

The Onslaught of Farmer – Herdsmen Crises In Nigeria: Perspectives From Sociological Viewpoint

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Abstract

For many Nigerians, farming and herding respectively justify as agro-production and culturally-linked production enterprises of people within the agricultural sector. Both have a long history of practice even across Africa especially in sub-Saharan regions and also are largely seasonal and sensitive to geography and climatic variables. Conflict history between practitioners in the two enterprise activities reveal both immediate and long term root causes which sporadically manifest debilitating impacts on the economy and the populace. This review employed expository and analytical methods in evoking key issues surrounding the thesis. The outputs of this discourse place the crux of the matter more on historical and sociological pedestals than on immediate political and religious fronts. It is the view of this piece among other recommendations to as matter of urgency promptly narrow the widening indigene-settler differences that dot and accentuate identity crisis across the Nigerian polity, urgently reform land tenure holding, step up implementable and result-orienting grassroot education policies as well as strengthen traditional conflict resolution mechanisms.

Key Words: agricultural sector, seasonal, conflict history, indigene-settler differences and identity crisis,

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Introduction

The logic of the livelihood of herding population in Nigeria is often misunderstood. What is better understood is the culture of farming because it is rooted within a certain kind of location in which the activities take place within almost defined seasons/periods. The assumption that herding is in itself an irrational production system is far from the truth. Herding is one major livestock production system in much of Africa especially in semi-arid zones and is a historically developed strategy to cope with the uncertainty associated with climate change, the build-up of associated parasites on herds and several other costly challenges (Hampshire, 2006; Benjaminsen and Lund, 2001). Herding is above all an efficient way to produce livestock at relatively low prices through the use of non-commercial feeding stock. Pastoralists particularly herdsmen have been able to meet the meat demand in West Africa with a relatively high level of efficiency without government subsidy for generations. Nigeria has about 19 million cattle, much of it in the hands of pastoralists.

According to Nwokolo *et al.* (1981), the nation cannot survive without farmers. They own lands and additionally cultivate on it to produce food for the nation. Farming is very important for livelihood and survival of any society (Hovorka *et al.*, 2009). The perennial and largely unaided sustenance of farming and land fertility by these farmers visibly indicated by character and flush of vegetation especially down South of Nigeria attract nomads and transhumance movement. So, the farmers rue the wanton ravaging of their lands as herds destroy their source of livelihood often times rendering their life-long efforts useless. At the end, it becomes a battle for survival. Nigeria's population has grown from 33 million in 1950 to about 192.3 million today. This phenomenal increase of the population has put enormous pressure on land and water resources used by farmers and the herdsmen (Martin, 2016).

Crises across Nigeria: The Hidden Story

Crises and conflicts today appear to have become mutated into complex systems that are driven by multiple and competing interests. The dynamics in crisis assessment and analysis have the potential to evoke considerable and lasting ripples across political and socio-economic spheres which tends to undermine regional and continental peace and sustainable development. A deeper understanding of the drivers of crises, unrest and conflicts across Africa and especially in Nigeria and the capacities for peace in an ever-changing world is crucial for identifying and streamlining support for national capacities in sustaining peace and co-existence.

Africa is laced with some of the most obstinate ethnic, religious and historical conflicts. Nigeria is synonymous with deep divisions which cause major political issues to be vigorously and violently contested along the lines of intricate ethnic, religious and regional divisions. Majority of these have metamorphosed from the difference existing in identities amongst the different population groups therein. Nigeria has been pushed by recurrent crises of illegitimacy, often impairing efforts at economic transformation, democratization, national cohesion and stability (Osaghae and Suberu 2005).

From a socio-political perspective, identity bears a personal and a social meaning. Processes related to identity are located at the core of the individual and yet in the core of the

broader community sphere and culture which influences behaviour (Erikson 1968; Okpanachi 2010; Anderson 2010). Crises handling and management provides an evidence base to enable strategic and targeted responses to better manage transition and turbulence, and reduce the likelihood of resurgence.

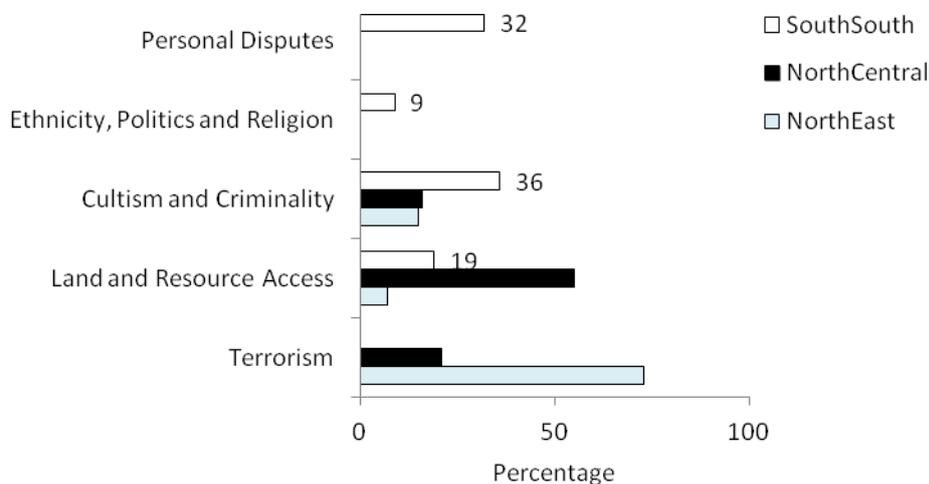


Fig 1: Causes of most recent conflict events in Nigeria: 2010 - 2017

Table 1: Trends and Statistics of Deaths arising from Cattle Herding in Nigeria over time

Year	Number of Deaths
2006	22
2007	54
2008	31
2009	83
2010	39
2011	116
2012	128
2013	115
2014	27
2017	549
2018	1351

(IFRA, 2015; Amnesty International, 2018)

Drivers of the Violence

For centuries, pastoralists drove their cattle east and west across the Sahel, the semi-arid zone south of the Sahara Desert which includes Nigeria’s far northern belt. In the early 20th century, herders started shifting their migratory routes farther south, pushed by a series of droughts in the far north, but also attracted by heightened security in central and southern Nigeria and by better control of parasitic diseases (such as trypanomiasis or sleeping sickness) in the central and southern zones. Herders again wanted to evade the much-hated cattle tax (jangoli) imposed by the British colonial government in the northern region. As cattle herds migrated southward, so did conflicts between pastoralists and farmers.

Among the principal causes and aggravating factors behind this escalating conflict are climatic changes (frequent droughts and desertification); population growth (loss of northern grazing lands to the expansion of human settlements); technological and economic changes (new livestock and farming practices); crime (rural banditry and cattle rustling); political and ethnic strife (intensified by the spread of illicit firearms); and cultural changes (the collapse of traditional conflict management mechanisms). A dysfunctional legal regime that allows crime to go unpunished has encouraged both farmers and pastoralists to take matters into their own hands.

Grazing by animals is a very intense form of deforestation. So it is no exaggeration to say that desertification in West Africa has been caused mostly by overgrazing especially in the Sahel and Sudan Savannah zones. Periodic droughts and natural disasters, and now climate change accelerate what had already been initiated by overgrazing. Nigeria has an obligation to the international community to preserve the environment and to conserve vegetation, in particular. It is well known by conservation area managers that herdsmen enter conservation areas, national parks and forest reserves in search of fodder for their herds. This type of deforestation negates Nigeria’s agreed primary roles under the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD).

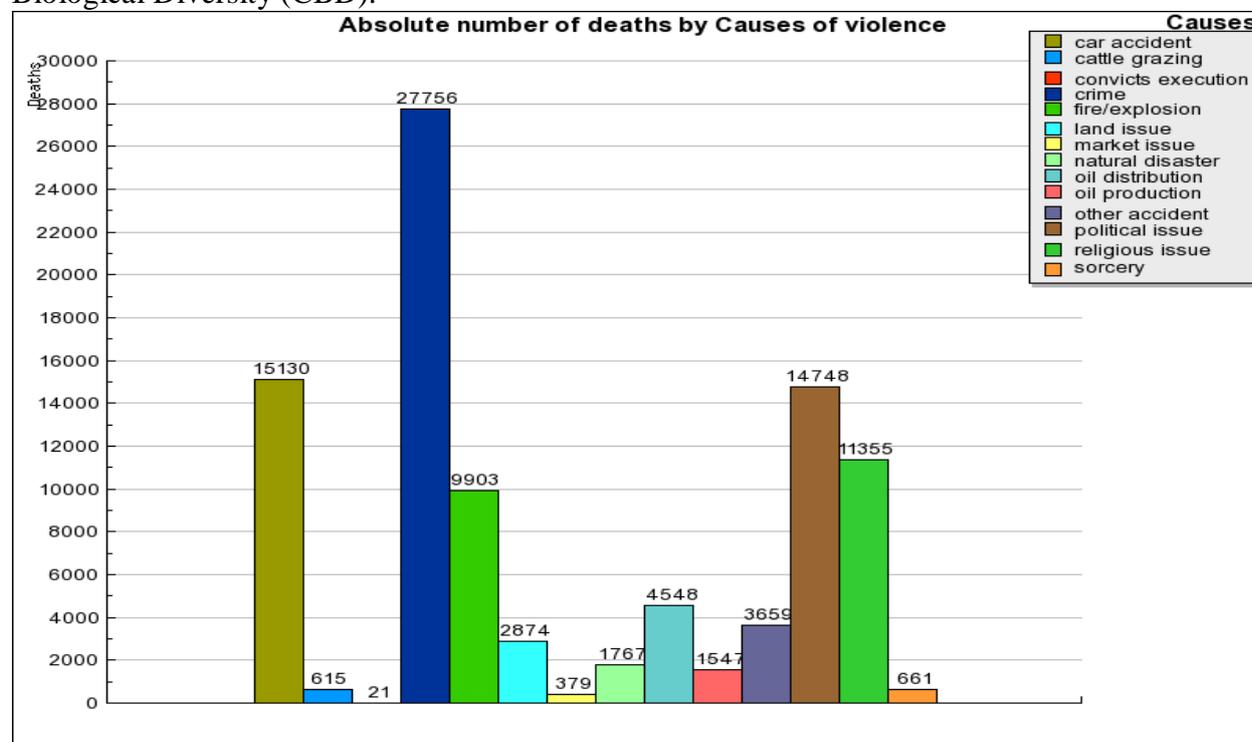


Figure 2: Causes of violent deaths in Nigeria, cumulated figures (June 2006–May 2014)

Historical Perspective

The Fulani are a part of Fula ethnic group which has existed for thousands of years. There are about 20 million Fulanis in Africa today but the largest community is located in Nigeria where they make up one of the nation's largest ethnic groups (Crowe, 2010). The Fula people are almost solely Muslim having converted to Islam from their traditional belief system in the 1500s. Most Fulanis maintain a semi-nomadic lifestyle earning them the appellation of "Fulani herdsmen." In the past, the Fulani have engaged in fighting with other groups specifically the Jukun, Eggon, and Tiv communities (Stanton, 2012). The disputes with these communities have been primarily focused around land disputes, though religious concerns have fueled the violence as well. The current struggle between the Fulani and other peoples of Nigeria is somewhat an expression of conflict-prone attribute of the Fulani and results from many social, economic and environmental factors that have long characterized and defined the Fulani.

The Issues

The Nigerian State has a relatively weak and sickly rural setting. She has almost neglected her agrarian sector where is largely domiciled in the rural areas since the 1970s when oil revenues began to dominate the economy (Okolo, 2010). There have been few improvements in agricultural productivity and livestock production as a result of the dependence on oil revenues which have not been reinvested in productive economic activities. Government response in the context of the lingering conflicts between farmers and herdsmen has been both ad hoc and reactive with no concrete and sustainable strategies for conflict management and peace building beyond the deployment of security or establishment of commissions of enquiries. One of the key pathways here is for government (Federal, States and LGs) to be more proactive in its response by putting in place mechanisms that are institutional and sustainable at all tiers/levels.

Protagonists in the herdsmen-farmer saga often present two distinct groups who are usually depicted as perpetrators and victims respectively (Akov, 2017). Perspectives of the social, religious and ethnic characteristics of the herdsmen community and farmer communities are hence framed into discourses that actively breed and sustain suspicion and distrust fueling almost endless hate process and culminating in chains of attacks and revenge attacks exchanged between these different groups. Nigeria urgently needs to seek pathways to build and continue to build trust and sustain trust and confidence.

The Problem

The current conflict in Nigeria involving Fulani herdsmen stems from a long history of feuding, farming and herding, and will not easily be resolved (Mustapha, 1966). Preexisting communal conflicts have fueled and escalated this violence as herdsmen turn militants in the face of urbanization, insecurity, desertification and the indifference of the Nigerian government. Similarities have been observed between the Fulani militants and Boko Haram and there have been accusations of collusion between the two groups (Burton, 2017). However, these claims are not firm-founded. The aim of Boko Haram is to kill and inspire fear as a way to grasp official control of the northern region. The Fulani herdsmen simply seek land and often vengeance. Solutions to the crisis must address these goals not as the goals of terrorists but as goals that the respective groups share with the people from which they have come.

Possible Solutions

Bridge the Indigenes-Settler differences: When the Fulani herdsmen find themselves in the farmer's territory (farmlands) despite spending years and decades around such regions in herding, they are still regarded as settlers by the indigenes (farmer indigenes). This difference ought to be bridged through avenues for friendly socialization, regular meetings, social gatherings, festivals and sporting events which platforms can bring the parties together more informally.

The politics and sociology of herdsmen-farmer crisis ought to bother political leaders more than ever before. Regrettably, this is not the case, given the lack of political will and non-prosecution of offenders/culprits in this scenario by government which could lead to mistrust, lack of confidence and anarchy. Only the political class and its business associates are living in peace and affluence at the expense of the toiling masses. Most of the age-long, indigenous values and value-systems of Nigeria especially the indigenous peoples of Nigeria are disappearing because of such emerging trends. The Nigerian masses have become voiceless and there is near-total helplessness especially of the victims. Such situations if prolonged could lead to reprisal by the masses as in the 1929 Aba Women riot (Marc *et al.*, 2011). Nigerians, regardless of their ethnic or religious backgrounds, need good governance not insensitivity.

This conflict is debated as being largely a matter of scarcity. There is a link between scarcity and onset of livelihood conflict (Bello, 2013). Elite land-grabbing is fingered as a major cause of land resource scarcity leading to herdsmen being robbed of land grazing resource in addition to ethno-religious identity construction, the citizenship question and institutional inadequacies. The reform of land tenure system should be vigorously pursued with attendant implementable policy on land redistribution to improve fair and equitable access.

To understand the sources of this conflict, it is necessary to analyze how forms of insecurity and the narratives of threat are articulated in social and cultural terms. These vary between locations especially between urban and rural areas. The Plateau conflicts have produced contrasting discourses from Muslims and Christians and from farmers and herdsmen who have been engaged in long history of armed conflict in some northern parts of the Jos Plateau (Higazi, 2016). The ways in which conflict or violence are understood in the past have been distant from the above and these varying local impacts ought to guide external involvement, local participation and response strategies. These are aspects which necessarily ought to be ramified in resolving any conflict between and among parties.

Pastoralism particularly herding is not sustainable in Nigeria over a long term. At the same time, herding cannot end or be proscribed in the short term as there are strong cultural and economic reasons for its existence. A new policy framework on the herdsmen-farmers crisis should be developed that is both comprehensive and mutually beneficial to both groups. A high-tech Presidential committee should be constituted with experts and a stakeholder membership involving all stakeholders to draw up a workable and acceptable framework. There should be a deep consultative process which would listen to the concerns of all stakeholders in developing the new framework so that the outcome would have national as well as composite ethnic ownership.

Improper information about the whole scenario has given room for hasty speculations and hate/dangerous speech. There is need for development of a media code to be used in sensitizing the public especially the media on relevant international standards on reporting issues of conflict. This process should involve conflict sensitivity and safety training and it should be based on very strict journalistic standards.

One of the most important dimensions of the growing conflict between herdsmen and farmers has been the breakdown of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms. In the past, when conflicts arise, they were settled by village heads and Fulani community leaders and if need for payment of compensation arises, they were traditional systems and knowledge of how to assess damage done and the amount necessary to compensate for the damage and not profiteering (Bello, 2013; Isichei, 1983). In line with the above, significant investment should be made in restoring traditional conflict resolution mechanisms. There should be capacity development for farmers and herdsmen association so that they play a more positive role in the process.

There is need to promote informal or semi-formal education in form of rehabilitation of nomadic schools, introduction and equipment of modern education and cultural and behavioural re-orientation (Fafunwa, 1974; Essuman *et al.*, 1990). Nomadic education system is apt to enable herdsmen get interested in modern herding, western education and standard practices. This will reduce friction and promote peace.

Conclusion

It is clear that Nigeria and, indeed, Africa have to plan towards the transformation of cattle herding into settled forms of animal husbandry. The establishment of grazing reserves provides one good opportunity for practicing a more limited form of pastoralism. However, social issues especially those that border on conflict cannot always be ignored in matters of this magnitude. It is clear that at least in the mid and long term ranges, many herders will continue to practice seasonal migration between dry and wet season grazing areas. By and large, there is the need for lasting and sustainable approach to this impasse which sociological tips can and has provided in this article.

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