



## **Violent Conflicts in Tivland: An Ethical Assessment of the Loss of Human Dignity and Moral Values in the Contemporary Society**

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### **Abstract**

This paper is an ethical assessment of violent conflicts in Tivland. It is no gainsaying that those conflicts have had overwhelming consequences on Tivland. This study aims to examine the moral bases for violent conflicts in Tivland with the hope of finding solutions to the scourge. The phenomenon of violent conflicts in Tivland spanned the pre-colonial period and has continued to date. These conflicts include communal and ethnic conflicts, land disputes, farmer/herder clashes and banditry which have caused humanitarian crises and underdevelopment in Tivland. This paper argues that violent conflicts in contemporary Tiv society are caused by the loss of human dignity and moral values that have veiled the sacredness of life. The authors make use of content analysis as well as qualitative analysis methods of data collection for the work. The paper found out that conflicts have had negative effects such as loss of life, destruction of schools, churches, markets, homes and farmlands. The ethical principles adopted were the Human dignity argument, the Sacredness of Human life, the Just War, and the Double Effect Principle. Based on these principles, it is argued that, the only authority that can engage in arms fight is the state. While conflict seems inevitable, the paper recommends that the state can apply the Just

War Principle; victims of violence can apply the Double Effect Principle for self-defence. The paper concludes that for violent conflicts to be properly resolved, the people must lay down arms in respect of human dignity and the sacredness of life; the state must mediate in conflict responsibly while applying ethical values.

**Keywords:** Conflict, Tivland, Human Dignity, Moral Value, Contemporary Society.

## Introduction

The failure to maintain the dignity of human persons, moral values, appropriate individual and communal relations, or put in place apposite crisis management strategies is responsible for the intermittent wars and violent clashes in the Tiv nation. Violent conflicts in Tivland can be blamed on a total lack of respect for human life. It seems to disturbingly intrude on every aspect of society, and people of all different beliefs and viewpoints. The rich or poor or middle class, religious or secular, the one common denominator throughout society, in general, is a total disregard for individual life. The mindset that a human being must be respected – as a person – from the very first instant of his existence is completely eroded. This can be blamed on the commercial world humanity lives in, where greed and apathy are encouraged at the expense of virtues. Sadly, the sanctity, value, and respect for human life are usually grossly undermined in conflict situations, leading to the killing of even children and women who are vulnerable in society.

Violent conflicts have in recent years taken a more dangerous dimension as bandits and herdsmen now carry sophisticated ammunition with which they kill and maim perceived opponents at will. These crises take different forms such as banditry, land skirmishes, ethnic crises as well as farmer/herders clashes. Conflict is a part of people's lives and a natural phenomenon in all organizations. A low level of conflict will not be harmful to daily operations but will help to create smooth functioning by better understanding of prevailing issues. Conflict at the anticipated level can stimulate creativity when handling issues and resolving conflict. Therefore, conflict can be helpful in work environments, but whenever a critical or major conflict happens, it should be fixed as the unwanted level of conflict can be harmful and dysfunctional for the organization (Leung, 2010). This study therefore



examines the prevalence of violent conflicts as traceable to loss of moral values and dignity for human persons in Benue state. The value for life and human dignity argument is considered in this work as one of the strategies to dampen violent conflicts in Tivland.

### **Clarification of Concepts**

**Violent Conflict:** Conflict has been variously perceived by scholars. Dudley Weeks sees conflict as a relationship between two parties who disagree over matters, they value and who perceive that their power to attain that which they value is threatened by the other party's values, goals, perceptions, behaviour, and/or degree of power (4). Meanwhile, Bullard insists that conflict can be described as when two pieces of matter, objects, or ideas try to occupy the same space at the same time (10). In the context of this paper, therefore, conflict is taken to mean disagreement that leads to violent physical assaults on one's opponents.

**Tivland:** Tivland is located in Benue - one of the thirty-six States of Nigeria's present political structure. A state which is situated almost in the middle of the country, and therefore falls within the geographical region popularly referred to as the middle belt.

The Northern Nigeria statistical yearbook of 1965 puts the Tiv population at 2.7 million. Today, it is estimated that they number over 30 million cut across Benue, Nasarawa, Taraba, Plateau and Cross-river. That makes them the most populous ethnic group in Benue State, and Nigeria's fourth-largest ethnic group. Tivland extends on both sides of the River Benue and occupies an area of about 30,000 square kilometers and stretches from about 6030 to 8010 north latitudes and 80 to 100 east longitudes. The Northern Nigerian statistical yearbook further buttresses that, the Tiv are by traditional farmers, though quite a number of them have now joined the business world (Wegh, 23-24).

The Tiv are bordered on the East by the Jukun and Chamba of Taraba State. To their, West are the Idoma and Igala of Benue and Kogi States respectively. To the North, the Tiv shares borders with the Angwe, Alago, and Koro of Nasarawa State. While to the South the Tiv are bordered by a congeries of ethnic groups which they call Udam of Cross River State (25).

The issue of land is so important, it is not owned by an individual and it cannot be sold. Remarkably, one does not purchase land; one gets a share of the land that is commonly owned. Tseyao differentiates two kinds of landholding among the Tiv: citizenship and allodial rights on the land (6). The latter is dependent on agnation and is a permanent right, while the former is not similarly based and is not permanent. Tseyao further states that the Tiv believe that attacks can be made on their land. But when the elders accused the British Administration of having spoilt the land, this was not a reference to physical destruction (7).

**Human Dignity:** Human Dignity is the state of being worthy of honour or respect. When dignity is associated with the adjective human, it denotes that all human beings possess equal and inherent worth and therefore ought to be accorded the highest reverence and care, regardless of their age, sex, socio-economic status, health condition, ethnic origin, political ideas or religion (Adorno, 45). However, the loss of respect for human life leaves no boundary for tolerance, peace, and unity, the result of which is violent conflicts characterized by killings and mass destruction.

### **Brief History of Violent Conflicts in Tivland**

The history of the Tiv is laden with violent conflicts such as *Nyambuan* (1939) *Haakaa, nande-nande* (1960), and *Atemtyo* (1964) (Rubingh 147), the current trend in insurgency, banditry and farmer/herder crises leaves a devastating mark on the society. The spate of land disputes, political differences, marginalization, and socio-economic differences made Peter Genger categorize Tiv conflict scenarios into five categories namely; historical conflicts (violent migration wars, settlement and colonial encounters); Occasional conflicts and spiritual warfare; Industrial disputes and consultation for development; Regular conflicts such as political violence, land skirmishes, family conflicts, interpersonal and inter-group disputes; and moral conflict seen in the loss of respect, social responsibility, harmony and adoption of values inimical to the Tiv community, that is the degeneration of Tiv cultural values (110-111).

As an agrarian-based economy, the Tivland faced far-reaching economic effects due to violent conflicts. Usually, schools, markets, and churches are



razed down, and many villagers are displaced which prevents them from farming causing food shortages. Furthermore, the destruction of crops and animals is widespread. According to Oli, M.P. et al, more than 40 million worth of crops are usually lost annually due to conflicts in the Middle Belt region of Nigeria (30-39). Conflicts have not only created an impediment to the survival of the host communities but have forced many crop farmers to abandon farming for occupations with a lesser impact on the nation's GDP growth like Okada riding (commercial motorcycling) and other artisan works.

According to Akighir, D.T. *et al*, “the unfortunate development of the Fulani herdsmen crises is gradually killing Benue's major industry, rice milling” (89-96), thus, triggering an evolving national food crisis and upsetting the socio-economic structure of the Tiv community. Also, the crises disrupt crop planting, animal rearing, and the flow of (agricultural) investments since no investor would prefer to invest in a crisis-ridden community. Alao, *et al* add that food security constitutes one of the seven elements of human security (39). By implication, human security cannot be effectively achieved if food security constitutes a threat.

On the other hand, James Shagbaor Moti argued that conflict had also taken a toll in terms of lost income due to poor economic activities and performances. The destruction of infrastructures such as schools, health facilities, etc., the disruption in trading activities, the bottlenecks in the free movement of goods and services as well as the disruption in the transportation system, forced the economy of the area to perform below potential (17). Conflicts have led to loss of human lives and properties that can never be replaced, therefore, impacting negatively on the Tiv economy. For instance, the engagement of the youths in violent conflicts and their resultant deaths creates food insecurity arising from the fact that they constitute the most active segment of the working population.

Conflicts in Tivland have caused the youths lot of deprivations due to weaknesses in social organization, social institutions and structural deficiencies in creating an enabling environment for the society and economy to grow as they have retarded all economic and social progress. Throughout the crisis years, there was a decline in the level of agricultural

investment/yield, a decline in income levels of the people of the area, and an increased level of social and residential segregation and damage to lives and property worth millions.

Several towns and markets are usually destroyed. For instance, the invasion of ZakiBiam, Gbeji and Vaase in the Ukum local government area; Anyiin and Ayilamo in the Logo local government area by the Nigerian Military in 2003; political mayhem in Adikpo in Kwande local government area in 2004; political violence at Ugba in Logo 2011; razing down of TiorTyu in Tarka local government due to communal clashes in 2018; Militia attacks at Gbishe, Abaji and Katsina-Ala town in Katsina-Ala local government area in 2021; attacks on Naka in Gwer West local government area by herders in 2018; air strikes at Gungul by the Nigerian Military in 2021 among several other markets have caused economic setbacks in Tivland.

Violent conflicts in Tivland have devastating consequences on society; this cuts across social, economic, religious, educational and political perspectives. At the height of these negative effects is the death of victims, destruction of properties, displacement of victims resulting in poverty, starvation and death creating socio-economic deficits. Conflicts also create humanitarian problems such as food shortages, reported rape cases, disease outbreaks, and psychological trauma. Religiously, many churches in Tivland have been razed down while scores of people have been murdered including members of the clergy. On the aspect of education, there are practically no arrangements for the refugees to further their education yet. Basically, what remains a priority is food. Thus, victims of conflicts are denied the opportunity for education. These impacts are far-reaching and cannot be wished for (Abdulbarkindo and Alupsen 33-43).

### **Violent Conflicts in Tivland: An Ethical Assessment**

The ethical assessment of violent conflicts has been grounded on the Human dignity argument, the sacredness of human life, the just war principle, and the principle of double effect.

**Human Dignity:** The ethical perspective of human dignity is also called the Sacredness of Human Life argument. The dignity of human life has also been advanced as a Christian ethical position in support of the argument



against violent conflicts. According to Immanuel Kant (1993), humans have intrinsic dignity which needs no struggle on the part of the dignity carrier. Kant contended that dignity is inviolable and cannot be denied even by a vicious man. In other words, intrinsic dignity cannot be missing because we are all born with dignity and we all die with dignity. From now no one can take it away from us. It is consequently, this sense of dignity that is viewed generally as the underpinning stone or basis of human rights. The Dignity or Sacredness of Human Life is a position in Christian ethics or the Church's argument on respect and preservation of human life.

Iyanda avers that the argument on the sacredness of life is founded in the creation narrative, with the implication that life belongs to God. This is the foundation for all Christian ethics which teaches that human lives have intrinsic and not merely instrumental value (16). Human beings have inestimable value in the sight of God, irrespective of gender, race, and state of health, dependency, or social and economic utility. It is simple and profound because human beings among the creatures of God have been designed and created to enjoy a personal relationship with the Creator of the universe. Humans are, according to the doctrine, the express image of God (*Imago Die*), made in His image and likeness. Humans are said to be a reflection of God's image here on earth with the totality of God's sovereignty and inestimable and irrefragible rights and sanctity (Iyanda, 17-18).

The notion of human dignity has been the subject of many centuries of philosophical inquiry. Most of the explanations emphasize the rational capacities and the free will that characterize human beings and make them something absolutely unique among living beings. Ancient Greek philosophers, in particular Plato and Aristotle, concluded that the core of every human individual is not just pure matter, but a spiritual principle, which they called the soul (*anima, psyche*). They argued that, since human beings are capable of spiritual activities (understanding, self-understanding, loving, self-determining by judging and choosing, expressing themselves through arts, etc.), they are essentially spiritual beings (Aristotle, *On the Soul*, III). Precisely, thanks to their spiritual component, human beings were regarded as radically unique among living beings and were thought to share in the divine nature (Plato, *Laws*, V; *Timaeus*, 90).

Roman Stoic philosophers seem to have been the first to use the term dignity (*dignitas*) to indicate the intrinsic and universal worthiness of human beings. Cicero explicitly employs it to refer to the excellence and dignity (*excellentia et dignitas*) that all human beings possess by the simple fact of sharing in the common rational nature (*On Duties*, I, 105). Similarly, Christian thinkers stressed the special dignity of all human beings on the grounds of their spiritual soul, which is the seat of intellect and free will. Certainly, in this tradition, the intrinsic worth of all human individuals is ultimately a consequence of their being an “image of God” (Gen. 1, 26) and of the belief in the redemption by Jesus Christ of every single human being. But these theological explanations of human worthiness presuppose that the ultimate internal principle of every human being is spiritual and not merely corporeal (*Summa Theologica*, I, 93). However, the Christian tradition, following Aristotle, holds that every individual has an integrated bodily and spiritual nature. This implies that, although the soul is the core of every human being, it is connaturally related to the body, with which it makes up the substantial unity of the person.

Immanuel Kant developed one of the most influential accounts of human dignity in the history of philosophy. For him, the intrinsic human worthiness is grounded on the capacity for practical rationality, especially the capacity for autonomous self-legislation under the categorical imperative; “Autonomy is then the ground of the dignity of human nature and of every rational nature” (*Metaphysics of Morals*, 85). Kant proposed that there is only one categorical imperative and it is this: “Act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law” (73). In his view, the only way to make sense of the human will as a ground of universal moral law is to conceive human beings as ends in themselves. This idea is expressed in the second formulation of the categorical imperative: “So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means” (80). Kant presents “dignity” as exactly the opposite of “price”: while “price” is the kind of value for which there can be an equivalent, “dignity” makes a person irreplaceable.

Understandably, Tiv culture in particular articulates the idea of intrinsic human worth using its own conceptual tools such as *Ulum u Umace* (human





dignity), *Umace ka EevmbuAondo* (humanity is a creation of God), *Umacengu zo mom* (humans are equal), etc, and more importantly, this notion is ever-present in all of them. For instance, the Tiv like Kant believes that “Autonomy is the ground of the dignity of human nature and every rational nature”. This is why they fiercely fought against domination by other tribes in the pre-colonial period, the same rationale for the resistance to British intrusion into the Tiv territory. They valued independence (i.e. *Tseeneke*) and freedom. Secondly, like the Confucian philosopher Mencius; Greek’s Plato and Aristotle; Italian’s Cicero and medieval Pico della Mirandola, the Tiv valued *Or Umace* (humanity) not just for his dualistic nature (*Uma man Iyol*, soul and body), but that he is the peak of all creation imbued with rationality. Thus, it is a matter of self-love to be extended.

**Just War Doctrine:** the idea of the *Just War Doctrine* is employed here with reference to attacks on civilians in several places in Tivland, namely, Gbeji, Vaase, Anyiin, ZakiBiam and Ayilamo in Ukum and Logo local government areas in 2001; the attack on Bonta and Gungul in Konshisha twenty years later in 2021 and several other Tiv communities by the Nigerian military. This paper views the military action as the unjust application of the *Just War Doctrine*.

The notion of *Just War* is traced to the ethics of *St. Augustine of Hippo* (354–430). Underpinning the *Just War Doctrine* is a belief that, the commandment against killing is qualified ethically by stating that the killing is concerned with killing the unjust aggressors (the enemy) and the avoidance of killing the innocent (e.g., killing innocent civilians). The theology underpinning this exception arises out of the Christian belief that we live in a world of grace but it is also a world co-conditioned by sin and brokenness. Hence, Christians may find themselves in situations of moral ambiguity, especially in situations of war/conflict. In his work titled *On the Just War* Augustine identifies one important piece of criteria that emphasizes his idea that the justification of the conflicts is crucial in determining if wars are truly just. He believes that just wars are wars in which the soldiers fight obediently for God. If these men fight for God, then Augustine believes that they must be fighting a righteous war and, therefore, fighting a valid war (121).

According to Jaroslav Pelikan, when Emperor *Constantine* (272-312) became a Christian, the link with *Constantine* was *Augustine* who reasoned that fighting on behalf of the Roman Empire was a Christian obligation since it was an empire with a Christian leader (132). Although, *Augustine*, himself wrestled with the reality of war which he approves only for the sake of greater peace and defence of innocent civilians. Augustine (cited in Philips, 2017) defended the proper use of force under certain circumstances. This classic text laid the foundation for the later Christian understanding of just war. Augustine recognized the basic fact that sometimes force must be used to stop the evils of human violence. Later in this text Augustine expresses that a lot hinges on the causes for which men start wars, and on the authority, they have for doing so; for the normal order which pursues the harmony of humans, decrees that the ruler should have the authority of embarking on war if he reasons it worthwhile, and that the militaries should perform their military obligations in support of the peace and security of the community. When war is assumed in submission to God, who would reproof, humble, or crush the egotism of man, it must be permitted to be righteous war; for even the wars that erupt from human desire cannot damage the eternal well-being of God, nor even the saints.

Relatedly, the moral contention here is that the military attacks on the Tiv communities in 2001 and 2021, the Nigerian Military cannot justify its raid or armed incursion into the Tiv territories without being branded as a blatant aggressor who was guilty of human rights violations. In both 2001 and 2021, the mediatory mission of the Nigerian military between the Tiv and Jukun and between the Tiv and Igede respectively were lopsided. In both instances, the military was perceived to have supported the opponents (that is, the Jukun in 2001, and then, the Igede in 2021), which resulted in anger and aggression on the part of the Tiv who turned against them. Therefore, the journey of the peace process requires some new thinking and a change of consciousness. In conflict situations, both parties need to lay down their arms as they reflect a consciousness laden with oppressive thinking. The *Just War Doctrine* as deployed by the Nigerian army in conflict situations in Tivland has not served peace and justice but perpetrated other interests such as power, hatred and oppression.



**The Principle of Double Effect:** this principle was advanced by St. Thomas Aquinas in his discussion on self-defence. Aquinas states that “nothing hinders one act from having two effects, only one of which is intended, while the other is beside the intention. The act of self-defence may have two effects: one, the saving of one's life; the other, the slaying of the aggressor” (II-II, Qu. 64, and Art.7). He argues that ‘as the care of the common wound is committed to those who are in authority, it is their business to watch over the common wound of the city, kingdom or province subject to them” (197).

Aquinas’ *Doctrine of Double Effect* discussed the possibility that killing in self-defence may be permissible as a side effect of protecting one’s own life. He notes that “nothing hinders one act from having two effects, only one of which is intended, while the other is beside the intention”. Killing one’s assailant is justified, he argues, provided one does not intend to kill him (II-II, Qu. 64, Art.7). This means that one should not intend to deliberately kill another. However, should this happen in the process of self-defence, the killer will not be implicated or held responsible for the act.

Applying the ethical *Principle of Double Effect* as a model invalidates every argument that may support violent conflicts in Tiv land. His position that “only the right authority may wage war without sin” prohibits any group from engaging another in violent conflicts. The principle can be interpreted as formulating a prohibition against attacks on fellow humans. Even though the state, described as “authority” may use violence to impede violent conflicts, using the *Just War Doctrine*, Aquinas imposes a limit. For instance, there should be no intention to kill the aggressor. Thus, every form of ‘violent conflict’ provided it’s not aimed at self-defence and is prohibited. Evaluating violent conflict on the ethical model of Aquinas’s *Double Effect Principle*, therefore, challenges the typical expansionists’ notion of land grabbing, survival of the fittest, and the-winner-takes-all syndrome. These notions are clearly evidenced in the internal land skirmishes, political, religious and farmer-herder conflicts that are eating deeply into every fabric of the Tiv society.

## Recommendations

- i The government should initiate mass enlightenment programmes on the danger of violence. For peace to evolve and be nourished, all citizens should be adequately enlightened on the value of peace for national development. This enlightenment, if effectively executed can sensitize the Tiv nation on the need to develop the society rather than destroy it with violence.
- ii There should be a sound moral value system. Thus, the Church in Tivland is called to preach sermons that are geared towards moral development and preservation. The moral value system must be jealously guarded against corrupt and criminal practices irrespective of people, social class, or status.
- iii The government must revisit its law enforcement agencies by way of improvement with special attention to the lack of gadgets, under-funding, and training for better performance.
- iv The Nigerian military is called to ensure that they do their work within the professional Ethics to avoid breakdown of law and order or unjust aggression.
- v Attention should also be given to youth empowerment to ensure their proper participation in community development.
- vi The Tiv traditional council should take the role of peace-building seriously by calling for a collective sense of patience and tolerance. They must teach and practice leadership qualities such as justice, fairness, and equity which are cardinal to the survival of any nation.
- vii Community policing should be instituted and funded for quick response to violent attacks so as to curb bloodbaths caused by Fulani headers and other forms of conflict.

## Conclusion

This paper discusses the nature and effects of violent conflicts in Tivland. It argues that the major cause of killings in Tivland and, of course, in Benue state is as a result of the loss of human dignity and moral values. Hence, human life is worthless and no longer considered as sacred. This is evidenced in killings even of the most vulnerable masses during conflict situations. The mediation of conflicts by the military was blamed on the premise of prejudices. The Ethical positions presented here argue for the dignity of human life or the sacredness of human life through the *Just War Doctrine* and *Principle of Double Effects*. This paper argues that persistent conflicts have prevented the development of Tivland; hence, ethical evaluation of conflict resolution procedures remains key to correcting these ills.



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