INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL FOR HUMAN SOCIOLOGY AND ANTHROPOLOGY
Affiliated to: School of Anthropology and Conservation, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Kent, Canterbury, Kent, CT2 7NX

COLONIAL VIOLENCE AND INDIGENOUS TRAUMA: A PSYCHOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE 1912 WULKO MASSACRE

VOLUME: 9 ISSUE: 9
SEPTEMBER, 2025

eISSN: 5733-6783
pISSN: 5532-7563

IMPACT FACTOR: 3.78

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Abstract

This study examines the psychological impact of colonial violence through a focused analysis of the 1912 Wulko Massacre in Central Nigeria, committed by British colonial forces during their military expansion and consolidation of power in the region. While historical scholarship on colonialism in Nigeria has predominantly emphasized political and economic transformations, this paper shifts attention to the often-overlooked psychological distress experienced by indigenous communities subjected to violent colonial encounters. Drawing upon oral histories, archival materials, and interdisciplinary literature from trauma studies and postcolonial theory, the research explores the immediate and long-term mental health effects of the massacre on survivors and their descendants. It interrogates manifestations of historical trauma, including generational grief, cultural disorientation, and disrupted identity, within the Wulko community. The study also considers how collective memory, silence, and cultural resilience shape contemporary understandings of the event. The findings reveal that the psychological scars of the massacre continue to influence community behavior, intergenerational narratives, and perceptions of authority and justice. This paper contributes to global conversations on colonial trauma, historical violence, and indigenous memory-making by centering African experiences within frameworks of psychological and cultural recovery. Ultimately, it underscores the need for integrating psychosocial dimensions into the historiography of colonialism in Africa.

Keywords: *Colonial Violence, Indigenous Trauma, Psychological Study and Wulko Massacre.*

1. Introduction

The entrenchment of colonial rule in Africa was not merely a political and economic enterprise-it was also a severely violent and psychologically upsetting process. British colonial expansion in Northern Nigeria, particularly through military conquest and punitive expeditions, often resulted in mass killings, destruction of indigenous settlements, and psychological trauma for affected communities. One of such cases is the 1912 Wulko Massacre, a relatively undocumented episode of British colonial violence in the Nasarawa region of Central Nigeria, which remains fixed in the collective memory of the local population as a turning point in their historical and cultural experience.

Colonial violence in Africa has received significant scholarly attention, especially in terms of its political and structural consequences. However, the psychological dimensions of these violent encounters-especially their intergenerational effects have not been equally interrogated within African historical scholarship. The few studies that do engage with trauma in postcolonial African societies regularly focus on post-independence conflicts, civil wars, or apartheid legacies, leaving a scholarly gap in understanding how earlier colonial military campaigns left long-lasting psychological scars on indigenous populations. This paper argues that the 1912 Wulko Massacre exemplifies how early 20th-century colonial military violence in Nigeria contributed not only to the physical subjugation of communities but also to deep psychological dislocations. The attack led to the killing of community leaders, the burning of homes, and the destruction of sacred cultural artifacts. These actions disorganized indigenous systems of authority and social cohesion, generating collective grief, cultural awkwardness, and identity crises that continue to influence community narratives and behaviors to this day.

Relying on oral sources, archival materials and postcolonial studies, this paper provides an interdisciplinary and neocolonial reading of the psychological aftermath massacres. It seeks to analyze how the pain experienced during and after the event has been set in memory, transferred across generations, and reflected in local cultural practices. This approach situates Wulko within broader discourses on historical trauma and memory studies, contributing to a more holistic understanding the enduring effects of colonialism in Africa. In addition, the study challenges the prevailing silence and marginalization of African perspectives on psychological trauma within colonial historiography. It calls for a reorientation of historical inquiry-one that acknowledges the emotional and mental dimensions of violence, and centers indigenous voices in recounting and interpreting their experiences.

2. Conceptual Clarifications

Colonial Violence

Colonial violence refers to the systemic use of force, coercion, and structural oppression employed by colonial powers to dominate and control indigenous populations, often resulting in the destruction of life, culture, and social systems. In the context of British colonial rule in Nigeria, such violence included military expeditions, punitive raids, forced labor, and the imposition of foreign legal, economic, and political systems that marginalized native institutions and ways of life. The Wulko Massacre of 1912 exemplifies colonial violence through the British

military's violent suppression of perceived resistance, resulting in mass casualties and long-lasting psychological and cultural scars on the Eggon people.

Indigenous Trauma

Indigenous trauma is the collective and cumulative emotional and psychological wounding experienced by indigenous communities as a result of historical oppression, displacement, and violence, including colonialism. This form of trauma is intergenerational and persists through social disintegration, loss of cultural identity, and unresolved grief. In the case of the Wulko people, the trauma inflicted during the 1912 massacre contributed to long-term disruptions in social cohesion, indigenous governance, and communal well-being. The massacre thus stands as a symbol of cultural rupture and psychological affliction within the Eggon historical memory.

A Psychological Study

A psychological study, in this context, refers to a scholarly investigation that employs psychological theories, frameworks, and methodologies to analyze the mental, emotional, and behavioral consequences of a specific historical event or experience. Applied to the Wulko Massacre, this study seeks to interpret how the traumatic colonial encounter affected the survivors' mental health, identity formation, and intergenerational memory. It also explores collective grief, post-traumatic stress manifestations, and how cultural mechanisms were used for coping and healing.

Wulko Massacre

The Wulko Massacre refers to a violent colonial incident that occurred in 1912 in Wulko, a town located in present-day Nasarawa State in central Nigeria. British colonial forces, acting under the guise of a pacification mission, launched an unprovoked attack on the town, killing many inhabitants, burning homes, and forcibly dismantling indigenous resistance. The event was not only a military tragedy but also a psychological and cultural calamity that disrupted the spiritual and social fabric of the community. It serves today as a critical case for analyzing the intersection of colonial violence and indigenous trauma through historical and psychological lenses.

Geographical Location Wulko and its Conquest

Wulko is a pre-colonial settlement of the Eggon people, is located in what is now Nasarawa Eggon Local Government Area of Nasarawa State, within the North Central zone of Nigeria. In the pre-colonial era, Wulko served as a strategic hill settlement, situated among the rugged, rocky terrains of the Eggon Hills, which form part of the Middle Belt highlands stretching between the Benue Valley and the Jos Plateau. The town's natural topography-marked by steep slopes, escarpments, and hidden valleys-provided not only agricultural viability through its surrounding fertile lowlands, but also defensive advantages against raids and external threats during inter-group conflicts and migrations. Wulko is believed to have been one of the earliest strongholds of Eggon-speaking communities, located southwest of the present-day Akwanga axis, and northeast of what became the colonial administrative center of Lafia. The town's proximity to other early Eggon enclaves such as Alizaga, Arugbadu, and Washo suggests its role as a nodal point in the socio-political and economic interactions of the Eggon people in pre-colonial times. Moreover, its location within the Guinea Savannah ecological zone afforded the inhabitants a mixture of forest and grassland resources, which facilitated both farming and hunting activities, contributing to the self-sufficiency of the settlement.

Thus, the conquest and colonization of Wulko town, was necessitated by some key factors its geostrategic importance of the area, situated in the rugged and defensible Eggon Hills, this made it a focal point for colonial interest in establishing control over the surrounding Eggon-speaking communities. Again, the fragmented political structure of the Eggon people, organized into clan-based with autonomous hill settlements without a centralized authority, this also created an enabling environment for coordinated resistance against British incursions difficult. However, the use of force and diplomacy by British expeditionary officers enabled the gradual subjugation of Wulko and its environs. The British deployed military expeditions from the colonial outposts in Lafia and Keffi, using indirect rule strategies where possible, but often resorting to armed confrontation where resistance was strong.

The process of conquest was marked by a series of punitive expeditions launched between 1905 and 1910, during which British forces subdued several Eggon settlements, including Wulko, after notable resistance. Once defeated, the colonial administration introduced new political arrangements, replacing traditional clan heads with warrant chiefs, many of whom lacked legitimacy in the eyes of the people. The imposition of colonial taxation, forced labor, and Christian missionary activity further transformed the socio-political landscape of Wulko, integrating it into the emerging colonial economy and administrative framework of the Northern Protectorate of Nigeria. The conquest of Wulko thus reflected both the military superiority of the colonial forces and the vulnerability of decentralized hill communities in the face of imperial expansion.

The 1912 Wulko Massacre

The British colonial conquest of Northern Nigeria was a strategic and gradual process that unfolded between the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It was motivated by imperial ambition, economic interests, and political rivalry with other European powers during the “Scramble for Africa. The Royal Niger Company, chartered in 1886, laid the groundwork by securing trade monopolies and signing treaties with local rulers along the Niger and Benue Rivers. However, effective military conquest and political subjugation came under direct control of the British government after it revoked the company's charter in 1900.

As such, the 1912 Wulko Massacre occurred within the broader context of British imperial expansion and resistance to colonial rule in the precolonial North Central Nigerian region. This period marked the height of British pacification campaigns, aimed at consolidating control over territories that had either resisted colonization or were slow to accept colonial authority. Wulko, a small but resilient indigenous community located in present-day Nasarawa State, was one of such societies that maintained autonomy under its traditional political and spiritual structures.

By the early 20th century, the British colonial administration had shifted from exploratory diplomacy to outright military enforcement of their authority across the Northern Protectorate. Sequel to the 1900 establishment of the Protectorate of Northern Nigeria, the British intensified their use of punitive expeditions against communities deemed “uncooperative” or “hostile. These expeditions were often justified under the pretext of quelling rebellion, collecting taxes, or enforcing the authority of appointed warrant chiefs.

The Wulko Massacre was the outcome of such a campaign. Oral source suggest that the people of Wulko resisted colonial intrusion, particularly the

imposition of foreign taxation, the disruption of their traditional leadership, and forced conscription into colonial army. In response, British forces launched a military assault in 1912, resulting in widespread killing, destruction of property, and psychological trauma that lingered for generations.

The massacre reflects the violent processes of colonial state formation in the Middle Belt region, where resistance was met with disproportionate military violence. It also reveals the cultural and political resilience of minority communities against external domination, a legacy that remains significant in understanding postcolonial identity and memory in the region.

The British Campaign and the Massacre

The 1912 Wulko Massacre was preceded by a series of tense encounters between British colonial authorities and the indigenous people of Wulko, a self-governing community located in the hilly terrain of present-day Nasarawa State in North Central Nigeria. Following the establishment of British control over Northern Nigeria in 1900, the colonial administration sought to enforce indirect rule, which included the collection of taxes, conscription of labor, and appointment of warrant chiefs over indigenous populations. The people of Wulko, however, rejected these impositions, citing their autonomous political structure, communal leadership, and spiritual sovereignty as grounds for resistance.

By 1911, reports from British officers in the Plateau and Akwanga divisions began describing Wulko as a “hostile” and “un-submissive” settlement that blocked colonial authority and trade routes in the region. Tensions escalated when local colonial officials attempted to enforce tax collection and were rejected by Wulko elders and youths. In retaliation, and as part of the broader British strategy to “pacify” resistant communities in the Middle Belt, a punitive military expedition was organized in early 1912. Hence, the attack on Wulko was swift and brutal. British forces, equipped with modern firearms and supported by local auxiliaries, raided the town at dawn. An eyewitness describe the burning of homes, destruction of granaries, and mass killings of unarmed villagers, including women, children, and the elderly. The community's spiritual shrines and ancestral symbols were also desecrated or destroyed, a psychological blow to the survivors. While colonial records significantly underreported the scale of the violence, suggesting only a few casualties.

The immediate consequences of the massacre were catastrophic for Wulko. The population was displaced, economic life was paralyzed, and the surviving leadership was forced to submit to colonial rule. A colonial-appointed headman was installed, and the region was officially absorbed into the British system of indirect administration. Furthermore, the spiritual and social cohesion of the community was deeply fractured, with the trauma of the massacre lingering for generations in oral memory. The Wulko Massacre stands as a stark example of the violence used to impose colonial authority in Northern Nigeria, particularly in regions that refused to conform to impose foreign structures.

Psychological and Emotional effects on the Wulko Community

The 1912 Wulko Massacre had profound psychological and emotional consequences for the people of Wulko, far beyond the immediate physical destruction and loss of life. The community, which had for centuries lived in relative autonomy and cultural cohesion, was plunged into a state of collective trauma marked by shock, fear, grief, and long-term social disorientation.

The suddenness and brutality of the colonial attack created deep psychological scars. Survivors were not only subjected to the loss of family members but also witnessed acts of extreme violence—homes being set ablaze, elders and children killed, and sacred shrines desecrated. The trauma from these events instilled a paralyzing fear among the people, many of whom fled to nearby hills and forests, abandoning their ancestral homes. Oral accounts from descendants speak of women who wailed for days and children who stopped speaking entirely—a sign of severe psychological distress and disorientation.

Fear became a pervasive emotion in the aftermath of the massacre. Survivors lived with constant anxiety over the return of colonial soldiers or further punitive actions. The presence of foreign-appointed warrant chiefs and soldiers symbolized the permanence of foreign domination, reinforcing feelings of helplessness and powerlessness. The community's sense of security, rooted in ancestral land and traditional protective rituals, was shattered, leading to widespread emotional numbness and cultural uncertainty.

Social disorientation was particularly visible in the breakdown of traditional leadership and kinship structures. Prior to the attack, Wulko society functioned under a decentralized but deeply respected elder-led council system. These elders, many of whom were killed or displaced during the massacre, were spiritual custodians and mediators of conflict. With their removal and the imposition of colonial warrant chiefs who lacked communal legitimacy, the moral authority of leadership eroded. Kinship bonds—central to the organization of labor, ritual, and identity—were disrupted as families were scattered, lineages decimated, and communal trust eroded.

Colonial records described the aftermath as "order restored," yet oral traditions recount the years that followed as a time of "darkness," during which the community struggled to realign itself spiritually, politically, and emotionally. Many traditional festivals were discontinued, initiation rites were suspended, and the communal spirit of reciprocity waned, replaced by silent mourning and generational fear.

The emotional and psychological impact of the massacre reverberated for decades. It altered not only the cultural rhythms of Wulko life but also left an indelible memory of pain and resistance. For many, the massacre became a defining trauma in collective memory—passed down through oral narratives as a cautionary tale of colonial brutality and the cost of defiance.

3. Conclusion

The 1912 Wulko Massacre stands as a tragic yet pivotal event in the colonial history of North Central Nigeria, revealing the brutal realities of imperial expansion and its lasting consequences on indigenous communities. This study has examined the events leading up to the massacre, the psychological and emotional toll on the people of Wulko, and the disintegration of traditional leadership and kinship structures that followed. Key findings indicate that beyond physical destruction, the massacre inflicted long-term trauma, fear, social dislocation, and cultural erosion, effects that continue to reverberate through oral memory and generational identity.

This work contributes meaningfully to scholarly efforts at bridging colonial history, trauma studies, and indigenous narratives. It challenges Eurocentric documentation by validating oral histories as critical sources of truth, especially in understanding the emotional and cultural consequences of colonial violence. By

positioning the Wulko massacre within the broader framework of psychological trauma and cultural disruption, the study opens up new interdisciplinary approaches to interpreting African colonial experiences.

The findings support several feasible recommendations. First, there is an urgent need to incorporate trauma-focused analysis into African historiography. Historians must go beyond political and economic paradigms to explore the psychological dimensions of colonial encounters. Second, policy makers and cultural institutions should prioritize the documentation and preservation of oral histories, traditional festivals, and spiritual practices that are at risk of extinction due to historical traumas. Third, healing processes—such as community truth-telling forums, heritage education, and culturally sensitive memorialization—should be supported as part of postcolonial recovery and reconciliation efforts.

In conclusion, the Wulko Massacre is not merely a historical episode but a living memory that shapes identity, resistance, and healing among its descendants. Recognizing and addressing the trauma it caused is essential not only for the integrity of African historiography but also for shaping policies that honor cultural resilience and support communal healing.

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