

TERRITORIALITY, IDENTITY POLITICS, AND POPULATION DISPLACEMENT: INTERROGATING THE TIV-JUKUN CONFLICT IN WUKARI LGA, TARABA STATE

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Abstract

This study interrogates the nexus between territoriality, identity politics, and population displacement within the context of the protracted Tiv –Jukun conflict in Wukari Local Government Area of Taraba State, Nigeria. Anchored on qualitative research methodology, the study utilizes in-depth interviews and focus group discussions conducted across multiple conflict-prone wards to explore how competing claims to land, historical narratives of indigeneity, and political exclusion fuel cyclical violence and forced displacement. Drawing insights from Contact Theory, the study finds that territoriality in this context transcends geographical boundaries, manifesting as symbolic and political claims to space, traditional authority, and cultural legitimacy. The indigene-settler dichotomy, entrenched by colonial legacies and perpetuated by contemporary political actors, has created rigid identity boundaries that limit integration and exacerbate marginalization. Furthermore, the study reveals that identity-based discrimination, exclusion from political appointments, and unequal access to land and public services significantly contribute to the displacement and disenfranchisement of Tiv populations. The findings underscore the need for inclusive governance, equitable land rights, and intercultural dialogue as pathways toward lasting peace. The study recommends state-led institutional recognition of long-term settler communities and the establishment of sustained community-based peace building mechanisms to bridge identity divides and prevent future conflict.

Keywords: Territoriality, Identity Politics, Indigene-Settler Conflict, Population Displacement, Tiv-Jukun Relations

Introduction

Nigeria, Africa's most populous country, is a multi-ethnic federation where inter-group relations are often shaped by fierce competition over land, political power, and access to state resources. While the Nigerian state strives to manage its diversity through federalism and constitutional safeguards, recurrent ethno-communal conflicts remain one of the major threats to national cohesion and internal security (Suberu, 2001; Ukiwo, 2005). Particularly in the Middle Belt region, the politics of identity and territory has continued to fuel violent clashes between ethnic groups, often leading to widespread displacement, loss of lives, and the breakdown of inter-communal relations.

The phenomenon of territoriality, the struggle over land ownership, space, and settlement rights has become a major driver of conflict in Nigeria's heterogeneous regions. Disputes over "who owns the land" are frequently framed around historical narratives, claims of indigeneity, and exclusionary identity politics. These dynamics are further intensified by the politicization of identity, where ethnic or sub-ethnic groups mobilize narratives of marginalization and cultural autonomy in pursuit of local dominance or resource access (Akinyele, 2009). The indigene-settler dichotomy, in particular, continues to manifest as a fault line in Nigerian politics, often with devastating social consequences.

In Taraba State, located in Nigeria's North-East geopolitical zone, identity-based conflict has become a defining feature of inter-group relations. The state's ethnic diversity, while a source of cultural richness, has also contributed to frequent communal violence, especially over questions of land ownership, traditional leadership, and political representation. One of the most protracted and violent of such conflicts is the Tiv-Jukun conflict in Wukari Local Government Area. The Tiv and the Jukun have a long history of cohabitation and interdependence, but this relationship has repeatedly broken down into hostility particularly around issues of territorial claims, political control, and ethnic representation in governance structures (Ajayi & Adeleke, 2020).

This conflict has led to numerous outbreaks of violence in Wukari LGA, resulting in the destruction of property, deaths, and the mass displacement of local populations. The most recent waves of conflict have been aggravated by perceived political marginalization, the manipulation of traditional authority structures, and electoral grievances. As the state and federal governments continue to struggle with conflict mitigation, humanitarian organizations have raised concerns over the deepening crisis of internal displacement and the erosion of social trust in conflict-prone areas.

This study interrogates the interplay between territoriality, identity politics, and population displacement within the context of the Tiv-Jukun conflict in Wukari. Specifically, the study aims (i) to examine the historical roots, nature, and identity-based dimensions of the Tiv/Jukun conflict in Wukari Local Government Area, and (ii) to assess the patterns and socio-economic implications of displacement arising from the conflict, particularly its impact on livelihoods, social cohesion, and community resilience.

Conceptual Clarification

Conceptualising Territoriality

Territoriality is a dynamic and contested concept that refers to the strategies and practices by which individuals, groups, and states exert control over, claim, or defend a specific geographic area. It involves the delimitation, occupation, and symbolic attachment to space for purposes of governance,

security, identity formation, or resource access (Sack, 1986; Agnew, 1994; Elden, 2013). Territoriality is not merely physical it is fundamentally political, cultural, and ideological, reflecting how power operates spatially.

Sack (1986: p.19) defines territoriality as “the attempt by an individual or group to affect, influence, or control people, phenomena, and relationships by delimiting and asserting control over a geographic area.” This assertion of control may manifest through legal claims, cultural narratives, historical ownership, military power, or spiritual significance. At the core of territoriality lies the tension between inclusion and exclusion, between those considered legitimate occupants and those framed as outsiders or intruders. Territoriality is also central to state sovereignty and the organisation of political authority, but in multi-ethnic societies and contested localities, non-state actors such as ethnic communities or militant groups also claim territory based on ethnic heritage, ancestral ownership, or socio-political dominance (Agnew, 2005; Elden, 2013). These claims often become heightened in contexts where access to land, political representation, or economic benefits is tied to indigeneity or group identity.

In recent scholarship, territoriality is also linked to identity politics and displacement, particularly in conflict-prone societies where spatial belonging defines who can live, own land, vote, or access state services. When territorial claims are contested, especially in plural settings, the result can be violent conflicts, displacement of perceived outsiders, and the militarisation of local spaces (Odoemena, 2020; Lenshie, 2017).

In this study, territoriality is operationalised as the ongoing struggle between the Tiv and Jukun communities over both the physical and symbolic control of land and space in Wukari Local Government Area of Taraba State. This struggle is deeply rooted in competing historical narratives of settlement and indigeneity, whereby both groups assert claims to being the original inhabitants of the area, thereby justifying their perceived territorial entitlements. Territoriality also manifests in contests over political control of local institutions, particularly in disputes surrounding the legitimacy and leadership of traditional rulership structures, such as the chieftaincy, which are seen as instruments of territorial authority and ethnic dominance. The control and allocation of land for farming, residence, and religious or cultural purposes serve as recurring flashpoints for inter-communal tensions, with access to land being tightly bound to ethnic identity and group affiliation. Additionally, exclusionary practices such as the denial of political appointments, access to social services, or issuance of certificates of indigeneity are employed as tools to assert territorial dominance and delegitimise the other group’s claims. Crucially, the violent contestations over territorial ownership have also led to patterns of forced displacement, with one group often subjected to migration or expulsion during conflict episodes, resulting in humanitarian concerns and the deepening of grievances rooted in identity and marginalisation. Therefore, territoriality in the context of the Tiv-Jukun conflict transcends mere

spatial contestation; it encapsulates a broader political, cultural, and symbolic struggle over identity, legitimacy, and belonging. It serves as a central analytical lens for understanding how ethnicity, political exclusion, and displacement intersect in shaping the dynamics of conflict and social fragmentation in Wukari.

Identity Politics: A Conceptual Analysis

Identity politics refers to a political approach wherein individuals of a particular gender, religion, ethnicity, race, social background, or cultural affiliation form exclusive political alliances to advance the interests of their group. These alliances are based not on shared ideological commitments but on shared identity, often tied to historical grievances, marginalisation, and claims for recognition and redistribution (Heyes, 2020; Yuval-Davis, 2022).

In the Nigerian context, identity politics is deeply embedded in the country's socio-political history. It is largely framed around ethnic, religious, and regional affiliations that have historically influenced political mobilisation, access to state power, and distribution of national resources (Lenshie & Agbu, 2013; Olanrewaju & Alabi, 2021). As such, political elites often instrumentalise identity to galvanise support, manipulate public sentiment, and consolidate political power.

The colonial construction of the Nigerian state institutionalised ethnic divisions by governing through indirect rule, which reinforced local identities while suppressing the emergence of a national consciousness (Osaghae, 1995; Suberu, 2001). Post-independence politics continued this trend as successive governments struggled to balance ethnic demands for inclusion, representation, and autonomy within a fragile federal structure (Ibeanu, 2005; Mustapha, 2007). Thus, political representation and resource allocation became primarily mediated through ethnic identity rather than democratic ideals of equal citizenship or competence.

Contemporary studies confirm that identity politics remains one of the central challenges to democratic governance in Nigeria. For instance, Ojo and Falola (2022) observe that Nigeria's political space continues to be fragmented by ethnic cleavages that affect electoral outcomes, party formation, and national policymaking. Similarly, Akinola (2021) contends that identity politics in Nigeria is a double-edged sword: while it offers marginalised groups a platform for voice and visibility, it also entrenches division, fuels suspicion, and fosters political instability.

The operation of the federal character principle and zoning arrangements are institutional manifestations of identity politics in Nigeria. Designed to promote equity and inclusion, these frameworks have often been manipulated to serve the interests of dominant ethnic elites while alienating smaller or less politically influential groups (Adele, 2020; Adebawwi, 2021). As a result,

identity considerations have become prerequisites for political appointments, employment, and developmental projects, often at the expense of meritocracy.

Furthermore, ethnic-based political parties, civil society organisations, and militias have emerged to champion group-specific interests. Groups such as Ohanaeze Ndigbo, Afenifere, Arewa Consultative Forum, and the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) have become key actors in identity politics, with implications for national unity, secessionist agitations, and the legitimacy of the state (Iroegbu, 2022; Okonkwo & Ibrahim, 2023).

Importantly, while identity politics is often viewed as divisive, it can also have positive emancipatory potentials. It can serve as a vehicle for political inclusion, cultural recognition, and social justice, particularly for historically marginalised communities. As Kymlicka (1995) and Crenshaw (2020) argue, democratic pluralism must accommodate diverse identities within a state, especially in postcolonial societies where power imbalances are entrenched in historical structures. Nevertheless, the Nigerian case and specifically the Tiv–Jukun experience demonstrates that unchecked identity politics, especially when used as a tool of exclusion or dominance, poses a threat to democratic consolidation and peaceful coexistence. As Lenshie and Agbu (2013) aptly note, the dominance of identity-based mobilisation has weakened national cohesion, undermined democratic institutions, and exacerbated violent conflicts. Managing identity politics in Nigeria thus requires a delicate balance between group recognition and the cultivation of a shared national identity based on inclusive citizenship and democratic values.

Population Displacement

Population displacement refers to the large-scale and often involuntary movement of people from their habitual place of residence due to external pressures such as armed conflict, inter-communal violence, environmental disasters, large-scale development projects, or persecution. It encompasses both the sudden uprooting of communities and the long-term dislocation of individuals or groups who are unable to return to their original homes due to insecurity, loss of property, or political exclusion (UNHCR, 2023; IOM, 2021).

Unlike routine migration, which may be voluntary and economically motivated, population displacement is typically coerced, reactive, and associated with distress, loss, and vulnerability. It disrupts community cohesion, livelihoods, and access to basic services and often leads to severe humanitarian consequences, including food insecurity, exposure to disease, gender-based violence, and psychological trauma (Ferris, 2014; Cohen & Deng, 1998).

Population displacement can be internal when people remain within their country's borders (internally displaced persons, or IDPs) or cross-border, resulting in refugee situations. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) defines internally displaced persons as those who have been "forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence without having crossed an internationally recognized state border" (IDMC, 2023). This phenomenon is particularly acute in fragile or conflict-prone states where ethnic, religious, or political rivalries intersect with weak governance structures and contested territorial claims.

Importantly, Wukari in Taraba State has witnessed repeated episodes of population displacement directly linked to the protracted Tiv–Jukun conflict. Historical records and recent reports document major clashes such as those in 1990, 2001, 2014, and the renewed violence of 2019 that forced thousands of Tiv and Jukun residents to flee their homes, often seeking refuge in neighbouring Benue State, other parts of Taraba, or makeshift camps for internally displaced persons (Best, 2005; Blench et al., 2021; Lenshie & Okoli, 2022). Many displaced families lost farmlands, houses, and livelihoods, and some have been unable to return because of lingering insecurity, destruction of property, or fear of renewed hostilities. In some cases, displacement has been used as a strategic tool by rival groups to assert territorial control and alter local demographics, thereby deepening tensions and complicating peacebuilding efforts (Akombo, 2019; Avav, 2020).

The consequences of population displacement are far-reaching. Displaced populations are often denied access to political participation, education, healthcare, and legal protections. They may also face discrimination in host communities or resettlement areas, especially when displacement alters the local demographic balance or strains limited resources (Bakewell, 2008; Iroegbu, 2022). Women, children, the elderly, and persons with disabilities are particularly affected, facing heightened risks of exploitation, marginalisation, and abuse. Therefore, population displacement is not simply a demographic event, but a deeply political and socio-economic phenomenon. It reflects systemic inequalities, governance failures, and unresolved historical grievances dynamics that are vividly evident in the recurring Tiv–Jukun conflict in Wukari.

Territoriality, Identity Politics, and Population Displacement: A Triadic Nexus in Communal Conflicts

The interplay between territoriality, identity politics, and population displacement constitutes a dynamic and mutually reinforcing triad that drives many communal conflicts in multi-ethnic societies such as Nigeria. While each concept can be examined independently, their entanglement becomes especially potent in ethno-political struggles where land, political representation, and belonging are violently contested.

Territoriality extends beyond a mere spatial notion to embody the political, economic, and symbolic power of place. It reflects how ethnic or cultural groups assert control and ownership over geographic spaces as an expression of historical identity, sovereignty, and exclusion of the “other” (Sack, 1986; Elden, 2013). In Wukari Local Government Area of Taraba State, the Tiv and Jukun communities both claim indigeneity and ancestral rights, turning land into a physical and metaphysical battleground. The contest is not only over farmland or settlements but over the right to define and control a homeland, determine local governance, and secure access to state resources and traditional authority. The cyclical clashes of 1990, 2001, 2014, and 2019 underscore how territory in Wukari is more than property it is the ultimate proof of collective existence and legitimacy (Best, 2005; Blench et al., 2021).

Identity politics provides the ideological and emotional energy that animates these territorial disputes. Political elites and traditional leaders mobilise ethnic narratives to validate claims to land, chieftaincy, and administrative control. By framing conflicts as a struggle between “indigenes” and “settlers,” they convert geography into a symbol of ethnic survival, drawing sharp boundaries between insiders and outsiders (Lenshie & Agbu, 2013; Mustapha, 2007). In Wukari, Jukun leaders often invoke ancestral sovereignty, while Tiv leaders emphasise decades of settlement and economic contribution. This mobilisation transforms everyday disputes into existential battles and hardens ethnic boundaries, making compromise politically costly. It also ethnicises local state institutions, allowing the allocation of political offices, security responses, and social services to become arenas of ethnic contest.

Population displacement is both a consequence and an instrument of these struggles. Violent clashes repeatedly force thousands to flee, as seen in the mass exodus of Tiv families to Benue State and other parts of Taraba during the 2001 and 2019 crises (Akombo, 2019; IDMC, 2023). Displacement serves more than a tragic by-product: it is strategically exploited to reshape demographics, depopulate contested areas, and solidify territorial claims. Displaced persons often face barriers to return, including the destruction of homes, seizure of farmlands, and intimidation or bureaucratic hurdles designed to entrench new power dynamics (Turton, 2003; Okunmadewa & Yusuf, 2022). Over time, the loss of land and property weakens the displaced group’s bargaining power and erodes their political representation, reinforcing the dominance of the victors.

Understanding this triadic nexus is essential for analysing the Tiv–Jukun conflict. Territorial claims draw legitimacy from identity narratives; identity politics escalates territorial disputes; and displacement reshapes both the physical and demographic landscape to the advantage of dominant actors. These three forces operate in a feedback loop, where each reinforces and amplifies the others. Sustainable peace in Wukari therefore requires more than short-term ceasefires or humanitarian relief. It demands structural solutions that confront historical grievances, guarantee equitable land and

political rights, and create inclusive citizenship frameworks capable of transcending the insider–outsider dichotomy

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Contact Theory. Contact Theory, as developed and popularised by social psychologists Hewstone and Richard (1998), asserts that interaction between members of different social, ethnic, religious, or cultural groups under optimal conditions can reduce prejudice, promote empathy, and foster peaceful coexistence. The central idea of the theory is that prejudices and intergroup suspicions stem from lack of interaction and misinformation, which can be corrected through meaningful and repeated contact. When structured appropriately through shared goals, equal status, and institutional support contact can transform intergroup relations by encouraging trust, friendship, and mutual understanding (Jev, 2016)

This theory has been applied in multiple real-world contexts. In Northern Ireland, contact programs between Catholic and Protestant youths built friendships that significantly reduced group-based prejudices (Hewstone, 2003). Similarly, in Burnley, UK, contact initiatives involving residents, businesses, and local authorities used mediation and dialogue to de-escalate community tensions (Goodwin & Tausch, 2009). Another example is the "Living Library" model, where people interact with individuals from different backgrounds in structured conversations, promoting tolerance in segregated areas.

The theory has also evolved into a broader policy framework known as “interculturalism”, promoted by the Council of Europe. Interculturalism emphasizes the need for continuous, quality contact in shared public and social spaces such as schools, youth centres, markets, religious spaces, and workplaces to nurture mutual learning and joint growth. It calls for creating "spaces of dialogue" that bring people together to share experiences, challenge stereotypes, and build inclusive communities (European Institute for Comparative Cultural Research, 2008).

However, critics from the conflict theory school challenge Contact Theory’s optimism. They argue that proximity between groups can actually intensify conflict, especially in contexts of power imbalance, competition for resources, or historical grievances (Stark, 2006; Vasquez, 1995). The argument here is not that proximity causes conflict, but that it creates opportunities for domination or resistance, especially when the groups involved are socio-politically unequal. Critics stress that contact must occur under supportive conditions; otherwise, it risks reinforcing negative stereotypes rather than reducing them.

Despite these criticisms, Contact Theory remains relevant, especially when applied to ethnic conflicts such as the Tiv-Jukun crisis in Wukari LGA, Taraba State. The Tiv (often regarded as settlers) and the Jukun (considered indigenous) have historically coexisted, sharing aspects of socio-cultural life including intermarriage and farming systems. However, due to inadequate cultural contact and institutional support, mistrust and ethnic fragmentation have deepened. The theory suggests that contact if positively structured can bridge these divides by facilitating dialogue, shared goals, and collaborative activities such as sports, festivals, and community service.

In this context, integration policies that promote regular interethnic interaction particularly among youths can help erode settler-indigene dichotomies, reduce prejudice, and build social cohesion. Contact-based strategies like joint cultural events, inclusive leadership forums, and community dialogue platforms are necessary for transforming perceptions and fostering peaceful coexistence. Moreover, the creation of physical and symbolic spaces for interaction is key to reducing fear and encouraging cooperation. Contact also enables “in-groups” to understand and empathize with “out-groups”, making it an essential framework for national integration in a multi-ethnic state like Nigeria.

While not without limitations, Contact Theory offers a practical and humanistic approach to peacebuilding and integration. Its emphasis on everyday interaction, empathy, and shared humanity makes it highly applicable to the Tiv-Jukun context and to Nigeria’s broader quest for social harmony and unity.

Methodology

This study adopted a case study research design with a qualitative method of data collection and analysis to examine the interplay of territoriality, identity politics, and population displacement in the Tiv-Jukun conflict in Wukari Local Government Area (LGA), Taraba State. The case study design was appropriate because it allows for an in-depth, context-specific investigation of a single complex phenomenon within its real-life setting. A qualitative method was chosen to capture the lived experiences, narratives, and historical memories of people directly affected by the conflict—insights that cannot be generated through quantitative surveys. Primary data were collected through in-depth interviews (IDIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs) because these techniques facilitate rich, interactive, and nuanced accounts of participants’ perspectives while allowing the researcher to probe sensitive issues like displacement and ethnic identity in a culturally respectful manner. The combination of IDIs and FGDs was particularly useful for cross-validating individual experiences and generating group reflections on collective memory. Purposive sampling was employed to deliberately target participants with firsthand knowledge of the conflict such as displaced persons, traditional leaders, women leaders, youth representatives, and local peace-committee members while snowball sampling

enabled the recruitment of additional participants recommended by earlier informants who possessed unique insights but might have been difficult to identify beforehand. A total of 15 IDIs and six FGDs was considered adequate because data saturation the point at which no new themes emerged was reached after the fifteenth interview and sixth group session, ensuring both depth and breadth of information.

Data from interviews and group discussions were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and coded manually using an inductive approach. Initial open coding identified recurring ideas, which were refined into focused codes and then grouped into key themes such as territorial contestation, ethnic identity mobilisation, cycles of displacement, governance gaps, and peacebuilding challenges. To enhance credibility, triangulation was employed by systematically comparing information from different participant categories (e.g., traditional leaders versus displaced persons), data-collection methods (IDIs, FGDs, and documentary sources), and secondary materials such as government reports, archival records, and publications from the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) and the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA). This multi-source validation helped to confirm the consistency of findings and reduce potential researcher bias. For confidentiality, participants were assigned pseudonyms such as Participant A1 (traditional leader), Participant B3 (displaced woman), and Participant C2 (youth representative), allowing the analysis to illustrate diverse viewpoints while protecting identities. Together, these methodological choices ensured a rigorous, ethically sound, and contextually grounded exploration of the Tiv–Jukun conflict and its attendant displacement dynamics.

Presentation of Data, Analysis and Findings

This section presents and analyzes the qualitative data generated from in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and documentary sources, organized around the two key objectives of the study. First, it examines the historical roots, nature, and identity-based dimensions of the Tiv–Jukun conflict in Wukari Local Government Area, highlighting how competing claims of indigeneity, land ownership, and political authority have sustained the protracted crisis. Second, it assesses the patterns and socio-economic implications of conflict-induced displacement, exploring its effects on livelihoods, social cohesion, education, health services, and community resilience. The analysis is thematically structured to illuminate how territorial claims, identity politics, and population displacement intersect to shape the dynamics of violence and its aftermath. Quotations from participants are incorporated to substantiate the discussion and give voice to the affected communities.

The nature and historical causes of the Tiv/Jukun indigene-settler conflict in Wukari Local Government Area.

The indigene-settler conflict between the Tiv and Jukun ethnic groups in Wukari Local Government Area of Taraba State reflects deep-rooted structural, political, and historical contradictions embedded in Nigeria's federal and multi-ethnic setup. Historically, the Jukun are widely regarded as the aboriginal inhabitants of Wukari, occupying the area from precolonial times. The history of Tiv migration, however, remains contested. While some scholars such as Akiga (1939), Rubingh (1969), Downes (1971), Fardon (1988), and Burton (1991) maintain that the Tiv migrated from the Benue Valley, which they regard as their historical homeland, emphasizing their early settlement and expansion within the Middle Belt. In contrast, others like Bohannan and Jev (2016), drawing on Makar (1994), dispute this view by tracing Tiv origins to southeastern Cameroon, from where they first settled in Sardauna before moving into Takum, Donga, Ussa, and Wukari, and eventually expanding into Benue and Nasarawa States. These migration trajectories, whether traced through Benue or Cameroon, brought the Tiv into sustained contact with the Jukun, creating contestations over land ownership, political authority, and social belonging tensions that intensified with demographic growth and the political awakening of the Tiv people.

The colonial period entrenched the indigene-settler hierarchy by instituting indirect rule, which recognized centralized traditional authorities like the Aku Uka of Wukari while denying similar recognition to decentralized ethnic groups like the Tiv (Afigbo, 1972). This reinforced the perception that Tiv people were outsiders despite their increasing population and contribution to local development. According to Egwu (2003), the British preferred working with centralized systems and discouraged the rise of non-centralized ethnic groups like the Tiv, whom they categorized as politically inferior.

Contemporary interviews conducted in Wukari corroborate these historical accounts. A Tiv elder in Tsokundi shared a deeply emotional account:

My grandfather came to this land in 1927, long before Nigeria's independence. He cleared the forests, planted yam and guinea corn, and even helped build the old market square that everyone uses today. But now, they say we are strangers. That we don't belong here. This is the root of our pain. We are called settlers in a place where our forefathers are buried. It's like someone telling you that your father's house is not your home (Interview, Tsokundi Ward, July 2025).

This account underscores the problem of exclusion and identity-based classification. The term "settler" in Nigerian politics is not merely descriptive; it carries serious consequences such as lack of access to land, political rights, and social exclusion. This contestations arises from long-standing perceptions that those who arrived later, no matter how long they have stayed, do not enjoy equal status and benefits

with those regarded as ‘indigenes’ (Best, 2005; Ishyaka, Chuseh & Ali, 2023). This tension becomes more volatile when linked to access to public goods like land, education, and government appointments.

Jukun narratives, however, present a contrasting historical account that asserts their status as aboriginal inhabitants of the Wukari region and custodians of the Wukari Traditional Council, historically headed by the Aku Uka.

A Jukun traditional titleholder in Kente asserted:

“Our ancestors have lived here for centuries, and the Wukari Federation has long been under Jukun custodianship. When the Tiv settled here in the early 1900s, they were welcomed as neighbors and given farmland. But as their numbers and influence grew, their calls for political recognition began to be seen as a challenge to the authority of the Wukari Traditional Council. For us, coexistence is important, but it must not come at the expense of our heritage and identity (Interview, Kente Ward, July 2025)”.

These conflicting origin stories fuel tensions, as each group seeks legitimacy. While Tiv residents seek equal rights based on historical settlement and population growth, the Jukun seek to preserve their perceived ancestral authority. This dichotomy has been weaponized by political elites, especially during elections, when identity becomes a tool for mobilization.

A Tiv youth leader in Puje explained:

Every election season, the conflict gets worse. Politicians come and say, ‘They want to take your land,’ or ‘They don’t belong here, don’t let them win.’ The people get charged. After elections, the politicians disappear, but the damage is done. We fight, we bury our dead, we rebuild and then it happens again (Interview, Puje Ward, July 2025).

This manipulation of ethnicity for political gains is consistent with the findings of Kwaja (2009), who notes that ethno-political competition over land and leadership positions in Nigeria often fuels communal violence under the guise of indigene-settler conflicts. The fear of the unknown, especially the perception that the Tiv could overrun Wukari due to their numerical strength and increasing political participation, has further driven conflict (Ishyaka, Chuseh & Ali, 2023, p.12).

Land ownership and access is another key driver of the conflict. The Tiv, known for their expansive agricultural practices, have continuously sought fertile land in Wukari, often expanding beyond their original settlements. Land is particularly a volatile factor. As predominantly agrarian communities, both Tiv and Jukun depend on land for subsistence and commercial farming. Over the years, increasing

population pressure, environmental degradation, and the absence of clear land tenure documentation have created intense friction. A Tiv woman in Bantaje narrated:

“We farm every year, but when the crisis starts, we run and lose everything. They burn our homes and seize our farms. When we return, we see strange people farming on our land. We report to the local chief, and they tell us, ‘You’re not from here.’ This is the injustice we face” (FGD with Tiv women, Bantaje Ward, July 2025)”.

This account highlights the intersection between land, traditional authority, and marginalization. The Wukari Traditional Council, dominated by the Jukun, is perceived by Tiv residents as excluding them from land rights and cultural recognition. This exclusion was cited across multiple wards and is a major trigger of violence. A Jukun youth in Akwana responded:

“We have the Aku Uka, the highest traditional authority in this area. The Tiv don’t have a stake in that structure. So, they try to create parallel chiefs or demand new chiefdoms. That is a red line for us. It is like breaking the Wukari heritage. This is why conflict keeps coming back” (Interview, Akwana Ward, July 2025)”.

Historical documentation supports this claim of exclusion. As Akinwumi (2004) and Egwu (2005) argue, the legacy of indirect rule under British colonial administration entrenched the dominance of certain ethnic groups by formalizing chieftaincy structures, while others were excluded and labeled “migrants,” even if they had settled for generations. These categorization have hardened permanent identities, creating deep-rooted social cleavages that often escalate during periods of political competition and land scarcity.

The patterns and socio-economic implications of displacement arising from the conflict, particularly its impact on livelihoods, social cohesion, and community resilience.

The Tiv–Jukun conflict in Wukari Local Government Area (LGA) of Taraba State has not only precipitated widespread displacement but has also engendered far-reaching socio-economic dislocations in both affected and host communities. The protracted and cyclical nature of the conflict has devastated local economies, fractured communal bonds, and significantly eroded access to basic social services. The ramifications of displacement have persisted beyond the immediate phase of violence, often manifesting in long-term impoverishment, interrupted development, and social exclusion of the displaced.

Findings from field data gathered across the ten (10) wards of Wukari LGA Akwana, Avyi, Bantaje, Chonku, Hospital, Jibu, Kente, Puje, Rafin Kada, and Tsokundi affirm that communities in both Tiv

and Jukun settlements experienced severe disruptions in livelihood systems. In each of the twenty-four (24) selected villages (twelve from each ethnic group), respondents detailed how displacement affected agriculture, food security, education, health services, gender relations, housing, and local economies.

In a focus group discussion held in Rafin Kada, a Tiv farmer recalled:

“Before the crisis, I had six hectares of cassava and yam farms. When the attack happened, I couldn’t harvest anything. My entire investment went up in flames. Since then, I have been doing menial labour. Hunger has taken over our homes. We’ve moved from being producers to beggars” (FGD with Tiv farmers, Rafin Kada Ward, July 2025)”.

This experience is consistent with broader research by Kwaja and Adeoye (2019), who note that agrarian communities in conflict zones across North Central Nigeria often experience total economic collapse following displacement, leading to long-term food insecurity and dependency on aid. Similarly, Ishyaka, Chuseh and Ali (2023, p.32) report that the Tiv–Jukun crisis has resulted in the “disruption of farming and commercial activities, destruction of properties including houses and food stores, killing and displacement of people, increased cases of kidnapping, abduction, rape and rising levels of food insecurity” in Southern Taraba. With over 83% of the population relying on agriculture, the inability to farm due to insecurity is catastrophic.

Among Jukun communities, economic hardships were also pronounced. In an interview conducted in Avyi, a Jukun widow lamented: “I used to trade foodstuff in the local market. My shop was looted and burnt during the conflict. I now rely on handouts from my church and relatives. My children dropped out of school because I can’t pay their fees” (Interview with Jukun woman, Avyi Ward, July 2025).

This aligns with observations by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC, 2020), which documents how internal displacement disrupts microenterprise activities and reinforces cycles of poverty, particularly among women in conflict-affected zones. Women and children are disproportionately affected, often experiencing the loss of economic agency, educational access, and social protection.

Education systems were also severely affected in the aftermath of displacement. Schools were closed for extended periods, and many pupils either dropped out or failed to re-enroll. In Hospital Ward, a headmaster reported:

“Most of our classrooms were destroyed. Over 200 pupils were displaced, and many never returned. Teachers also fled. Even now, classes are half-empty and under-resourced. Education

is no longer a priority for displaced families struggling to feed” (Interview with School Head, Hospital Ward, July 2025)”.

UNICEF (2022) confirms that in conflict-affected LGAs in Nigeria, displacement leads to over 50% decline in school enrollment, with girls more likely to permanently drop out due to early marriage and household labor demands. In Wukari, this trend was confirmed during FGDs with displaced Tiv and Jukun communities in Chonku and Kente Wards. A displaced Tiv girl stated: “I wanted to return to school, but my father said we have no money. So I started hawking groundnuts. School is now a dream for me” (FGD with displaced girls, Chonku Ward, July 2025).

This mirrors the finding of Ishyaka et al. (2023) who observed that the conflict “is now threatening the hope and future of the children from Southern Taraba,” where school closures, loss of teachers, and insecurity have disrupted educational calendars, even affecting students in tertiary institutions Awortu (2015) also notes that this will compound the region’s educational crisis, deepen illiteracy, and reduce the future manpower capacity of Southern Taraba.

Healthcare services also deteriorated sharply in displaced communities. Many primary health centers were abandoned or vandalized. A displaced mother in Tsokundi shared:

“I gave birth on a mat in an abandoned classroom. No nurse, no medicine. When my baby became sick, we trekked for hours to find help. By the time we reached, the child was gone” (Interview, Tsokundi Ward, July 2025)”.

This personal account resonates with Médecins Sans Frontières (2021), which reported a 70% increase in maternal and child mortality in conflict zones in the Middle Belt region due to inadequate access to health services for internally displaced persons (IDPs). The absence of clean water, immunization, and maternal care facilities in camps and destroyed settlements compounds the vulnerability of displaced women and children.

Housing conditions among returnees were also deplorable. Shelters destroyed during conflict remain unrepaired, forcing many to live in overcrowded, makeshift structures. A Tiv youth from Jibu narrated: “We returned after eight months. Our compound was gone. We sleep under plastic sheets tied to poles. When it rains, we huddle together. No privacy. No safety. It’s like punishment for surviving” (Interview with displaced youth, Jibu Ward, July 2025).

The UNHCR (2020) confirms that in displacement situations, over 80% of returnees face long-term housing insecurity due to lack of rebuilding support, loss of land rights, and absence of institutional restitution. This finding is supported by Ishyaka et al. (2023) who note that “the conflicts have reduced

drastically government developmental projects... and discouraged both local and foreign investment” in Southern Taraba. As a result, infrastructural decay, unemployment, and economic backwardness persist.

Social cohesion and traditional institutions have equally been undermined. Displacement has broken kinship ties, disrupted communal leadership, and fostered suspicion between and within communities. A Jukun elder in Kente stated: “We no longer meet for community decisions. Everyone is scattered. Even those who returned are angry. They don’t talk like before. The youth now take laws into their hands” (Interview, Kente Ward, July 2025).

These findings are supported by Egwu (2015), who argues that population displacement in ethnically divided societies often results in deeper polarization, eroding inter-communal trust and weakening traditional governance structures. Furthermore, Kwaja (2016) observes that displacement transforms cultural conflict into structural poverty and intergenerational trauma, particularly when grievances are left unaddressed.

Gender-specific vulnerabilities were also recurrent in testimonies. Women, especially widows and young girls, faced economic and sexual exploitation in IDP camps. A woman in Akwana shared: “Some men demanded sex for food or medicine. I refused, but others could not. There is no security in the camps. Even our dignity is not safe” (FGD with women, Akwana Ward, July 2025).

This echoes findings by Amnesty International (2021), which highlight that displaced women in Nigeria often suffer sexual violence, forced marriage, and economic abuse in camps or temporary shelters. *Ishyaka et al.* (2023) further confirm that women and children remain the most vulnerable demographic, often lacking access to protective services or economic rehabilitation.

The socio-economic effects of displacement in Wukari LGA are devastating and multidimensional. The conflict-induced displacement has undermined agriculture, commerce, education, healthcare, housing, and social capital. Both Tiv and Jukun communities continue to grapple with the consequences, some of which are immediate, while others long-term. The lack of adequate institutional support for recovery and reintegration further exacerbates the crisis. As the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD, 2022) cautions, unresolved displacement crises in Nigeria's Middle Belt contribute not only to poverty and underdevelopment but also to renewed cycles of violence.

Conclusion

The Tiv-Jukun conflict in Wukari Local Government Area is rooted in a complex interplay of historical grievances, contested territorial claims, politicized identities, and systemic exclusion. The enduring

indigene-settler dichotomy, reinforced by colonial legacies and modern political manipulation, has continued to fuel cycles of violence and displacement. Territoriality, in this context, goes beyond physical land ownership to include symbolic and political struggles over belonging, legitimacy, and representation. The study reveals that the lack of inclusive governance structures, equitable land access, and meaningful intergroup contact perpetuates mistrust and undermines efforts toward sustainable peace.

Recommendations

Arising from the findings of the study above the following recommendations were made: They are as follows:

- i. Institutional Recognition and Inclusive Governance: The Taraba State Government, in collaboration with traditional councils and federal authorities, should officially recognize long-term resident communities such as the Tiv in Wukari through legal frameworks that grant them equitable political representation, access to public services, and traditional participation. Establishing mechanisms for rotational political appointments and inclusive chieftaincy structures will help reduce perceived marginalization and promote interethnic harmony and integration of the people.
- ii. Community-based Peacebuilding and Intergroup Dialogue: There should be a sustained investment in grassroots peacebuilding initiatives, including intergroup cultural festivals, joint youth empowerment programs, and mediated dialogues between Tiv and Jukun leaders. These platforms should aim to rebuild trust, confront negative historical narratives, and foster shared identities. The creation of “Peace Committees” across wards comprised of elders, women, and youth from both groups will also help in preventing future escalation and supporting early warning systems.

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