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**THE TIV–JUKUN PERENNIAL CONFLICT IN
WUKARI, TARABA STATE, NIGERIA: THE ROLE OF
INJUSTICE**

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Abstract

The Wukari Local Government Area Tiv-Jukun conflict is one of the longest and deadliest cases of ethno-communal violence in Nigeria's Middle Belt region. The cycle recurs with deadly regularity, and it has repeatedly drawn in State and Federal interventions for more than sixty years. The case presented in this paper identifies injustice in its distributive, procedural, historical and restorative dimensions as both the cause of violence and the main vehicle enabling and perpetuating cycles of conflict. Using a conceptual and secondary-analysis framework based on relative deprivation theory, horizontal inequalities theory, procedural justice theory and transitional justice scholarship to explore how labour rights achievement (in terms of the existence of informal or formal foundations for collective bargaining; fair wages; conditions; hours etc.) are linked to getting these into most appropriate disputes bottom-up both formally through industrial/labour right reforms as well top-downs via less recognised legal channels (judicial reviews

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on regional/state laws) at both system levels. The analysis demonstrates that none of the peace interventions in the time since independence have substantially delivered on addressing the justice deficit at the heart of their conflict. The final section of the paper provides recommendations on how to establish a Wukari Conflict Justice Commission and reform land adjudication, as well as suggesting ways in which transitional justice mechanisms can be integrated into future peace processes.

Keywords: Tiv-Jukun conflict, Wukari, ethnic conflict, injustice, Middle Belt Nigeria, intergroup violence, peacebuilding

Introduction

History dates the Tiv-Jukun conflict back to a period shortly before the independence of Nigeria in 1960. The conflict between Tiv and Jukun ethnic communities has been recorded to occur at repeated intervals resulting to deadly violence within Wukari Local Government Area of Taraba State in Nigeria's Middle Belt. What was once an occasional skirmish about land use, access to land and the market, suddenly, degenerated to a system of mass displacement, mass violence, and institutional dysfunction that has proven resistant to resolution across six decades of engagement from both Federal and State authorities. The 1990 crisis alone is estimated to have resulted to the death of over 5,000 people and displacement of

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tens of thousands of others, rendering it one of the deadliest communal conflicts that followed postcolonial Nigeria (Human Rights Watch, 1995). This cycle was repeated in successive eruptions, in 2001, 2011 and between 2016 and 2020 without any considerable structural alteration.

The sustainability of peace in Wukari despite repeated interventions, beg for an analytic question: why have security deployments, government commissions and dialogue initiatives failed to achieve sustainable peace? This paper argues that it is less the absence of intervention than the absence of justice which led to the failure of the solutions. In constructive terms, injustice is indeed the engine that pilots the conflict machine with all its distributive, procedural, historical and restorative dimensions, with land use exclusion and political representation as lubricants. While security forces are seen as supporting one side against the other and colonial boundary errors remain unrectified, inter-ethnic violence has often been met with a failure of accountability on both sides.

The importance of this paper is three fold. Overall, it adds to the existing literature on the justice-conflict nexus in sub-Saharan Africa. Secondly, it attempts to cover a distinct and under-traced war theatre that very much receive less significant academic focus than the Niger Delta or Boko Haram insurgency of the northeast. Thirdly, it provides prescriptive policy analysis on the Wukari conflict situation and how the inhabitants are affected by the violence. The paper is organised as follows: starting with a set of theoretical concepts, followed

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by a historical lens, an analysis that breaks injustice down into several dimensions and structural factors that might compound the process; then a review of what has been done for peace on both levels before offering some recommendations.

Conceptual Framework

Theories of Injustice and Ethnic Conflict

The study of ethnic conflict has produced competing explanatory paradigms. Collier and Hoeffler (2004) famously positioned greed, specifically competition over economic opportunity and resources, as the primary driver of civil conflict, with grievance playing a secondary or even epiphenomenal role. However, subsequent scholars have rehabilitated the centrality of grievance, particularly when grievance is structured along ethnic lines through horizontal inequalities. Stewart (2008) demonstrated that when economic, political, and social disadvantages coincide along group boundaries, the probability of violent conflict increases substantially. This horizontal inequalities framework provides the foundational theoretical basis for analysing the Tiv-Jukun conflict, where both land access and political representation are stratified along ethnic lines.

Gurr's (1970) relative deprivation theory adds a psychological dimension, emphasising that violence becomes probable when a group's expectations of entitlement consistently exceed its

actual conditions. In Wukari, Tiv farming communities that have occupied the land for generations perceive their continued exclusion from formal ownership and political participation as a systematic injustice that delegitimises the state. Tyler's (2006) procedural justice theory further illuminates why security and judicial interventions in Wukari have failed: when institutions are perceived as biased, their authority is rejected; compliance with their decisions cannot be sustained even when compliance might serve the group's material interests.

Fraser's (2008) framework of recognition justice extends the analysis to the cultural and political domain. Jukun claims of autochthony and the associated monopoly on the Aku Uka chieftaincy deny Tiv communities symbolic recognition as legitimate political participants in Wukari. Teitel's (2003) transitional justice genealogy and De Greiff's (2012) theorisation of reparations and guarantees of non-recurrence, provide the normative and institutional tools for assessing the adequacy of past peace interventions. Together, these frameworks identify five dimensions of injustice relevant to Wukari: distributive, procedural, historical, restorative, and recognition.

Table 1

Dimensions of Injustice Applied to the Tiv-Jukun Context in Wukari

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Dimension	Manifestation in Wukari	Theoretical Lens	Conflict Outcome
Distributive	Land ownership, chieftaincy access, trade exclusion	Relative deprivation (Gurr, 1970; Stewart, 2008)	Cyclical resource-based violence
Procedural	Security partiality, delayed prosecution	Procedural justice (Tyler, 2006)	Erosion of institutional trust
Historical	Colonial boundary errors, unresolved land claims	Historical injustice (Mamdani, 2001)	Intergenerational grievance transmission
Restorative	Impunity for perpetrators on both sides	Transitional justice (Teitel, 2003)	Emboldened repeat offending
Recognition	Denial of Tiv political representation and cultural rights	Recognition justice (Fraser, 2008)	Alienation and radicalisation

Note. Theoretical framework synthesised from Gurr (1970), Stewart (2008), Tyler (2006), Fraser (2008), and Teitel (2003).

Historical Background

Pre-Colonial Relations and Early Settlement

The Jukun people have long occupied the Benue-Taraba corridor, with Wukari serving as the seat of the historical Jukun kingdom and the Aku Uka functioning as the supreme traditional ruler. Over the course of several centuries, the Tiv expanded southwards and eastwards out from the Benue valley towards farming settlements built on what are claimed to be ancestral lands by Fulani associated Jukun (Makar, 1994; Blench, 2004). Although the pre-colonial relationship was characterised by periods of coexistence and even economic interdependence, it was a hierarchical coexistence. The Tivs settled on a land that theoretically remained under the political jurisdiction of Jukun rulers which laid the basis for subsequent contestation. The Jukuns on their part forgot to remember that they as descendants of Kwararafa migrated from somewhere, first settled in Benue valley before settling in their present Wukari location.

Colonial Restructuring and the Institutionalisation of Injustice

British indirect rule formalised and legitimised these existing hierarchies which in turn institutionalised the foundational historical injustice. Jukun primary authority over the area was

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acknowledged by the colonial administration and the Wukari District administrative unit was built around it, formalizing Jukun political dominance and denying the Tivs official land rights in territories they had been farming for generations (Osaghae & Suberu, 2005; Dung, 2020). The joint boundary delineations of 1914 and later administrative boundaries closely corresponded to the geographic distribution in favour of the Jukun community and deracinated hundreds of thousands of Tiv farmers on the wrong side of boundaries that would determine their access to land adjudication and political representation.

However, the political marginalisation of communities such as the Tiv was found to be a key issue by the Willink Commission of 1958 created specifically to address minority issues in light of impending independence, but it did not generate structural solutions that are enforceable (Egwu, 2022). Such a pattern of acknowledgment without remedy would become characteristic of all subsequent interventions.

Post-Independence Conflict Escalation

The decades following independence saw low-intensity friction escalate into mass violence as population growth intensified competition over land and as democratic competition raised the stakes of political exclusion. The 1990 crisis was the most catastrophic, producing an estimated 5,000 deaths, mass displacement, and the destruction of entire communities

(Human Rights Watch, 1995; Genyi, 2014). Federal military intervention achieved a ceasefire but addressed none of the underlying structural causes. The same pattern repeated itself in 2001, 2011, and across the extended cycle from 2016 to 2020, with each recurrence demonstrating that security containment without justice produces only temporary respite.

Figure 1 Timeline of Major Tiv-Jukun Conflict Episodes in Wukari, 1960-2023

Note. Data compiled from Human Rights Watch (1995), Genyi (2014), Danjibo (2021), and Onuoha (2020).

The Role of Injustice; Analytical Dimensions:

Distributive Injustice: Land and Resource Contestation

Land is the primary material derivation of the Tiv-Jukun conflict and the most persistent source of distributive injustice in the imbroglio. For Tiv farming communities, land is simultaneously a productive resource, a marker of identity, and a symbol of belonging. The absence of formal legal recognition for Tiv land claims in Wukari means that communities that have farmed the same land for generations remain vulnerable to dispossession and have no reliable legal mechanism for asserting their rights (Isumonah, 2019; Jakpor, 2021). The Land Use Act of 1978, which vests all land in state

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governments, paradoxically intensified this vulnerability by removing customary land rights without replacing them with an accessible formal system, leaving Tiv farmers in a legal grey zone that Jukun political actors have consistently exploited (Blench, 2004; Nwozor et al., 2020).

Market access embodies the second dimension of distributive injustice. During periods of tension, Tiv traders in Wukari have consistently reported being deprived of entry into vital commercial spaces, a form of systematic exclusion that grounds enduring economic marginalisation and represents an additional grievance capable of igniting conflict (Albert 2020; Genyi 2014). In the political sphere, distributive injustice is rendered more intractable by the chieftaincy structure, because there is a Jukun monopoly of recognition through the traditional institution of chiefs that has significant influence over land allocation decisions within its jurisdiction.

Procedural Injustice: State Failure-Security and Judicial Bias

The perception that security forces and judicial institutions respond to Tiv-Jukun violence in a systematically biased manner is one of the most consistently reported findings in the empirical literature on the Wukari conflict. Both communities allege partiality, but Tiv communities more frequently and more specifically identify Nigerian Army and Police deployments as providing cover for Jukun reprisal attacks

while failing to protect Tiv settlements (Amnesty International, 2020; Hassan, 2022). Regardless of the precise empirical distribution of bias, the perception itself is consequential: when communities do not believe that state security institutions will protect them impartially, they develop parallel protection structures, typically ethnic militias that become instruments of both defence and offensive violence.

The judicial vacuum surrounding the Wukari conflict is equally significant. No special tribunal has been established for any of the major conflict episodes and where any was setup; its white paper has never been implemented by the State. Prosecutions for conflict-related offences have been rare, episodic, and widely perceived as selective. The result is a culture of impunity that Tyler's (2006) framework predicts will undermine compliance with all institutional authority, including the authority of peace agreements. When actors believe that their opponents have escaped justice for past atrocities, the incentive to accept a negotiated settlement is substantially weakened.

Figure 2: Perception of Security and Judicial Bias among Conflict-Affected Communities in Wukari

Note. Percentages reflect proportions within each community group. Adapted from Genyi (2014) and Danjibo (2021)

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Historical Injustice and Collective Memory**

The unresolved injustices of the colonial period and of the 1990 crisis have not faded with time; they have been preserved and transmitted through community memory, oral history, and elite narrative construction in ways that actively shape present-day conflict behaviour (Falola& Heaton, 2021; Osaghae, 2020). Tiv communities memorialise the 1990 violence primarily through the lens of displacement and massacre, while Jukun communities memorialise the same events through the lens of invasion and territorial defence. Both narratives contain selective but genuine historical elements, and both are mobilised by political entrepreneurs during periods of electoral competition or resource pressure (Egwu, 2022; Ibrahim, 2020).

The absence of any formal truth-telling or acknowledgement process means that these divergent memories have never been subjected to shared verification. The Willink Commission's failure to produce structural remedies for minority political marginalisation represents an unresolved historical injustice that predates independence and has compounded each subsequent crisis. Mamdani (2001) has perceptively analyzed colonial nativism and postcolonial violence, and his framework is directly appropriate here: the colonial creation of Jukun autochthony against migrating Tiv populations which has produced an ethnic topography of inclusion or exclusion that postcolonial governance deepens rather than disrupt.

Perhaps the most direct mechanism by which injustice sustains conflict in Wukari is the consistent failure of post-violence accountability. Across every major conflict episode from 1990 to 2020, the pattern has been identical: mass violence, federal or state government panel of inquiry, published report, absence of implementation, impunity for perpetrators, and subsequent recurrence (Danjibo, 2021; Onuoha, 2020). Mendeloff (2004) identifies this pattern as characteristic of conflicts where truth-telling and accountability processes are treated as political liabilities rather than peace building investments. The result is that perpetrators return to their communities emboldened, victims are denied both material redress and symbolic acknowledgement, while the conditions for the next cycle of violence are actively reproduced.

Lenshie et al. (2021) panel study of victim attitudes in a transitional context shows that absence of accountability mechanisms substantially lowers victims' support for reconciliation with former adversaries and increases their support for retributive violence. That finding relates precisely to Wukari, where repeated failure to prosecute conflict-related crimes rather serves as a hardening process for pervasive ethnic jingoism and increasingly weakens the very social foundations which durable peace will ultimately rest on.

Structural Factors Compounding Injustice

The multi-dimensional injustices analysed above do not operate in isolation. They are embedded in and amplified by a set of structural conditions that increase the frequency and lethality of conflict eruptions. Table 2 presents a systematic mapping of these structural factors, their associated justice deficits, and their conflict effects.

Table 2

Structural Drivers and Their Associated Justice Deficits in the Wukari Conflict

Structural Factor	Justice Deficit	Conflict Effect
Weak state institutions	Procedural	Impunity cycles; unresolved disputes
Elite political manipulation	Political recognition	Ethnic mobilisation for violence
Poverty and resource scarcity	Distributive	Intensified competition over land
Climate and ecological stress	Environmental justice	Extended conflict seasons

Arms proliferation	Restorative	Escalation of fatalities per episode
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Note. Compiled from Danjibo (2021), Onuoha (2020), Okpara et al. (2015), Obasi (2021), and UNDP Nigeria (2022).

Weak state institutions at both the Taraba State and federal levels have consistently failed to provide the governance environment within which justice claims can be adjudicated. The Taraba State government's limited fiscal capacity, administrative reach, and political independence from ethnic attachment and patronage networks mean that even well-intentioned interventions are poorly resourced and easily captured by local power brokers (Obasi, 2021; Oche, 2020). Federal interventions while more resource-intensive, have been episodic, politically motivated and triggered by electoral pressures or media attention rather than sustained commitment to structural transformation.

Elite political manipulation of ethnic cleavages represents a second critical structural factor. Research on Nigerian electoral violence consistently demonstrates that political entrepreneurs exploit ethnic identities and historical grievances to mobilise voters and suppress opponents (Ibrahim, 2020; Egwu, 2022). In Wukari, elections have repeatedly coincided with or preceded conflict escalations, a pattern consistent with deliberate elite mobilisation rather than spontaneous communal eruption. Arms proliferation facilitated by local patrons with

interests in maintaining ethnic royalty and tension, has increased the lethality of each conflict episode and created new economic interests in the perpetuation of instability (Onuoha, 2020; Suberu, 2020).

Climate and ecological stress has emerged as an increasingly significant structural compounding factor in the twenty-first century. Okpara et al. (2015) documents the relationship between declining rainfall, shrinking agricultural land, and increased conflict intensity in the Lake Chad basin region, a dynamic that is directly applicable to the Benue-Taraba corridor. As available farmland contracts under climate pressure, the distributive injustice of unresolved land claims becomes more immediately consequential, shortening the intervals between conflict eruptions and increasing the intensity of each episode (Raleigh & Hegre, 2009; UNDP Nigeria, 2022).

Peace Efforts and Their Limitations

The history of peace interventions in Wukari is a history of procedurally adequate but substantively hollow responses to a justice crisis. Table 3 presents a chronological summary of the major interventions and their outcomes.

Table 3

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**Summary of Peace Interventions in the Wukari Conflict and
Their Outcomes, 1990-2023**

Year	Intervention	Outcome	Justice Component
1990	Federal military intervention	Ceasefire achieved; displaced persons not resettled	None
2001	Federal government investigative panel	Report submitted; recommendations not implemented	Not implemented
2011	State-level dialogue committee	Temporary calm; no structural change	Partial
2016–2020	Combined state and military deployment	Ongoing fragility; recurrence in 2019–2020	Minimal
2021–2023	Civil society and interfaith mediation	Limited community-level dialogue; no legal mechanism	None formal

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Note: Compiled from Human Rights Watch (1995), Danjibo (2021), Genyi (2014), Onuoha (2020), and Badmus et al. (2024)

Every intervention in the record achieved at most a temporary reduction in violence without addressing the structural conditions generating that violence. The 1990 military intervention established a ceasefire but resettled none of the displaced, prosecuted none of the perpetrators, and produced no land adjudication mechanism. The 2001 Federal panel submitted a report that was never implemented. The 2011 State Dialogue Committee produced temporary calm without legal or institutional change. The 2016 to 2020 military deployment managed the conflict's most acute phase without resolving any of its underlying causes (Danjibo, 2021; Badmus et al., 2024).

The theoretical literature on peacebuilding is clear about why these interventions failed. De Greiff (2012) argues that sustainable peace requires not merely the cessation of violence but the establishment of accountability, institutional reform, truth-telling, and reparation mechanisms that address the justice deficit sustaining conflict. Lederach (2020) similarly emphasises that durable peace requires transforming the relational and structural conditions of conflict, not merely managing its violent manifestations. None of the Wukari interventions have met these standards. Interfaith dialogue and Civil Society mediation have achieved limited community-level trust-building but have been unable to address the

structural justice deficits that elite actors can exploit to reignite violence.

Discussion

The multi-dimensional analysis presented in this paper supports the central argument that injustice is not merely a background condition of the Tiv-Jukun conflict but its primary sustaining mechanism. Each dimension of injustice, distributive, procedural, historical, restorative, and recognition, contributes independently to conflict recurrence, and their interaction create a reinforcing dynamic in which each failed peace intervention intensifies the grievances that generated the conflict in the first place. This finding extends Stewart's (2008) horizontal inequalities framework by demonstrating that horizontal inequalities across multiple justice dimensions simultaneously, rather than in any single domain, are particularly resistant to conventional peacebuilding approaches.

The Wukari case also speaks to a broader pattern observable in Plateau State, Benue State, and other Middle Belt conflict zones: Nigerian peacebuilding policy consistently prioritises security containment over structural justice, a preference that reflects both institutional capacity constraints and political incentives that reward short-term stability over long-term transformation (Osaghae, 2020; Suberu, 2020). The comparison with similar conflicts in the region suggests that the justice deficit at the core of the Wukari conflict is not an

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idiosyncratic local failure but a systemic consequence of Nigeria's approach to ethnic conflict management.

A notable limitation of this analysis is its reliance on secondary data and published field research. The methodological ideal would be a mixed-methods study combining structured surveys of conflict-affected communities in Wukari with key informant interviews, archival research on government panel reports, and analysis of judicial records. Future research should pursue this more comprehensive evidence base, particularly to disaggregate the perceptions of different sub-communities within both the Tiv and Jukun groups, whose interests and experiences are not monolithic.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The Tiv-Jukun conflict in Wukari will not be resolved by security deployments alone, its trajectory over six decades of attempted management amply demonstrates this. The conflict is fundamentally a justice crisis: unresolved land claims, political exclusion, biased institutional responses, unacknowledged historical wrongs, and systematic impunity have created a structure in which violence remains a rational response to perceived injustice for communities on both sides of the ethnic divide. Without a serious, sustained, and politically committed effort to address this justice deficit, the conflict will continue to recur with each generation of political actors finding new occasions to mobilise old grievances.

The following policy recommendations flow directly from the analysis. First, the federal government should establish an Independent Wukari Conflict Justice Commission with a mandate to investigate all major conflict episodes from 1990 to 2023; make accountability referrals to the judiciary and oversee reparation payments to documented victims.

Secondly, the National Assembly should enact legislation requiring the implementation of existing panel recommendations, beginning with the 2001 report, under a time-bound accountability framework.

Thirdly, the National Land Commission, in collaboration with Taraba State government, should undertake a formal land adjudication process in Wukari that recognises dual occupancy claims and establishes a permanent land rights register accessible to both communities.

Fourthly, the composition of Wukari Local Government Area governance structures, including elected positions and statutory appointments, should be reformed to guarantee proportional Tiv representation in accordance with the Federal Character principle.

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Fifthly, a transitional justice mechanism incorporating public truth-telling hearings, symbolic acknowledgement of past atrocities by state institutions, and guarantees of non-recurrence should be designed with community participation and embedded in all future peace processes.

Finally, Taraba State's judiciary should be strengthened through dedicated inter-ethnic dispute courts with specialist training in land adjudication and conflict-sensitive jurisprudence. Without justice, peace in Wukari will remain episodic, fragile, and perpetually deferred.

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