



Researching Indigenous Moral Heritage amid Active Conflict: A Decolonial Methodology for Studying Nrunga among the Hema and Lendu

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Abstract

This study presents and evaluates the methodology developed to study *Nrunga*, an indigenous moral heritage of humanness shared by the Hema and Lendu communities of Djugu Territory, Ituri Province, Democratic Republic of Congo, during active armed conflict. It used an indigenous-led qualitative design based on sensory participant ethnography and abductive logic. Fifty-eight purposively selected participants, drawn from four Hema and four Lendu communities of Djugu and from Hema and Lendu residents of Bunia, including displaced persons, took part in 20 storytelling interviews and five talking circles between December 2024 and December 2025. Ten institutional documents were also analysed. Analysis combined three layers: inductive thematic analysis in NVivo 15, the Nrunga Reflexive Interview and Talking-circle Analysis Tool (NRITAT) and a Critical Document Analysis Matrix (CDAM). Interview saturation was reached after about fifteen interviews. The four sensitising dimensions of *Nrunga* were confirmed and also complicated by the data. A descriptive comparison of the two coding procedures showed low overall agreement (39.3%) but high agreement for *Nrunga* heritage (92%) and conflict dynamics (69%). Among the ten documents examined, those produced by international bodies largely ignored *Nrunga*, while the locally produced ones treated it as central. The study is a single case shaped by the first author's insider position, and its definitional accounts came mainly from elders and clergy. It offers a transparent, community-developed model for decolonial research in conflict-affected African settings.

Introduction

Research on indigenous resources for peace in Africa has grown substantially, yet the methods through which such resources are studied have received far less attention than the resources themselves. Concepts such as Ubuntu, Utu and Bumuntu are frequently invoked as evidence of African relational ethics (Metz, 2007; Ramose, 2003), but the procedures by which researchers access, interpret and validate indigenous moral knowledge are often left implicit. This gap matters most in settings of ongoing violence, where communities are traumatised, access is restricted, and the researcher's identity can shape what participants are willing to say.

This study responds to that gap by presenting and evaluating the methodology of a doctoral study of *Nrunga*, an indigenous heritage concept shared by the Hema and Lendu communities of Djugu



Territory, Ituri Province, in the north-east of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). *Nrunga*, from the roots *nru* (person) and *nga* (inner essence), names the moral quality of relational humanness. The two communities that share it have been in recurrent violent conflict since 1999, with renewed violence since 2017. Studying a moral system held in common across a line of armed conflict raised three methodological problems. The first was how to access knowledge carried as much in gesture, ritual and silence as in words. The second was how to analyse that knowledge without reducing it to categories foreign to it. The third was how to demonstrate rigour to an academic audience without abandoning indigenous standards of truth and accountability.

The aim of this study is to describe the methodology in enough detail to allow scrutiny and replication, and to report what applying it revealed about its own strengths and limits. The study first reviews the literature on how indigenous knowledge has been researched in conflict settings and where existing approaches fall short. It then presents the method, the methodological results, a discussion of their implications and limitations, and a conclusion.

Literature review

This section reviews four bodies of methodological literature: critiques of extractive research, the limits of interviews and focus groups, indigenous research methodologies, and debates on coding reliability. It ends by stating the gap that this study addresses.

Critiques of extractive research

Indigenous scholars have long argued that research on indigenous peoples has often treated their knowledge as raw material to be extracted, interpreted and owned by outsiders (Smith, 2012). Chilisa (2012) shows that this pattern persists in African research, where methods designed elsewhere are applied without adaptation to local ways of knowing. In peace research, Mac Ginty (2008) shows that the liberal peace tends to treat indigenous peacemaking as a tool to be absorbed into external programmes rather than as a system of knowledge in its own right. The limitation these critiques identify is not a lack of data but a lack of accountability to the communities whose knowledge is studied.

The limits of interviews and focus groups

Interviews and focus groups are the most common methods in qualitative peace research. Both have limits when the object of study is a relational and embodied moral system. Interviews isolate individual accounts. Focus groups elicit opinions but are usually facilitated in ways that reward quick exchange rather than collective reasoning (Bohanon, 2005). Talking circles, by contrast, rely on uninterrupted listening and shared accountability (Barkaskas & Gladwin, 2021). Pink (2015) further argues that knowledge carried in the senses, such as greetings, shared food and ritual, is largely lost when research relies on spoken accounts alone.

Indigenous research methodologies

Indigenous methodologies answer the critique of extraction by grounding research in relationship, ceremony and community accountability (Kovach, 2021; Wilson, 2008). Thambinathan and Kinsella (2021) show how such principles can be put into practice in qualitative research. In our reading of this literature, however, published accounts have given more attention to paradigm, relationship and ethics than to analytical procedures that other researchers can follow step by step. This makes such methodologies harder to evaluate and to reproduce. Researchers working in conflict settings face the further problem that access, consent and safety must be renegotiated throughout fieldwork (Rashid, 2021).



Debates on coding reliability

Qualitative researchers disagree about whether agreement statistics between coders are meaningful. O'Connor and Joffe (2020) argue that intercoder reliability can increase transparency when coders apply a shared codebook. Braun and Clarke (2021) argue that such measures are inconsistent with reflexive thematic analysis, in which coding is interpretive. Neither position addresses what happens when two coding procedures built on different epistemologies are applied to the same data. This question becomes central when indigenous and conventional analytical tools are combined.

Research gap

Taken together, this literature shows the need for a methodology that is accountable to indigenous communities, captures relational and sensory knowledge, and sets out its analytical procedures in enough detail to be evaluated. It also shows that the relationship between indigenous and conventional coding procedures has not been examined empirically. This study addresses both gaps.

Method

This section describes the research paradigm, design and logic, the study site, participants and sampling, data collection, the three-layer analysis, the community protocol and data handling, trustworthiness and ethics, and the procedure used to compare the two coding schemes.

Research paradigm

The study was grounded in an indigenous research paradigm that integrates relational ontology, indigenous epistemology and decolonial axiology (Kovach, 2021; Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008). Its relational ontology draws on *Nrunga* itself, which understands the person not as an isolated individual but as a node in relationships with other people, the ancestors, the land and the divine. Four implications followed for the research: the conflict was treated as a lived reality co-constructed by participants, researcher and context rather than an external object; knowledge was treated as situated rather than universal; the first author's position as a Hema Catholic priest with ancestral roots in Djugu was treated as a resource to be reflexively managed rather than a contaminant to be eliminated; and the research was held accountable to communities as well as to academic standards.

Epistemologically, the study recognised narrative, embodied, sensory, spiritual and collective knowing as legitimate sources of knowledge. Stories were treated as knowledge in their own right rather than as raw data to be stripped for codes. Axiologically, the study adopted principles of research justice, community benefit, epistemic justice, relational accountability and 'do no harm'. These three dimensions were treated as mutually constituting: the relational view of reality shaped what counted as knowledge, and both shaped the ethical obligations of the research.

Research design and research logic

The study adopted an indigenous-led qualitative design using sensory participant ethnography (Pink, 2015; Somjee, 2026). A qualitative design suited a study of meanings and lived experience; ethnography allowed *Nrunga* to be studied as everyday practice rather than abstract principle; and the sensory dimension was needed because much of *Nrunga* is carried in greetings, rituals and shared mourning that interviews alone cannot capture. Phenomenology, narrative inquiry and case-study designs were considered and set aside because they focus on individual experience or a bounded case rather than on a shared cultural system.

The study followed an abductive logic, moving iteratively between preliminary theoretical sensitivity and empirical data (Blaikie & Priest, 2019; Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014). Four dimensions of *Nrunga*, namely moral interiority, relational ontology, theological-cosmological grounding and embodied



practice, entered the study as sensitising concepts. Blumer (1954) defines these as orienting categories that guide attention without predetermining findings. They were derived from the first author's embodied knowledge of Djugu, pre-fieldwork consultations with elders between 2022 and 2024, and scholarship on African relational ethics (Bujo, 2021; Metz, 2007; Ramose, 2003). The study does not claim that these dimensions emerged from the data alone, as in classic grounded theory. It claims instead that they were exposed to the data and could have been revised or abandoned, consistent with constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014).

Study site

Fieldwork took place in Djugu Territory, which covers about 8,740 km² of Ituri Province and has been the main theatre of the Hema-Lendu conflict (Tshonda, 2021). The study focused on four Hema communities (Nord, Badjere, Banyawagi and Baguru) and four Lendu communities (Pitsi, Djatsi, Tatsi and Mabendi). During fieldwork, about 70% of Djugu Territory was inaccessible because of insecurity. Data were therefore also collected in Bunia, where Hema and Lendu residents, including internally displaced persons, lived in neighbourhoods associated with their communities of origin: Katoto, Iga-Barrière and Mandro for the Hema, and Kotoni, Fichama and Makpo for the Lendu (Tshonda, 2021). The talking circles were held in Djugu Territory, and 8 of the 20 interviews were conducted in Bunia. Djugu was chosen because it is the epicentre of the conflict, because both communities share the *Nrunga* heritage, and because the first author's insider position made access possible.

Participants and sampling

The focused population, a term preferred to 'target population' to avoid militarised language, comprised about 494,689 Hema and Lendu residents of the eight entities and of Bunia. The study did not seek statistical representation of this population. Participants were selected purposively for their knowledge and experience of *Nrunga* and of the conflict (Campbell et al., 2020). Sample size was guided by information power (Malterud et al., 2016), by empirical evidence that saturation is commonly reached within 9–17 interviews and 4–8 focus groups (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022), and by the need to include both communities, women and men, and elders and youth in each category. Participants were adults who were current or former residents of Djugu, spoke Bbadha, Bbaledha/Kilendu or Kingwana, and had direct or indirect experience of the conflict; active combatants and people in acute psychological crisis were excluded. Table 1 presents the sample.



Table 1: Sampling frame and sample size

No.	Category of participants	Storytelling interviews	Talking circles
1	Community elders, custodians of <i>Nrunga</i> knowledge	6	–
2	Religious leaders (Catholic, Protestant, indigenous spiritual)	4	–
3	Women leaders, including survivors of gender-based violence	5	–
4	Youth representatives	3	–
5	Community members with direct experience of displacement	2	–
6	Women's peace circle	–	8
7	Elders' council	–	9
8	Religious leaders' circle	–	6
9	Mixed community circle	–	8
10	Youth dialogue circle	–	7
Total (N = 58)		20	38

Note. Participants were drawn from four Hema and four Lendu communities of Djugu Territory and from Hema and Lendu residents of Bunia. Ten institutional documents were analysed in addition and are not counted as participants (see Appendix A).

As Table 1 shows, 23 of the 58 participants (about 40%) were recruited specifically as women or youth, through women leaders' and youth interviews and through the women's and youth circles. Separate circles for women, youth, elders and religious leaders allowed gender and generational dynamics to be examined, while the mixed circle tested meanings across groups.

Data collection

Data were collected between December 2024 and December 2025 through four complementary methods.

Storytelling interviews

Twenty in-depth interviews used a storytelling approach rather than structured questioning, inviting participants to narrate their experiences of conflict, their understanding of *Nrunga* and their visions of peace. This approach follows indigenous oral traditions and lets participants structure their own knowledge (Kovach, 2021). Interviews lasted 60–120 minutes, were conducted in participants' preferred languages, audio-recorded with consent, transcribed and translated into English, with verification by a second bilingual translator.

Talking circles

Five talking circles (n = 38) followed a guide adapted from Barkaskas and Gladwin (2021). Unlike focus groups, which elicit individual opinions, talking circles emphasise collective reasoning, uninterrupted listening and relational accountability (Bohanon, 2005). Each circle opened with cultural protocols of prayer, acknowledgement of the ancestors and a statement of purpose, moved through open questions on conflict, *Nrunga* and peace, and closed with collective reflection and commitments. Circles lasted 90–150 minutes. Circle members were nominated by the communities to ensure representation across the Hema and Lendu.



Sensory observation

Participant observation was extended into what Somjee (2026) terms sensory participant knowing, attending to embodied, affective and material dimensions of experience that transcripts cannot record. A six-dimensional framework guided observation in markets, churches, displacement camps, elder assemblies and reconciliation rituals: auditory (soundscapes of violence, fear, ritual and code-switching), visual (landscapes of destruction and coexistence), affective (fear, grief, hope and trust), embodied (greetings, kneeling, shared food), symbolic (sacred trees, ritual objects) and collective (shared mourning, joking alliances, intermarriage). Field notes, organised with Lareau's (2021) WRITE mnemonic, audio journals and reflexive memos recorded these observations alongside the narratives.

Institutional documents

Ten documents were selected purposively against three criteria: relevance to conflict or peacebuilding in Ituri; relevance to indigenous knowledge or traditional justice; and a balance between international, national and community producers. They comprised a 2020 unilateral ceasefire agreement signed by the armed group URDPC/CODECO, the national strategic development plan for 2019–2023, three humanitarian and human rights reports on Ituri, a policy report by the International Crisis Group, an academic report on the political economy of the conflict, and three community documents. The community documents were produced by the Lendu and Hema cultural associations, *Lori* and *Ente*, and by a women's network, the Cadre de Concertation de la Femme Congolaise (CAFCO). Appendix A lists each document with its institutional origin and the criterion for its selection. Each was read for explicit content, implicit assumptions, silences and the voices it centred or marginalised.

Data analysis: A three-layer architecture

Analysis combined three layers in a single iterative process. Table 2 sets out the input, steps and output of each layer so that the procedure can be reproduced.



Table 2: Operational steps of the three-layer analysis

Layer	Input	Steps	Output
1. Thematic analysis in NVivo (Braun & Clarke, 2006)	20 interview in and 5 circle transcripts (English), 10 documents	(1) Repeated reading and familiarisation notes. (2) Open coding of meaning units in participants' own words, at semantic and latent levels, without using the sensitising concepts. (3) Grouping of codes into subthemes and themes. (4) Review of themes against the full dataset. (5) Definition and naming of themes. Memos recorded where accounts confirmed, complicated or contradicted the sensitising concepts.	Codebook; 171 coded references across 18 participant files; four master themes
2. NRITAT	The same transcripts, field notes and NVivo codes	Level A, for each transcript: (1) identification record; (2) reflexive and contextual notes, including emotional tone and power dynamics; (3) coding of meaning units across thematic domains; (4) analysis of six sensory-cultural dimensions drawn from field notes; (5) analytical memo. Level B: a cross-case table comparing transcripts across six domains by ethnicity, gender and generation. Level C: development of themes and links to the research questions.	25 within-case records; cross-case table; interpretive themes
3. CDAM	10 institutional documents	(1) Several close readings of each document. (2) Completion of a matrix with six dimensions: context and positionality; conflict framing; peacebuilding framing; representation of indigenous knowledge; power dynamics; recommendations. (3) Comparison across documents. (4) Triangulation with interview and circle themes.	10 completed matrices; cross-document patterns

Note. Coding was carried out by the first author. Coding decisions and themes were discussed in supervision sessions and peer debriefing, and recorded in the audit trail.

The layers were not applied once in sequence. CDAM findings sharpened NRITAT codes, NRITAT readings exposed the limits of NVivo categories, and each pass returned to the data. The abductive treatment of the four dimensions was built into this process in three phases. In pre-fieldwork sensitising (2022–2024), the dimensions were entered into NRITAT as provisional constructs, with open probes for unanticipated meanings. During fieldwork, NVivo codes were generated without forcing data into the dimensions. In abductive synthesis, NRITAT re-read the coded themes through indigenous categories, and CDAM tested them against the documents.

Community protocol and data handling

The research protocol was developed before fieldwork with representatives of the Hema and Lendu cultural associations, *Ente* and *Lori*. The first author presented the study's aims and draft procedures to these representatives, and the protocol was finalised in discussion with them. Five decisions were made jointly: the consent procedure and the languages of consent forms (Kilendu, Swahili and French); the nomination of talking-circle members; a security plan for fieldwork, including where and when meetings could safely take place; the procedure for reviewing interpretations; and the communities' continued ownership and long-term stewardship of project materials.

Communities reviewed the interpretation of their contributions in two ways. Preliminary interpretations were presented back to participants in member-checking sessions. They were also discussed with a community advisory group, whose comments were recorded in the audit trail and used to revise interpretations. Recordings and transcripts were handled as follows: names and specific places of residence were removed from transcripts and replaced with codes, and the key linking codes to identities was held separately by the first author. Under the protocol, the audio recordings and



transcripts are treated as the shared heritage (*patrimoine*) of the Hema and Lendu communities, not as the property of the researcher. For the present, the first author holds them in custody on the communities' behalf. Decisions on who may access the materials in future, and on how long and where they will be kept, have been deferred by agreement to discussions with *Ente* and *Lori* representatives. These discussions will take place during the dissemination of the findings to the communities after the study is completed.

Trustworthiness and ethics

Trustworthiness was pursued through credibility, confirmability, dependability and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The strategies were triangulation of sources, methods and analytical frameworks; negative case analysis; peer debriefing with academic and community advisers; the member-checking described above; an audit trail of journals, coding memos and saturation notes; and thick description.

Ethical approval was obtained from the Tangaza University research ethics committee and a research permit from the DRC Ministry of Scientific Research. Psychological support and referrals were available to participants who became distressed. Lendu research assistants facilitated interviews in Lendu communities to reduce the influence of the first author's Hema identity, and a reflexivity journal documented how that identity shaped decisions (Chavez, 2008).

Comparison of the two coding procedures

NVivo 15 is software for organising and coding data, not an analytical framework. What the study compared were two coding procedures applied to the same data: inductive thematic coding following Braun and Clarke (2006), carried out in NVivo, and interpretive coding with NRITAT and CDAM. Codes from both procedures were grouped into six macro-categories, and agreement was calculated on 61 comparison units using percentage agreement, Cohen's kappa and Krippendorff's (2018) alpha.

This comparison is not a test of inter-rater reliability in the conventional sense. The two procedures were not designed as equivalent instruments, and both were applied by the same research team rather than by independent coders (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). The agreement statistics are therefore reported only as a descriptive measure of where the two coding schemes overlapped.

Results

This section reports what the application of the methodology revealed about its own performance, rather than the substantive findings on *Nrunga*, which are reported elsewhere.

Saturation

Saturation was assessed differently for each dataset. For the interviews, iterative analysis alongside data collection allowed saturation to be monitored in real time. After fifteen interviews, a preliminary thematic review found that the major themes were consistent and that few new insights were emerging. Five further interviews were conducted to confirm saturation and to strengthen the representation of women and youth. They added nuance but no new dimensional content.

The number of talking circles was set in advance, one for each group, within the range of four to eight groups suggested by Hennink and Kaiser (2022). The circles were not used to judge saturation of the dimensions of *Nrunga*. Their role was to add collective perspectives, such as the women's critique of their exclusion from elder assemblies. The ten documents were selected purposively and were not subject to saturation. They were used for triangulation. Across datasets, a theme was considered saturated only when it recurred in interviews, talking circles and documents. The final corpus



produced 171 coded references across 18 participant files in NVivo and NRITAT analysis of 25 transcripts.

Testing the sensitising dimensions

The abductive procedure did not simply return the four dimensions it began with. Inductive NVivo coding produced four master themes, namely the roots of conflict as multi-layered dehumanisation, *Nrunga* as living moral heritage, *Nrunga* in peacebuilding, and limitations and power dynamics. Their correspondence with the sensitising dimensions had to be interpreted rather than assumed. Within the *Nrunga* heritage theme, codes for each dimension appeared independently across files: moral interiority in 9 files, relational ontology in 8, embodied practice in 7 and theological-cosmological grounding in 6. NRITAT second-order analysis then enriched each dimension with emic content: moral interiority through participants' use of *le thi na ba nga na nyo d'yu* ('heart knowledge') as distinct from behavioural compliance; relational ontology through documented kinship and coexistence practices; theological-cosmological grounding through accounts of ancestral cosmology and sacred land; and embodied practice through institutions such as *Ite* elder assemblies and *Lo* joking alliances.

The procedure also surfaced content that the sensitising framework had not anticipated. A code for the dual character of *Nrunga*, with a positive and a negative or 'corrupted' expression, appeared in four files, and it emerged only when the latent evaluative stance of one account was read against a contrasting account. Cross-case comparison at NRITAT Level B showed that variation in how *Nrunga* was understood ran mainly along lines of gender and generation rather than ethnicity, which shifted attention from inter-ethnic incompatibility to internal power dynamics.

Agreement between the two coding procedures

Overall agreement between the two coding procedures was low: 39.3% agreement, $\kappa = 0.26$ and $\alpha = 0.24$. Agreement by domain varied widely, as Table 3 shows.

Table 3: Agreement between the two coding procedures by thematic domain

Thematic domain	Agreement	Interpretation
<i>Nrunga</i> heritage and peace practices	92%	Strong overlap on <i>Nrunga</i> as a living moral system
Conflict and dehumanisation	69%	Shared recognition of structural drivers and dehumanising mechanisms
Rehumanisation and peace potential	29%	Partial overlap; NRITAT-CDAM codes more prescriptive content
Demographics and context	0%	Thematic coding records participant characteristics; NRITAT-CDAM does not by design
Limitations and power dynamics	0%	Thematic coding records one subtheme; NRITAT-CDAM codes gender and structure extensively
Integrated peacebuilding framework	0%	Thematic coding is descriptive; NRITAT-CDAM builds normative theory
Overall (61 units)	39.3%	$\kappa = 0.26$; $\alpha = 0.24$

Note. Agreement statistics are descriptive. Both procedures were applied by the same research team and are not equivalent instruments.



The three zero-agreement domains were not random disagreement. In each, one procedure coded systematically what the other, by design, did not. Thematic coding produced fourteen demographic codes, whereas NRITAT-CDAM treated such categorisation as extractive and generated none. On power dynamics and on the integrated framework, NRITAT-CDAM produced extensive critical and prescriptive coding where thematic coding recorded little.

Document analysis

CDAM produced a result that neither interviews nor circles could have produced alone. Among the ten documents examined, those produced by international research and policy institutions largely ignored *Nrunga* and indigenous institutions. They framed the conflict through quantitative indicators, disarmament programmes and governance reform. The locally produced documents identified *Nrunga* as the most fundamental peacebuilding resource and described specific practices such as marriage exchanges, blood covenants and elder negotiation protocols. Within this set of documents, the divergence between lived experience and institutional discourse was the most consistent pattern.

Discussion

This section considers what the coding comparison can and cannot show, how the abductive procedure was made transparent, the role of *Nrunga* as an analytical instrument, the conditions of research in active conflict, and the study's limitations.

What the coding comparison can and cannot show

Low overall agreement could be read as a methodological failure. We do not read it that way, but we also do not claim that the statistics establish complementarity. Because the two procedures are not equivalent instruments and were applied by the same team, the comparison can only show where the two coding schemes overlapped and where they did not (Braun & Clarke, 2021; O'Connor & Joffe, 2020).

Using both procedures was nonetheless a deliberate design choice. The first author combined inductive thematic coding in NVivo 15 with NRITAT and CDAM, two tools he developed, so that a Western qualitative procedure and an indigenous-led one could be applied to the same data. This follows the principle of Two-Eyed Seeing, which brings indigenous and Western ways of knowing together while keeping each distinct (Bartlett et al., 2012). Quinn (2022) shows that indigenous research principles can be congruent with Western qualitative frameworks, and that integrating them serves both reconciliation and methodological rigour. The study sought this kind of methodological congruence (Bloomberg, 2023). Both procedures rest on an interpretivist epistemology and a constructivist ontology, while the study's axiology was informed by *Nrunga*.

Beyond this design rationale, the case for using both procedures rests on what each one captured, not on the agreement statistics. The schemes overlapped most where the phenomenon was most densely represented in the data, namely *Nrunga* heritage and conflict dynamics. They diverged where their purposes differed. Had only thematic coding been used, the critical analysis of gender and power and the prescriptive framework would have been lost. Had only NRITAT-CDAM been used, the systematic documentation of the full dataset would have been missing. A stronger test would use independent coders who did not design NRITAT and would pre-specify where convergence and divergence are expected. The study did not do this, and future applications should.

Making abduction transparent

A common criticism of research on indigenous concepts is that researchers find what they set out to find. The three-phase procedure answers this criticism not by denying prior knowledge, which would



misrepresent the research, but by documenting when that knowledge entered, how it was exposed to the data, and what the data added. That the dimensions were confirmed is less telling than that they were complicated: the corrupted register of *Nrunga* and the gender and generational fault lines were not in the sensitising framework. This aligns with indigenous methodologies that treat the researcher's embodied knowledge as a legitimate resource (Kovach, 2021; Wilson, 2008), while meeting the demand for traceability made by conventional qualitative standards (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The indigenous concept as analytical instrument

A distinctive feature of the methodology is that *Nrunga* functioned both as the object of study and as an instrument of analysis. Its four dimensions were operationalised in NRITAT as interpretive categories and in CDAM as criteria for assessing documents. This reflexive relationship between theory and method is characteristic of indigenous research paradigms, in which the knowledge system under study supplies the resources through which it is studied (Chilisa, 2012; Wilson, 2008). It also carries a risk of circularity, which the abductive procedure and the comparison with inductive thematic coding were designed to contain. What can transfer to other settings is the approach rather than the categories: an equivalent tool for another community would need to be developed with that community's own knowledge holders.

Researching in active conflict

The methodology was shaped throughout by insecurity. About 70% of Djugu Territory was inaccessible during fieldwork. People still living in the most insecure areas were therefore reached only if they had moved to Bunia or to accessible localities, and their perspectives are represented through displaced persons rather than through current residents of those areas. Talking circles distributed power more evenly than one-to-one interviews and gave women and youth spaces of their own. Lendu facilitators reduced, though did not remove, the asymmetry created by the first author's Hema identity. One mixed-ethnicity elder noted that participants speak to a Hema researcher in ways they would not to their own people. Another said that a priest allowed them to speak of God and the ancestors together. Both comments show that positionality shaped access and content in both directions. Following Rashid (2021), consent, vulnerability and power were treated as conditions to be renegotiated during the research rather than as procedural steps completed at its start.

Limitations

Several limitations qualify these claims. The study is a single case bounded to Djugu and Bunia, and its methodological claims require comparative testing. The sample of 58 is adequate for saturation but, being purposive, may favour peace-oriented perspectives. Women and youth took part through dedicated interviews and circles, but the extended definitional accounts of *Nrunga* came mainly from elders, leaders and clergy. Their definitions therefore carry more weight in the findings on what *Nrunga* is. Translation between Bbadha, Bbaledha/Kilendu, Kingwana and English inevitably shaped meaning. Finally, the coding comparison involved two procedures applied by the same research team rather than independent coders.

Conclusion

This study has presented a methodology for studying an indigenous moral heritage across a line of active armed conflict. Its main elements are an indigenous research paradigm informed by the heritage under study; a sensory ethnographic design that captures knowledge carried in gesture, ritual and place; talking circles as a culturally grounded method of collective inquiry; an abductive logic that documents how prior knowledge entered the analysis; a three-layer analysis whose steps are set out for replication; and a protocol developed jointly with the communities concerned.



Applying the methodology produced three methodological results. Interview saturation was demonstrated within an ethically limited sample. The sensitising dimensions were confirmed and also complicated by the data. Agreement between the two coding procedures was highest where the phenomenon was most densely represented and lowest where their purposes differed. Among the documents examined, those produced by international bodies largely left indigenous resources out of view. The methodology does not resolve the tension between indigenous and conventional standards of rigour, but it shows that the two can be held in a productive relationship. Researchers working with indigenous knowledge in conflict-affected African settings may adapt its approach, provided that the analytical categories are developed with the communities whose knowledge is at stake.

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Appendix A

Table 1A: Institutional documents analysed, with their origin and selection criterion

No.	Document	Institutional origin	Selection criterion
1	Hoffmann, K., Vlassenroot, K., & Büscher, K. (2018). Competition, patronage and fragmentation: The limits of bottom-up approaches to security governance in Ituri	International academic research	Political economy of the conflict in Ituri
2	Union des Révolutionnaires pour la Défense du Peuple Congolais. (2020). <i>Accord de cessez-le-feu unilatéral signé par l'URDPC/CODECO pour la paix en province de l'Ituri</i> [Unilateral ceasefire agreement signed by the URDPC/CODECO for peace in Ituri province]	URDPC/CODECO armed group, with a presidential delegation	Peace agreement for Ituri
3	Ministère du Plan. (2019). <i>Plan national stratégique de développement (PNSD) 2019–2023</i> [National strategic development plan 2019–2023]	Ministry of Planning, Government of the DRC	National development and stabilisation policy
4	Médecins Sans Frontières. (2025). <i>Ituri, land of violence and displacement: Risking their lives to survive</i>	Médecins Sans Frontières (international NGO)	Conflict and humanitarian response in Ituri
5	Human Rights Watch. (2022). <i>DR Congo: Armed groups killing civilians in eastern province of Ituri</i>	Human Rights Watch (international NGO)	Conflict and humanitarian response in Ituri
6	International Organization for Migration. (2025). <i>Democratic Republic of the Congo crisis response plan 2025</i>	International Organization for Migration (intergovernmental)	Conflict and humanitarian response in Ituri
7	International Crisis Group. (2020). <i>DR Congo: Ending the cycle of violence in Ituri</i> (Africa Report No. 292)	International Crisis Group (international policy organisation)	Conflict resolution and traditional mechanisms
8	Association Culturelle LORI. (2025–2026). <i>Appels et résolutions pour la paix, la cohésion sociale et la réconciliation en province de l'Ituri</i> [Calls and resolutions for peace, social cohesion and reconciliation in Ituri province]	Lori, Lendu cultural association (local community)	Community perspective on peace priorities
9	Association Culturelle ENTE. (2023). <i>Feuille de route stratégique pour la sensibilisation communautaire et la coexistence pacifique en territoire de Djugu</i> [Strategic roadmap for community awareness and peaceful coexistence in Djugu Territory]	Ente, Hema cultural association (local community)	Community perspective on peace priorities
10	Cadre de Concertation de la Femme Congolaise. (2023). <i>Rapport de plaidoyer des femmes de l'Ituri</i> [Advocacy report of the women of Ituri]	CAFCO Ituri branch, women's network (local community)	Women's perspective on peace

Note. Documents were selected purposively for relevance to conflict or peacebuilding in Ituri, relevance to indigenous knowledge or traditional justice, and a balance between international, national and community producers. Full references are given in the reference list.