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ARCHIVAL POWER AND EPISTEMIC INJUSTICE: UNEQUAL VISIBILITY IN INSTITUTIONAL DOCUMENTATION OF THE BOKO HARAM CONFLICT IN NORTH-EAST NIGERIA

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Abstract
The Boko Haram conflict in North-East Nigeria has generated extensive documentary records across government agencies, humanitarian organisations, human-rights groups, and peacebuilding institutions. While these records preserve important evidence of violence, displacement, protection needs, and institutional responses, the ways in which documentary practices shape visibility, recognition, and the marginalisation of knowledge remain insufficiently examined. This study analyses institutional documentation of the conflict through the complementary lenses of archival power and epistemic injustice. It employs institutional document analysis, informed by critical interpretive synthesis, to examine publicly accessible records published between 2009 and 2026. The findings show that humanitarian documentation makes the scale and spatial distribution of need highly visible but often translates complex lived experiences into administrative categories. Human-rights reports preserve more direct testimony, yet interpretation, contextualisation, and control over subsequent use largely remain with producing organisations. Documentary attention is also uneven: women, children, and the Chibok abductions receive sustained visibility, whereas male victims, less-publicised communities, local mediators, and community-generated knowledge are comparatively marginal. Records also provide limited transparency regarding long-term custody, preservation, and accessibility. The study argues that documentary presence does not necessarily constitute meaningful epistemic recognition and calls for more participatory and trauma-informed practices grounded in careful classification, continuing consent, protected access, and shared stewardship.
Keywords: Archival power; Boko Haram conflict; Epistemic injustice; Institutional documentation; North-East Nigeria.

Introduction
Armed conflicts are remembered, in part, through the records they leave behind. Incident reports, displacement registers, humanitarian assessments, human-rights investigations, survivor testimonies, policy documents, and media archives support humanitarian action, accountability, and historical research (Baumgartner et al., 2016).. Yet such records are neither complete nor neutral. Institutions document conflict according to their mandates, priorities, and evidentiary standards; consequently, decisions about what to record, whom to interview, how to classify experience, and what to preserve shape how conflict is known and remembered.

Archival scholarship has long challenged the assumption that archives merely preserve objective evidence. Schwartz and Cook (2002) argue that archives actively shape social memory because power operates throughout the record's lifecycle, influencing its creation, selection, description, preservation, and subsequent use. Archival silence may therefore arise not only from absent records, but also through aggregation, selective retention, weak description, restricted access, or institutional categories that obscure community meanings

(Carter, 2006). Conflict-affected people may consequently be extensively documented while remaining visible mainly as victims, beneficiaries, suspects, returnees, or members of designated vulnerable groups.

These concerns are particularly relevant to the Boko Haram conflict in North-East Nigeria, which has generated extensive documentation by government, humanitarian, human-rights, civil-society, research, and media institutions. Amnesty International (2015) combined interviews, documentary materials, and satellite imagery to reconstruct attacks and patterns of abuse. A subsequent investigation, based primarily on 126 interviews, including 76 with girls and young women, documented abuses perpetrated by Boko Haram, survivors' subsequent experiences with Nigerian security forces, and the challenges they faced during reintegration (Amnesty International, 2024). Humanitarian agencies produce a different form of visibility. The International Organization for Migration's (IOM, 2022a) Displacement Tracking Matrix documented internally displaced persons and returnees across the North-East, supporting assistance while translating diverse experiences into standardised categories.

Public and institutional visibility is also uneven. The April 2014 abduction of the Chibok schoolgirls became one of the most internationally recognised representations of Boko Haram violence, reinforced through survivor narratives and transnational activism (Onah, 2022, 2024). Gender further influences whose experiences become visible and how they are represented. Female victims are more often explicitly identified by gender, whereas male victims may be aggregated or presented as gender-neutral casualties (Beel & Jonathan, 2023). Frequent documentary presence does not necessarily result in fair or comprehensive representation.

Epistemic justice provides a useful framework for understanding this problem. Fricker (2007) distinguishes between testimonial injustice, in which a speaker's credibility is unfairly diminished because of prejudice, and hermeneutical injustice, which occurs when individuals lack equitable access to the interpretive resources necessary to articulate and communicate their experiences. Within institutional documentation, affected people may therefore be extensively recorded while receiving limited recognition as credible interpreters of their own experiences. Participatory archival scholarship responds to this concern by arguing that communities should have meaningful roles in documentation, description, custody, access, and reuse, while conflict settings also require attention to confidentiality, safety, and continuing consent (Huvila, 2008; Shilton & Srinivasan, 2007; Zavala et al., 2017).

Despite substantial scholarship on archival power, silence, participation, and trauma, and an extensive literature on Boko Haram, displacement, gender, media representation, and survivor testimony, limited attention has been paid to how different institutions collectively construct and preserve the documentary record of the conflict. This study addresses that gap by examining how state, humanitarian, human-rights, peacebuilding, and knowledge institutions represent conflict-affected populations; how documentary practices produce recognition, mediation, or archival silence; and what principles may support more participatory, trauma-informed, and epistemically just documentation.

The paper brings together bodies of documentation that are often examined separately, placing archival power in dialogue with epistemic injustice and translating these insights into practical principles for institutions responsible for preserving conflict records. Rather than seeking to construct a single authoritative account, the study examines how documentary practices can better recognise and represent the experiences and knowledge of the people whose lives and histories the records seek to preserve.

Theoretical and Analytical Framework

Institutional documentation of conflict involves more than determining whether an event or experience has been recorded. It also requires attention to the processes through which records are created, selected, classified, described, preserved, accessed, and interpreted, as well as to whose accounts are regarded as credible and whose knowledge shapes the meanings attached to those records. Archival power provides a framework for examining how institutional authority operates across these stages of the documentary process, while epistemic injustice draws attention to inequalities in credibility, interpretation, and participation in knowledge production. Bringing these perspectives together makes it possible to examine both the institutional processes that shape the documentary record and the extent to which conflict-affected people are recognised as credible knowers and interpreters of their own experiences.

Archival Power, Silence and Documentary Authority

Archival power operates from the point of record creation, long before records enter libraries, archives, or other repositories. It is exercised when institutions determine which events warrant investigation, what information should be collected, whose accounts are treated as relevant sources, and how those accounts are documented. It continues as testimonies are summarised, incidents classified, identifying information removed, and records selected for preservation or future access (Schwartz & Cook, 2002; Viebach, 2021).

Institutional mandates shape what becomes visible within documentary records. Security reports may organise information around threats, perpetrators, and operational risks, while humanitarian assessments typically foreground population movements, vulnerabilities, and material needs. Human-rights organisations prioritise evidence of violations, responsibility, and accountability, whereas peacebuilding institutions are more likely to document relationships, local tensions, and opportunities for intervention. These different forms of documentation serve legitimate institutional purposes, but each produces a partial representation of conflict shaped by the priorities through which the record was created.

Archival silence can emerge at multiple stages of the documentary process. Carter (2006) shows that such silence may result when individuals or communities lack the power or opportunity to create records, when institutions fail to preserve existing materials, or when inadequate description makes records difficult to locate and retrieve. Silence may also exist within documents themselves. A community may be identified as the site of an attack without its members being given space to explain the event, while displaced populations may be extensively represented in statistical tables even as differences in their histories, relationships, and interpretations are obscured through aggregation.

Not every archival silence signifies exclusion. Anonymity, redaction, and restricted access may be necessary to protect survivors, witnesses, and other vulnerable contributors. Individuals may also decline to provide information or place limits on the future use and accessibility of their accounts. Trauma-informed archival practice therefore emphasises safety, choice, and control in the management of sensitive records (Regehr et al., 2025). The question, therefore, is who decided that the information should be withheld, why it was withheld, and whose interests such silences serve.

Epistemic Injustice and the Analysis of Conflict Records

Fricker's (2007) concept of epistemic injustice draws attention to inequalities in the recognition, interpretation, and production of knowledge. Testimonial injustice may arise when officials and experts are treated as authoritative interpreters while conflict-affected people appear primarily as anonymous sources of information. Verification remains necessary, particularly where allegations have implications for protection, accountability, or public policy. The analytical concern is therefore not verification itself, but whether documentary practices create a persistent division between those whose experiences provide the evidence and those who retain authority to interpret, classify, and explain that evidence.

Hermeneutical injustice can also arise through the categories institutions use to organise and respond to conflict. Terms such as internally displaced person, returnee, former associate, or child born of war are often necessary for identifying needs, comparing cases, and directing assistance. Yet such labels can bring together people whose experiences of coercion, identity, belonging, displacement, and recovery differ considerably. When institutional categories become the dominant language through which these experiences are understood, important distinctions may be lost. As Evrard (2024) demonstrates, even categories intended to promote inclusion can unintentionally homogenise the people they seek to recognise.

Epistemic justice requires more than the inclusion of survivor quotations; it requires meaningful recognition of survivors as credible knowers and contributors to the interpretation of their experiences. Participatory archival scholarship therefore argues that affected communities should, where appropriate, have a meaningful role in decisions concerning appraisal, description, custody, access, and the reuse of records, rather than being treated solely as sources of information (Huvila, 2008; Shilton & Srinivasan, 2007; Zavala et al., 2017). In this study, these concerns are examined through questions of recognition, voice, interpretive authority, classification, consent, access, preservation, and accountability. These dimensions provide the basis for qualitative interpretation of the documents, while recognising that each record must also be understood in relation to the purpose and mandate of the institution that produced it.

Methodology

The study employed institutional document analysis informed by critical interpretive synthesis. Document analysis enables the systematic examination of textual and visual materials to understand how organisations represent social realities (Bowen, 2009), while critical interpretive synthesis supports interpretation across diverse forms of evidence and an iterative engagement between theory and data (Dixon-Woods et al., 2006). The documents were examined both as sources of information and as institutional artefacts.

The study examined publicly accessible materials published between 2009 and 2026 concerning the Boko Haram conflict in North-East Nigeria. Particular attention was given to Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe States, while relevant materials from Bauchi, Gombe, and Taraba States were included where they addressed displacement, regional spillovers, or institutional responses. Five institutional categories were considered: Nigerian state and peace institutions; international humanitarian organisations; human-rights organisations; peacebuilding and civil-society organisations; and libraries, research institutes, and digital repositories.

Documents were identified through structured searches of institutional websites, digital repositories, Google Scholar, and supplementary web searches using terms related to Boko Haram, victims, survivors, displacement, testimony, documentation, memory, archives, human rights, mediation, and peacebuilding. Reference lists and links within relevant materials were also examined. Where institutions produced repetitive report series, documents were purposively selected to capture substantive changes in documentation over time.

Documents were included where they addressed the conflict or its consequences, had identifiable institutional provenance, contained substantive evidence, and were available in full text. Duplicates, brief announcements, and materials without identifiable provenance were excluded. Selected documents were considered in relation to institutional authority, purpose, evidence base, geographical coverage, methodological transparency, and treatment of uncertainty. Analysis focused on voice, recognition, interpretive authority, classification, consent, ownership, access, preservation, and accountability.

The study relied exclusively on publicly accessible documents and involved no direct interaction with human participants. Public availability was not treated as unrestricted ethical permission, particularly where documents contained sensitive accounts of violence, displacement, or victimisation. Identifiable and sensitive information was therefore handled cautiously. Where information concerning consent, preservation, custody, or access arrangements was not provided in a document, it was recorded as “not reported” rather than interpreted as evidence that such arrangements did not exist.

Findings

The documents did not produce a single archive of the Boko Haram conflict. They created overlapping accounts shaped by institutional priorities. Humanitarian reports made displacement and material need visible; human-rights investigations preserved testimony and evidence of abuse; child-protection reports focused on grave violations; and peacebuilding materials attended more closely to relationships and recovery. Four themes emerged: the translation of lived experience into institutional categories; voice without equal interpretive authority; uneven visibility; and limited long-term stewardship.

Translating Lived Experience into Institutional Categories

Humanitarian agencies produced the most extensive numerical accounts. IOM’s Displacement Tracking Matrix documented displaced persons, returnees, households, locations and causes of movement. Its 2022 Atlas covered 2,520 localities across the six North-East states (IOM, 2022a). These records made the scale and distribution of displacement visible and supported planning.

The same standardisation also shaped how people were represented. Individuals appeared primarily as displaced persons, returnees, camp residents, host-community members, or people with specified vulnerabilities. Although these categories supported comparison and assistance, they captured less of how people understood displacement, disrupted relationships, and the conditions surrounding return. Reports by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) organised experiences around issues such as freedom of movement, gender-based violence, child protection, detention, and access to services (UNHCR, 2025). The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) similarly documented children through categories of grave violations, including killing, maiming, abduction, sexual

violence, and attacks on schools and hospitals (UNICEF, 2023). The documents provided substantial evidence of the scale and distribution of need but paid less attention to personal experiences and community meanings.

Voice Without Equal Interpretive Authority

Human-rights reports gave survivors the clearest documentary presence. Human Rights Watch drew on interviews with survivors, witnesses, relatives and social workers to document abduction, forced marriage and sexual violence (Human Rights Watch, 2014). Amnesty International used testimony, documentary material and satellite imagery to reconstruct attacks and abuses (Amnesty International, 2015). Its 2024 report also recorded survivors' hopes for education, livelihoods, family life and reintegration (Amnesty International, 2024).

Nevertheless, interpretive authority remained mainly with the organisations. Institutions selected testimony, placed it within legal or policy categories and linked it to findings and recommendations. This was partly unavoidable, because investigations require verification and interpretation. Yet survivors had little visible influence over how accounts were classified, preserved or reused. Reports generally explained interview practice and identity protection, but said less about future custody of recordings, notes and full testimonies.

Uneven Visibility Across Victims and Locations

Women and children received sustained attention, particularly in relation to abduction, sexual violence, forced marriage, recruitment and attacks on education. This reflected the severity of violations and institutional mandates. It also sometimes confined women and girls to narratives of vulnerability. Some reports recognised escape, resilience and reintegration, but fewer preserved women's knowledge of community protection or recovery.

Men and boys appeared as people killed, recruited, detained or suspected of association with Boko Haram. Human Rights Watch's investigation of detained children showed how boys and other children could move from victimhood into security classifications that exposed them to detention and suspicion (Human Rights Watch, 2019). Male victims were often aggregated as casualties, detainees or suspects, consistent with Beel and Jonathan's (2023) finding that apparently neutral language can make male victimhood less visible.

Borno State received the greatest documentary attention, reflecting its position as the most conflict-affected state in North-East Nigeria and the concentration of displacement within the state. In 2022, the International Organization for Migration reported that Borno hosted about 74% of all internally displaced persons in the North-East (IOM, 2022b). Adamawa and Yobe appeared regularly in the reviewed documents, while Bauchi, Gombe, and Taraba featured more often in regional summaries. Local mediators and community knowledge were less visible. Traditional and religious leaders appeared in consultations and programme accounts, but their interpretations were rarely documented in the same depth as institutional assessments. The record therefore preserved substantial evidence of what violence did to communities, while revealing less about how communities understood, resisted, and responded to it.

Protection Without Clear Long-Term Stewardship

Human-rights and protection reports generally recognised the risks associated with disclosure. Survivors were anonymised and sensitive details withheld to reduce the possibility

of retaliation, stigma, or renewed harm. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) psychosocial assessment similarly described measures taken to create safe conditions for consultations with children and caregivers (UNICEF, 2019). Immediate protection was more visible than long-term planning. Few reports explained where interviews, notes or datasets would be stored, how long they would be retained or who might later gain access. Where this was not reported, it could not be assumed that arrangements did not exist; their absence nevertheless made external evaluation impossible.

Accessibility also varied. Some institutions maintained stable collections, while others relied on changing links or poorly indexed pages. A report could remain online yet be difficult to locate without its exact title. The documents provided little evidence of coordinated transfer to Nigerian libraries, archives, universities or specialised research institutions. Records remained scattered across organisational websites and project holdings rather than connected through a shared national memory infrastructure.

Discussion

The findings show that the record is extensive but divided. Each organisation documented through the demands of its mandate. These purposes explain much of the variation and show why no institution could preserve the conflict in its full complexity.

Documentary Presence Is Not the Same as Recognition

Conflict-affected people were highly visible but often through institutional classification. Categories supported urgent work while deciding which parts of experience entered the record. This supports Schwartz and Cook's (2002) argument that archival power operates through ordinary routines, not only deliberate suppression. People may be counted accurately while their explanations and memories remain difficult to recover.

The findings extend Carter's (2006) account of silence. Here silence often arose through aggregation: a table revealed displaced households but not how families understood the loss of home; a protection report counted abductions without preserving the social meaning of captivity and return. This can be described as categorical presence with interpretive absence. Human-rights reports preserved testimony, but institutions usually controlled selection, interpretation and publication. Recognition as a source of information was not always recognition as a producer of knowledge.

Silence Emerged Between Institutions

The most important gaps emerged between institutions. Humanitarian reports contained detailed population data but little testimony. Human-rights investigations preserved personal accounts but disclosed limited information about long-term custody. Peacebuilding documents recognised community actors but rarely preserved their knowledge in depth. Libraries and repositories had no visible coordinating role.

Documents created for immediate purposes may later acquire evidentiary, historical or memorial value (Viebach, 2021). A displacement database may become one of the few surviving records of a destroyed settlement; a confidential testimony collected for advocacy may later matter to justice or family history. Without planned preservation, relationships among these materials may be lost. The answer is not to ask every institution to document everything, but to coordinate description, referral, preservation and ethical access while respecting distinct mandates.

This coordination is particularly important for Nigerian institutions. If records remain mainly on international websites or short-term project holdings, future access will depend on changing organisational priorities and platforms. Nigerian libraries, archives, universities and peace institutions should participate early in identifying records of lasting value.

Towards Epistemically Just Conflict Documentation

Improving documentation does not require institutions to discard categories that support their work. The problem arises when operational requirements become the only basis for deciding what deserves to be recorded and preserved. Broad labels may be useful, but they bring together people whose experiences differ greatly. Records should retain some of these differences rather than allowing one administrative label to become a complete description.

Affected people also need a stronger place in explaining the conflict. Their knowledge should not be reduced to quotations inserted into conclusions determined by others. Institutions can preserve direct accounts alongside professional analysis, consult communities about descriptive terms and allow people to explain what violence, displacement and return mean locally (Huvila, 2008; Shilton & Srinivasan, 2007; Zavala et al., 2017).

Consent should reach beyond the immediate interview. Contributors need to understand, as far as possible, whether accounts will be retained, who may access them and how they might be used. Protection should not become an excuse for neglecting preservation. Restrictions should be recorded and reviewed so sensitive material does not disappear when a project ends.

Nigerian libraries, archives, universities and peace institutions have an important role. Conflict records should not depend indefinitely on international organisations, temporary websites or failing links. Affected communities should remain connected to records concerning their histories. An epistemically just approach would recognise differences within categories, give affected people a meaningful role in interpretation, explain classification, extend consent to preservation and reuse, protect sensitive records without erasing them and share responsibility for long-term care.

Difficult choices remain. Wider access may threaten privacy; strict restrictions may prevent communities from recovering their histories. Detailed testimony may strengthen accountability but revive painful experiences. Community participation may improve representation while raising questions about who speaks for a divided population. These tensions cannot be removed, but they can be addressed openly rather than left to routine practice.

Conclusion

The Boko Haram conflict has produced a substantial but fragmented documentary record. Humanitarian agencies captured the scale of displacement, human-rights organisations preserved evidence of abuse, and peacebuilding and child-protection institutions documented particular forms of harm and recovery. Yet these records do not give affected people an equal place in explaining how the conflict should be understood and remembered. Much of the documentation presents people through categories suited to institutional work. These labels support planning and accountability, but preserve only part of the lives they describe. Documentary presence should not be mistaken for meaningful recognition. Better practice requires careful classification, continuing consent, stronger community participation and

clear arrangements for retaining sensitive records. Nigerian libraries, archives, universities and peace institutions should play a more deliberate role in preserving this documentary heritage. The aim is not to create one official account, but to keep different forms of evidence connected, accessible and ethically protected while ensuring that affected communities retain a place in the history recorded about them.

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