communal conflicts. Based on empirical fieldwork and integrating various theoretical frameworks such as Social Identity Theory (SIT), Conflict Transformation Theory, and Peacebuilding Theory, this paper shows that clergy are not just mediators of peace but also active agents promoting relational and psychological change.

The clergy's leading role in the conflict was to redefine strict 'in-group' and 'out-group' boundaries. Despite sharing a broader Christian faith, the intense conflict arose from exclusive communal identities tied to Eri's disputed legacy and land claims. Religious leaders often invoked their moral and symbolic authority to emphasize the collective identity of "brotherhood in Christ" and "children of God," distancing it from divisive labels like "Aguleri" or "Umueri." They fostered reconciliation through joint worship, prayer services, public forgiveness rituals, land cleansing ceremonies, and denominational youth exchanges—activities aligned with Igbo cultural values—and sermons promoting forgiveness. These efforts created sacred spaces for healing that alleviated psychological hostility often overlooked by traditional state-brokered agreements. This approach demonstrates that a unifying identity must be ritually and regularly promoted to be effective. Grassroots initiatives helped build trust and connect formal agreements with genuine community engagement.

The analysis highlights the considerable structural limitations described by Galtung (1996) in religious peacebuilding. Clergy often lacked sufficient material resources for long-term development initiatives, and their moral authority alone was insufficient to address deeply entrenched political problems like land titling and local government allocation, which often led to violence.

Based on the research findings, various recommendations are provided for religious leaders, policymakers, peace practitioners, and scholars.

1. Strengthening inter-denominational cooperation. The Aguleri–Umueri experience shows that denominational divisions can undermine credibility. Catholic and Anglican leaders, for instance, were occasionally perceived as prioritizing their flocks' interests. Future peace efforts should institutionalise ecumenical councils or interfaith platforms, ensuring that interventions represent broad religious consensus rather than factional positions.

2. Embedding ritual-symbolic practices in peacebuilding. Religious ceremonies, cleansing rites, and public forgiveness rituals proved effective in restoring communal trust and harmony. Policymakers and NGOs should formally integrate such practices into peacebuilding programming, recognising that cultural–religious rituals often resonate more deeply than externally imposed mechanisms.

3. Enhancing religious leaders' conflict mediation skills. While spiritual legitimacy is crucial, it should be complemented by professional training in mediation, trauma healing, and nonviolent communication. Partnerships between universities, theological seminaries, and peacebuilding NGOs could build this capacity, equipping clergy to combine spiritual authority with technical competence.

4. Strengthening collaboration between state and religious institutions. Governmental responses to the Aguleri–Umueri crisis were often belated or heavy-handed. Religious leaders can play a bridging role if they are systematically included in early warning systems, conflict monitoring, and peace committees. Institutionalising such collaboration would help prevent escalation while lending legitimacy to state-led interventions.

5. Supporting youth and women as complementary peace actors. Interviews revealed that youth and women's groups often felt sidelined in formal peace negotiations, despite bearing a disproportionate share of the conflict

burden. Religious leaders should intentionally integrate these groups into peace structures, amplifying voices that enhance inclusivity and sustainability.

6. Resourcing grassroots religious peace initiatives. Many local clergy worked with minimal resources, relying on volunteerism and personal sacrifice. Donors and NGOs should channel small grants and logistical support to strengthen community-level interventions. This would reduce dependency on sporadic state aid and enable consistent peace programming.

7. Advancing comparative research and documentation. This study contributes to the under-researched area of intra-Christian, sub-ethnic conflicts. Future scholarship should continue to document such cases, comparing them with more widely studied interfaith conflicts. Richer empirical data will refine theoretical insights into identity, religion, and peacebuilding.

Religious leaders in Aguleri and Umueri embody the paradox of African peacebuilding: limited in formal power yet profoundly influential in community life. Their interventions underscore the enduring importance of local legitimacy, moral persuasion, and identity reframing in promoting peace. As African societies continue to grapple with conflicts rooted in history, identity, and resource competition, religious leaders remain indispensable. Not because they alone can resolve such disputes, but because they carry the moral language and symbolic authority through which divided communities can imagine reconciliation.

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