

The Jukun-Muri Relations: Pre-Colonial Dynamics

Bello Zakariya Abubakar (PhD), Hamisu Sani Ali, Shekarau Nuapmen

Department of History and Diplomatic Studies Federal University Wukari, Taraba State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the nature of inter-group relations in Nigeria's Middle Belt region, with a focus on historical relations between the Jukun and the Muri Emirate. However, the Jukun kingdom played a significant role in the political history of central and northern Nigeria and had a lasting influence on many of its neighbours, including the Muri emirate. Using a historical approach, the study unearths the political and economic relations between the Jukun kingdom and the Muri emirate. It has been established that the relationship between the two pre-colonial states in the 19th century was marked by conflict and peaceful cooperation based on Dhimmi status. Specifically, the central concern of the study is to explore the political and economic relations of the Jukun and Muri emirates since 1817, when Hamman Ruwa established Muri.

Keywords: Jukun Kingdom, Muri Emirate, Pre-Colonial, Dhimmi-Status.

INTRODUCTION

The pre-colonial political and economic interactions between the Jukun Kingdom (based in Wukari) and the Muri Emirate, founded in 1817, were influenced by the Fulani Jihad, geographical factors, and socio-economic interdependencies in the Middle Benue region. As the title suggests, the aim of this paper is first to review the case of a Jukun kingdom, otherwise referred to as Kwararafa, and its political relations with the Muri emirate. Secondly, to explore the economic relations of the two independent kingdoms, which were reciprocal and symbolic since time immemorial. To fulfil the aim and objectives of this research, the following fundamental questions or problems must be squarely addressed. What is the Kwararafa or Jukun kingdom? How did it evolve? What was the nature of its political structure? Then, what is the Muri emirate? How did it evolve? What is the nature of the political and economic relationship between the two kingdoms? What is Dhimmi status? Was there any friction in the relationship, or was it peaceful throughout history to date?

Right from the onset, it is essential to recognise that intergroup relations are dynamic, not static. Trade, as we shall see, played a significant role in promoting peaceful and harmonious relationships between them (Abubakar, 1979, p. 118). However, at the advent of Jihad in the Middle Benue Valley and the consequent evolution of the Muri emirate, there was little friction. Nevertheless, after some time, the Jukun kingdom enjoyed Dhimmi status, and peace was restored (Kirk-Greene, 1958, pp. 155–156; Abubakar, 2008, pp. 40 – 41).

Historically, the term “Dhimmi” was derived from Islamic legal conceptions of membership in society. Non-Muslim ‘dhimmi’ were afforded protection by the state and did not serve in the military. In return for specific taxes (Jizya) in those days, it was practiced by the Muri emirate versus the Jukun kingdom. However, dhimmi was legally abolished in 1839 with the Hatt-i Serif of Gulhane and was formalised with the 1869 Ottoman Law of Nationality as part of the wider Tanzimat Reforms. Regardless of these official changes in various places within the Middle Eastern countries, non-Muslim subjects and some Shiites in Sunni states faced different forms of institutional discrimination (Hanioglu, 2008, pp. 99–110).

The Emergence of the Jukun and Kwararafa Kingdom

The Jukun kingdom emerged as a powerful state in the Gongola–Benue basin in the 16th century. The often-assented account of the Jukun past is that the people in question, also referred to as Apa, had, by the fourteenth

century of our era, succeeded in establishing an empire that, in its heyday, was evidence of the imperial achievement and was not only spectacular but also far-flung (Meek, 1931, pp. 16–21). As Fari says:

“The empire, the capital of which is given variously as Kororofa or Kwararafa, Bepi or Apa, is considered to have extended at one time or another from the twelfth meridian to the Niger, south of the Cross River, and the north to the border of Borno and the varying limit of the central Hausa states. In other words, the Jukun Empire comprised virtually the whole of the southeastern region of Nigeria and most of the north-central part of the country, including Zaria and Bauchi (2003, pp. 14–25).

Now what is Jukun? Or who are the Jukun? There are two oral traditions with regard to the word Jukun as an ethnic group. According to one of the traditions, the word Jukun is derived from the word Pajukun, which has been shortened by the Hausa to Jukun due to difficulty in pronouncing the word Pajukun (Zaku, 2022). In the other version, the word Jukun came into being as a result of a response to a white man when he was strongly confronted by a typical giant Jukun man. Then, the Jukun man responded and said, “Mchim Pajukun Ba?” which means, “Am I not a human being?” From this response, we understood that the word Jukun means human being. These two traditions supported what Mahdi Adamu said: Jukun is the name by which the people of the Jukun ethnic group call themselves and are understood as such by many other people (Adamu, 1978, p. 43).

Then, where was their original habitat? Although the majority of the Jukun wrongly believed that their original base was Yamen. In fact, this Hamitic Hypothesis was debunked by many professional historians like Abdullahi Smith, Sa’ad Abubakar, etc (Ekande, 2004, pp. 66–77). There is no substantive fact or proof of their claim of Eastern origin. The only undisputed fact is that Sa’ad Abubakar says:

“There are reasons to believe that before the beginning of the 18th century. The Jukun’s most important habitat was the Gongola and parts of the Upper Benue Basin. For, in the days when Bepi flourished, its rule extended through the Upper Benne as far as Rai Buba (1980, p. 168).”

Based on the above submission, the original Jukun inhabitant was Gongola Hawal and the upper Benue Basin, not Yemen. Even Greenberg’s language classification stated that the Jukun belong to the Jukunoid Group of the Benue-Congo sub-family (Shimizu, 1971, pp. 25–45; Greenberg, 1963, pp. 45–55).

By and large, Jukun is to some extent synonymous with Kwararafa. It is imperative to note that among all the ethnic groups that constituted the federation of Kwararafa, one can arguably say there will still be Kwararafa without the inclusion of one or the other ethnic group, but there can be no Kwararafa without the addition of the Jukun ethnic group. That is how relevant and indispensable Jukun was in the federation. Generally, most people believed that the Jukun were core and central to the land. Jukun is used to refer to all the Jukun-speaking people of the Middle Belt region. They have six known different dialects, namely Wapan (Wukari), Kpanzun Jukun, Kona, and Gwana (Pindiga), Jibu/Wurbo, and Wase Tofa. In this regard, C. K. Meek described Jukun as a people of superior race who were endowed with a natural aptitude for empire building. While Sale Abubakar concluded that they were central to state-building movements in the Middle Benue Valley, which they directed and controlled for over two hundred years before the arrival of the Fulbe (Abubakar, 1973, p. vi–10).

Moreover, the creation of this far-flung empire has been explained in terms of a series of remarkable conquests that culminated in the invasion of Kano, Zaria, and Borno in the seventeenth century. Although they were said to be under the leadership of Hausa states (the Kano, Zaria, Katsina, and Borno kingdoms). Later, she regained her independence as a result of their military ascendancy. The Jukun ascendancy to power also served as a constant threat to the powerful Hausa states and the Borno kingdom through its persistent attacks. For instance, in the 17th and early 18th centuries, the Jukun subjected Kano and Zaria to its control and also attacked Katsina and Borno but did not subject them (Ogbogbo and Okpeh, 2021, pp. 4-43). The Jukun revolted against Borno under Mai Idris Alooma, and Zaria was made tributary to them at the end of the 16th century. By 1680, the Jukun attack on Borno met with stiff resistance, and they were driven off with the assistance of the Tuaregs (Ikeme and Osoba, 1974).

Politically, the government was a theocracy under the divine rulership of the king called Aku. The Aku, like the Mai of Borno or Oba of Benin, was believed to be the representative of the gods and intermediary between the gods and his people. He was assisted by a body of counsellors headed by the Abocio, who had constitutional power to even depose the Aku. It was said that the Aku Uka held authority over local societies largely through his divinity and magical powers (Abubakar, 2020, pp. 134–141).

The Fulani Jihad and the Establishment of the Muri Emirate

The Jihad in the Middle Benue region, which led to the establishment of the Muri emirate, affected the religion-political setup of Wukari, the defunct headquarters of the Kwararafa confederacy (Abubakar, 2021, pp. 31–50). It is important to note that the Jihad in the Middle Benue region was part of the 19th-century Jihad movement in Hausaland under the leadership of Shehu Usman Danfodio. While in Hausaland, the basic aim of the Jihad was primarily to purify Islam among people who had been Muslims for centuries (Last and Al-Hajj, 1965; Adamu, 1990, pp. 4–7). But that of the Middle Benue region by Buba Yero of Gombe and his brother Haman Ruwa was not only concerned with the spread and consideration of Islam but also with establishing Islamic authority for the first time among the indigenous people whose rulers (the Aku Uka and his council) were non-Muslims (Abubakar, 1973, pp. 21–55).

Meanwhile, there were many causes of the Jihad in the Middle Benue region, which centred on the relations between the immigrant Muslims (Fulani in particular) who initiated and spearheaded the Jihad and the indigenous non-Muslim people over the question of land resources and power. Looking critically at the relationship, one important factor must be taken into consideration. The fact was that the Fulbe, or Fulani (as newcomers), had to accept that the land belonged to the indigenous peoples since they were earlier occupiers of the land and other natural resources and must abide by all rules and conditions imposed on them by the rulers. Later, the immigrant Fulbe, or Muslims, revolted and did not continue to tolerate these un-Islamic laws and conditions. Eventually, these intolerable conditions forced the immigrant Muslims to rebel and declare their Jihad (Abubakar, 2001, pp. 81–83).

For a better understanding of the causes of the Jihad, we have to know these conditions and how they were enforced on the immigrant Muslims, particularly the Fulbe, by the Jukun rulers. Among these conditions was the payment of dues to rulers to graze their cattle. In most cases, they paid these dues from their cattle. In fact, the Jukun chiefs used to select the best cow among the cattle of the Fulbe as payment or in exchange for grazing rights. Also in connection with the forceful seizure of the cattle was the practice whereby some non-Muslims among the Jukun Kona used to take away some Fulbe cows at will for sacrifice during their religious festivals (Hamman, 1985, p. 42).

Furthermore, a detested form of social subordination that prevailed in some of the Wukari, Ibi, and Jalingo areas, particularly among the Jukun-Awannu and Jukun Kona, who seriously antagonised the Fulbe in particular, was the practice of *jus primae noctis* (right of the first night). It is, in simplest terms, the right of the local noble to deflower local peasant brides on their wedding night before their newly wedded husbands. But did it ever happen? Is it fact or fiction? The practice of *jus primae noctis* by the princes, in which they claimed the right of the first night in respect of any bride, was seriously protested by the Fulbe (Hamman, 1983, p. 180). However, the Fulbe accepted most of the conditions laid down by the indigenous non-Muslim Jukun rulers. It was this practice of *jus primae noctis*, which Mahmud Hamman and Saleh Abubakar said was the immediate cause of the Jihad in the Middle Benue areas. This is because the custom or practice was alien and intolerant to the Fulbe and wounded their honour and reputations (Abubakar, 1972). Thus, these intolerable un-Islamic conditions made conflicts inevitable between immigrant Muslims and non-Muslim people in the region. In 1970, Sa'ad Abubakar described the Jihad as follows:

“A struggle in which the settled and semi-settled Fulbe hoped to acquire cheap slave labour to cultivate the food they required ...; the Mbororo, who were non-Muslim and therefore do not care about Islam, want to graze their cattle freely without having to pay grazing dues, and in general struggle to place authority of the regions in Fulbe hands. The Jihad in the whole of Fombina down to the Middle Benue basins arose out of social, economic, and political considerations, not from the need to spread Islam (1970, p. 164).

Similarly, Tesemchi Makar reiterated that the Jihad was not to spread Islam but rather for economic and political reasons (Makar, 1979, p. 50). Given this indisputable fact, the result of the Jihad conformed to the ulterior motives of the Fulbe Jihadists. Thus, one of the most significant changes of the Jihad in the Jukun Kingdom was not to force the Aku and members of his council to accept Islam but rather to ensure that the ruling elites of Kwararafa lived by Islamic laws by paying Jizya (poll tax) and allowing them to continue with their traditional religion. Therefore, the Jihad was extended militarily to Jibu and Wukari during the reign of the third Emir of Muri, Hamman dan Hamman Ruwa (1848-1861). Then Wukari was under the Aku Agbumanu I (1848–1860), who surrendered to the Jihadists without very much resistance (Kirik-Greene, 1958, p. 155). Since that military encounter, Wukari has been paying tribute (Jizya) to Muri until the British conquest of Muri.

Jukun–Muri Economic Relations: Diplomatic and Military Tension

The Jukun and the Fulani engaged in sporadic conflicts in the early nineteenth century, particularly the Chamba raids (allied with the Fulani forces of Muri), which attacked the Jukun kingdom, leading to its eventual collapse. The Jukun resisted Fulani dominance but were eventually subjugated. Therefore, the Muri Emirate incorporated Jukun areas, decreasing their sovereignty. The Jukun Aku Uka (divine monarch) maintained symbolic sovereignty in Wukari but became subject to Muri's Fulani kings.

Likewise, the Fulani Emir of Muri was accepted by the Jukun-speaking people of Adamawa Province, while other Jukun-speaking groups in the Benue basin, including the Jukun Wanu of Abinsi, Awei District, Donga, and Takum, maintained their political independence from the Wukari authority, while the Jukun speakers in Adamawa Province recognised the governorship of the Fulani Emir of Muri. Commenting on Muri-Wankari's political relations, William Balfour Baikie notes that Hamman Ruwa is a powerful Fulani province, tributary to the sultan of Sokoto and considered little inferior to Adamawa. It comprises a considerable extent of a country, on both sides of the river, extending from Kororofa and Bauchi to Adamawa.

Despite this pattern of conflictual relationships, a period of cooperation and diplomacy existed, particularly under Muri's policy of integrating local elites into its administrative system. Several territories pay annual tributes to Muri, among which is Wukari, which was conquered by the Muri emirate as a Muri dependency. The tributes consist chiefly of slaves, and the amount varies according to the success met within their annual predatory excursions in what they look on as a productive year. Wukari, the capital of the Jukun, sent from 35 to 40 slaves, carried off mostly from the Munshi or from the barbarous natives living beyond Kororofa (Baikie, 1856, pp. 145–200).

Jukun–Muri Economic Relations: Trade and Resource Exchange

As far as the understanding of pre-colonial Jukun-Muri economic relations is concerned, it can only be properly understood if it is noted that, to a large degree, the economy of Benue Valley generally was an integrated one in the sense that many parts of the region were, in varying degrees, interdependent. The main factor responsible for this was not planned by man but by nature. Nature had distributed the region's resources in such an equitable manner that no one area was made self-sufficient in its needs and had anything over its normal requirements that was not in demand in other areas. This situation laid the foundation for large-scale commerce involving people of Muri and Wukari as well as other regions in the Benue Valley (Adamu, 2015, p. 6).

As indicated in Table 1 below, Muri produced some items in large quantities, for which demand was high in Wukari, whereas, to the best of our knowledge, its production was nil. Similarly, some items were produced in Wukari, and their demand was high in Muri.

Table 1: Distributions of Items in Wukari (Capital of the Jukun) and Muri

Wukari	Muri
Slaves	Cattle

Mineral/Salt	Itinerant Scholars
Antimony	Clothes

Source: B. Z. Abubakar, *The Abakwariga and their Contribution to Economic and Educational Development of Some Northeastern States of Nigeria*, 2012.

The precolonial economic relations between the Jukun Kingdom and the Muri Emirate were shaped by commercial interactions and economic interdependencies in the Middle Benue region. The trans-Saharan trade facilitated by the Fulani rulers disrupted Jukun socio-economic structures, though some Jukun elites collaborated with Hausa merchants for mutual benefit. Similarly, some Jukun traders, Abakwariga craftsmen and dyers, and even some slave traffickers transact between Wukari and Muri. Therefore, based on this, B. Z. Abubakar (2012) says:

No ethnic group or nation lives as an island to itself economically and politically. Various ethnic groups (Fulani and Jukun inclusive) relate with or transact with each other both within and outside their homelands. In other words, no ethnic group or nation is economically self-sufficient. Therefore, it is this economic interdependence that brought Jukun and Fulani together since before the outbreak of the Jihad in the 19th century (2012, pp. 1–5).

Based on the above analysis, the earliest and most important export commodity to the Muri was slaves, a line of trade that, as noted above, perhaps started in the 15th century. Next in importance to Jukun traders were mineral salt and antimony, both mined at Arufu and Akwana (Abubakar, 2021, pp. 689–714). One of my informants in Wukari implied that the government used these commodities to pay for imports from Muri. This is an indication that there was strict supervision on the collection of levies by Aku officials or agents. It is important to note that some items were used as currency, that is, a medium of exchange for buying and selling the above-mentioned commodities. There were some elements of trade by barter in the exchange of goods for goods or goods for services and vice versa. It should also be noted that the commodities used as currency were cumbersome to carry about, unlike the modern paper currency brought by the Europeans. Again, this strict supervision by the Aku officials demonstrated that taxes and levies on goods were strictly enforced and collected. Therefore, taxes and levies served as one of the major sources of income to the government of Aku Uka in Wankari.

Like in any other economic relations, differences in factor endowment helped to shape and facilitate the nature and form of economic relations between societies. This was partially the case with pre-colonial Muri-Jukun relations. While the Fulani specialised in cattle rearing, territorial expansion, propagation of Islamic education, and other economic activities, the Jukun specialised in economic activities like fishing, hunting, textile making, petty farming, and production of salt and antimony. It was this arrangement that compelled the two communities to depend on one another to facilitate trade as well as to keep their political relations up-to-date.

Available information shows that trade between the Jukun kingdom and Muri was conducted essentially by the barter system. However, there were still currencies in circulation in this region. For example, some of the major currencies in circulation were salt, cowries, copper and iron rods, strips of cloth, and hoes. Therefore, in the Middle Benue region, iron currencies were very common. Writing on the pre-colonial economy of the Middle Benue region, Sa'ad Abubakar says:

The Mumuye and Fulani had their TAFE, while the Jukun had akika. By the 1850s a new form of iron currency, the kantai, superseded the akika among the Jukun. Iron currencies were very popular; no doubt they were fire- and waterproof. Moreover, they could be used not only for exchange but also for the payment of dowry and in the making of farming, hunting, and fishing implements (Abubakar, 1979, p. 118).

Apart from currencies, trade routes also played a significant role in facilitating commercial transactions between Muri and Wukari. The operations of regional trade in this period were facilitated by the River Benue and its tributaries, which provided an easy means of transportation and communication between the various

parts of the region. Similarly, River Benue and its tributaries linked old Muri to Jibu, Ibi, Gassol, Bantaje, Shinkai, and Akwana. Even on land, some footpaths linked Jalingo to Wukari and even beyond.

CONCLUSION

The research paper established that the political and economic relations between the Muri Emirate (Hamman Ruwa) and the Jukun Kingdom during the pre-colonial period were peaceful and reciprocal. In its heyday, the Jukun kingdom had total political control over all ethnic groups in the Middle Benue region and even beyond. However, with the spread of the Usman Dan Fodio Jihad in the middle Benue region, which led to the emergence of the Muri emirate, it became a shadow of its former self. Therefore, the Muri emirate conquered and subjected the Jukun kingdom politically and compelled her to pay tributes but allowed her to exercise her political hegemony. Since then, the two independent kingdoms have maintained commercial and educational relations. The paper emphasises that politico-economic relations were the primary factors influencing pre-colonial inter-group relations and diplomacy in the Middle Belt region.

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