

# Changing Patterns of Herders/Farmers Conflict and the Implications for Nation Building in Nigeria

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**Abstract:** Herders/Farmers conflict in Nigeria is a vexed national question that is threatening nation building. Though the conflict is historically an old one spanning pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial epochs; the Nigerian State is yet to find a remedy to the crisis. The patterns of the conflict have also changed. The conflict has metamorphosed from a local community conflict to a large scale conflict using sophisticated weapons and involving the sacking of settled communities on their ancestral homes. This development has ignited debates as to the real motives for the persistence of the conflict. Indeed, the lethality of the contemporary pattern has left damnable implications for nation building and begs for thoughtful policy interventions. This paper historicizes the patterns of herders/farmers conflict in Nigeria since 1914 and highlights the implications on nation building. It contends that herders/farmers conflict is escalating the bound of a local resource conflict to a politicized ethnic and religious one. The implications of this development on nation building and human security are damning and capable of degenerating into a wide scale civil war just as the experiences of Somalia and Rwanda depicts. Thus, the paper proposes thoughtful policy prescriptions to tame the gradual slide to State failure. The analysis in the paper is laced in a historical methodology using primary and secondary sources.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Herding and farming have long co-existed side by side as productive systems not only in Nigeria but the entire African region. Herding and farming communities have therefore had mutually reinforcing interdependent relations courted through reciprocity, exchanges and support (Moritz, 2010). But there is also a long historical record of oscillating conflicts and competition. What has changed in contemporary times is the lethality and scale of violent confrontations not the forms of relations. Herder-farmer conflicts in recent times get mixed with identity issues thereby blurring underlying causes. The lethality of violent engagements even complicates and compounds the triggers. For example, in 2004, Plateau State went in flames in a “near mutual genocide style” compelling President Obasanjo to declare a State of emergency. The January 2016 massacre of over 300 people at Agatu in Benue State and the killing of over 40 people at Nimbo Village in Enugu State hallmark the lethality of contemporary engagements (Azaigba, 2017). Just recently, South Western Nigeria is also experiencing serious crisis arising from herders-farmers violent engagements. Clearly, patterns of identity-based conflicts contrived from perceived or real cultural differences have emerged with deleterious consequences for the nation-building project. This is a marked departure from prior herders-farmers engagements. But what

has informed this emerging pattern of conflicts? What are the implications for the nation building project in Nigeria? Existing narratives on the conflict have mostly emphasized issues of land scarcity, grazing rights, climate change, settlement and movement, as well as resource competition. Not much causal link has been established in literature on the “conflicting indigene question” as a strong factor for explaining the intensity and lethality of contemporary herder-farmer conflicts in Nigeria. Whilst not underrating the primacy of other causal factors, this chapter underpins the particular character of identity contestations as a strong impetus for recurrent bout of clashes between herders and farmers.

To achieve the aforementioned objective, the chapter proceeds in sections. The first part establishes the thrust of the discourse. The second part overviews historical patterns of herder-farmer engagements based on two time constructs; pre-colonial and colonial epochs. The third part highlight correlates sustaining the contemporary pattern of herder-farmer engagements with much emphasizes on the aborigine question. The fourth part identifies the implications of the conflict on nation- building. The fifth part is the concluding thoughts.

## II. HISTORICAL PATTERNS OF HERDER-FARMER ENGAGEMENTS

Across Africa, as earlier indicated, farming and herding were complementary occupations that necessitated interdependent relationships between herders and farmers. In Nigeria, Adamu (2007). caps the pattern of relations thus;

The pastoralists required the fodder or the corn stubble and other forms of fodder for their cattle, which were often left behind after harvest. The pastoral Fulani *bararoen* who built temporary encampments also obtained the bulk of their food requirements from the farmers. Such included cereals, soup ingredients, wooden implements and wearing apparels. Similarly, the farmers could not do without the animal residues on their farms to resuscitate the soil. They also obtained milk (nono) and butter *manshanu* from the pastoralists.

Obviously, the pattern of relations were marked majorly by economic exchange of dairy products for grains, access to local markets, and the provision of manure on arable land while the cattle consume crop residues (Blench, 2010). This form of interdependence encouraged symbiotic relationships

based on a certain commonality of interests. The pre-colonial pattern of relations between herders and farmers were dominated by complementary relations and less of conflicts. Where conflicts occurred, the scale was small and easily resolvable. The economic reality during the pre-colonial period also encouraged the sustenance of this form of relations because the mode of production was based on subsistence and small surplus production (Gefu, 1992).

The imposition of colonial rule in Nigeria and in most of West Africa altered not just intergroup relations but affected fundamentally African social and physical landscapes. It is an undeniable fact that the colonialist's main interest in and a capacity for administration encouraged policy making geared towards the intentional manipulation of African environments for a variety of purposes. For example, by drafting new laws regarding land ownership and using European style court systems, colonial regimes gained control of large amounts of land in West Africa (Davidheiser and Anisuska, n.d). A further consequence was the imposition of formal laws on West African societies that had developed informal but effective systems of land use and tenure appropriate for local production styles. The changes brought by colonial rule undermined existing cooperative systems and created conditions that made future conflicts likely. In Nigeria, a number of colonial policies on herding redefined the relationship between herders and farmers in striking ways. For instance, the imposition of frontier boundaries and cattle tax (jangali) hindered cattle mobility (Adamu, 2007). This policy created an array of structural conditions prone to intergroup conflict between herders and farmers. More so, the conversion of erstwhile pasture areas to forest reserves limited the land available to herders/farmers and stimulated competition for land resources.

It is imperative to observe that colonial policies over land tended to reduce indigenous people's control of and access to land and natural resources, (thus making them more scarce and increasing competition and conflict over the resources that were still available), but privatization was also associated with environmental degradation. Secondly, nationalization of land on the other hand, not only occurred during the colonial era but it has continued under post-colonial governments. Such policies have often thrown traditional land tenure systems and relations of production into disarray, and caused herders to seek new land for grazing and increase the size of their herds. The nationalization of land was especially hard on pastoralists as colonial regimes tended to lay claims to territories that were not permanently settled. Thirdly, the sedentarization of herders combined with other colonial policies on land tenure to weakened transhumant production system and the symbiosis with farmers. Sedentarization contributed to conflict between the two groups. Fourthly, another effect of the capitalist system of production was an increase in cash crop production at the expense of pastoralism (Mortimore, 1989). But as Walter and Sobania (1994). Observe:

...pastoralists had been relegated to the periphery of an economic and political system that was now dominated by the needs of export agriculture and in which stock had been bypassed for new avenues of accumulation.

Furthermore, the enormous demand of the world market put pressure on raw materials leading as it were to increased production. This development encouraged encroachment on grazing reserves. The point being made is that colonial policies obliterated pre-colonial political systems which maintained herder-farmer production symbiosis. The combined effect of the colonial interventions was that conflicts and goal incompatibility escalated. Again, prior to colonial rule, competition and conflict between herders and farmers were often limited in scale arising from a number of factors namely; small human population pressures, periodic droughts, and epidemics of cattle disease (Davidheiser and Anisuska, n.d). Another point to note is that the improved medical knowledge that colonialism brought in its wake led to better health care for both human and cattle thereby increasing population dramatically. This also sparked competition for resources. Thus, both the tenure systems imported from Europe to Africa and the reduced mortality rates which have resulted from various pre and post colonial health initiatives have impacted heavily on the relationship of Africans to land. Though the former was a deliberate and the latter, an accidental factor in changing this relationship, both have increased the potential for conflict<sup>14</sup>. Thus, these variables have played critical roles in reconfiguring the relationship between herders and farmers.

### III. FACTORS SUSTAINING THE CONTEMPORARY PATTERN OF HERDER-FARMER ENGAGEMENTS

The contemporary pattern of herder-farmer relations is dominated by conflict narratives and has in the main reconfigured earlier forms of relations. In fact, the genocidal rampage of well-armed herdsmen blights contemporary confrontations and has since raised questions about the real intentions of the marauding herders as well as the appropriateness of existing explanatory narratives on the conflict (Azaigba, 2019). Three key variables have informed the conflicting relations between herders and farmers in contemporary Nigeria. First is the increased quest for grazing land amidst agricultural expansion. Second is the collapse of the system of *burti*, or cattle tracks, intended to separate livestock from farms. The third variable is the movement of pastoralists into new terrain, where language, religion, culture and land holding patterns are unfamiliar (Azaigba, 2019).

The argument that competition over land is at the heart of farmer-herder conflicts often suffices. However, at close scrutiny, scarcity of land does not automatically lead to an increased and intensification of farmer-herder conflicts. Across West Africa, agriculture and herding have co-existed side by side for centuries and could be considered as one integrated production system as the two systems have been integrated at multiple levels. At the community level, they are

integrated at multiple levels. At the community level, they are integrated through host-client (or host-stranger) relations, often described as symbiotic and mutually beneficial relations between interdependent communities of farmers and herders. Though environmental pressure related to climate change and growing competition for limited resources such as water and grazing land are driving herders and their cattle to agricultural areas year round where they destroy crops amidst agricultural expansion and search for fertile land spaces by farmers (Moritz, 2006; Pauline, 2004; Turner, 1999). This development made fertile land not only a very critical resource but a contested one. However, land scarcity alone does not explain why relations have been increasingly lethal. Clearly, herder-farmer conflicts are induced by a mixture of ethnic, religious and political interests. These factors often play a greater role than land scarcity in igniting conflict and escalating the scale of violence.

The increased frequency of the conflicts in contemporary times could also be explained in terms of the conflicting indigene challenge in Nigeria. This challenge was birthed by the indigene- settler crises that European colonialism created and bequeathed to African societies, in which categories of race and ethnicity were used to distinguish who belonged to the colonial state and who did not. These categories were carried into the post-colonial era with internal mobility within the post-colonial State. It is described in terms of the indigene and the settler. Aside these categorizations, opposing ideas of aborigine and how each group –herder and farmer- idealizes its relation to land is at the heart of the post-colonial pattern of herder-farmer crisis. Suffice it to state that the indigenous within the post-colonial African State is basically the group whose claims to indigenous rights are founded on a special physical attachment to an identifiable ancestral homeland. When there are stakes to these claims, the “homeland” is regarded as land that must be preserved and protected by all means including violence. Conversely, if the homeland is an imagined or lost territory, it becomes something worth striving and or fighting for (Maiangwa, 2017). Moses Ochonu (2014). provides a persuasive perspective on indigene claims thus;

Middle Belt peoples recall historical injuries inflicted on their cultures, languages, and religions by Anglo-caliphate colonials seeking to extend their influence and power... this narrative of victimhood is conjoined by a coterminous script of heroic resistance against Anglo-caliphate colonial oppression. Hausa-Fulani elites, on the other hand, invoke colonial anthropological evidence that dramatizes Middle Belt cultural “backwardness” and Hausa-Fulani civilizational influence on peoples of the Middle Belt. In the ensuing debate, Hausa – Fulani communities in the Middle Belt colonial societies as a basis for post-colonial political claims and as an anchor for laying claims to the patrimony of some Middle Belt constituencies.

This narrative fit contemporary contestations in Central Nigeria which is the hot bed of herder- farmer violence.

Fulani herders are perceived as “settlers” in most of Central Nigeria where the “indigenous” ethnic communities in the region stake claims to territories in their domain and recant the history of Islamic jihadist incursions. Fulani herders’ attempt at holding on to land in the region is therefore perceived in terms of an incursion typical of the historic “jihadism”. It is worth recounting that in Northern Nigeria, Fulani Pastoralists championed the 1804 jihad which resulted to the enslavement of non-Muslim communities and establishment of the Sokoto Caliphate. This history plays out during moments of tension and is theorized to mobilize resistance. The table below provides some clue to the lethality of herder-farmer confrontations in the Central region which is the theatre of perennial conflicts in Nigeria.

Table 1: Selected Incidences of Armed Attacks between Fulani Herdsmen and Farmers in Central Nigeria

Date	Place of Incident	Estimated Death
1/1/13	Jukun/Fulani clash in Taraba State	5
15/1/13	Farmers/Fulani clash in Nasarawa State	10
20/1/13	Farmers/Fulani clash in Nasarawa State	25
24/1.13	Fulani/Farmers clash in Plateau State	9
1/2/13	Fulani/Eggon clash n Nasarawa State	30
20/3/13	Fulani/Farmers clash at Tarok, Jos	18
28/3/13	Fulani/Farmers clash at Riyom, Plateau State	28
29/3/13	Fulani/Farmers clash at Bokkos, Plateau State	
3/4/13	Fulani/Farmers clash in Guma Benue State	3
10/4/13	Fulani/Farmers clash in Gwer-West, Benue State	28
23/4/13	Fulani/Egbe Farmers clash in Kogi State	5
4/5/13	Fulani/Farmers clash in Plateau State	13
4/5/13	Jukun/Fulani clash in Wukari Taraba State	39
13/5/13	Fulani/Farmers clash in Agatu, Benue State	50
20/5/13	Fulani/Farmers clash in Nasarawa – Benue Border	23
5/7/13	Fulani attacks on Tiv Villages in Nzorov, Guma	20
9/11/13	Fulani invasion of Agatu Benue State	36
7/11/13	Fulani/Farmers clash at Ikpele, Okopolo	7
20/2/14	Fulani/Farmers clash, Plateau State	13
20/2/14	Fulani/Farmers clash, Wase, Plateau State	
25/2/14	Fulani/Farmers clash Riyom, Plateau State	30
July 2014	Fulani attacked residents in Barkin Ladi	40
March, 2014	Fulani attack on Gbajimba, Benue State	36

Source: Culled from G.A. Genyi, Ethnic Religious Identities Shaping Contestation for land based Resources: The Tiv Farmers and Pastoralist conflict in Central Nigeria, 2014.

The table above indicates quite evidentially that herder-farmer conflicts have increasingly become lethal. This is a marked departure from the pre-colonial and colonial engagements. What then are the implications for the nation building project? The answer to this all important question will be attempted in the next section.

#### IV. IMPLICATIONS OF HERDER-FARMER CONFLICTS FOR NATION- BUILDING IN NIGERIA

The nation building project in Nigeria is strained by sporadic violent conflicts between herdsmen and farming communities. The conflict poses serious threats to human security and development. Given the strategic importance of the rural economy to agricultural development, the conflict is undermining food security and disrupting the livelihoods of millions of Nigerians. The much talked about agricultural revolution in the country cannot proceed on a sustainable path amidst rural violence arising from herder-farmer conflagrations. The lethality of the confrontations also speaks to the number of lives lost and properties destroyed. The country's active agricultural population is being decimated by the continuing bout of clashes. More so, the conflict is also exacerbating poverty amongst the most marginalized groups- women and children.

The conflict is reconfiguring intergroup relations in disturbing ways. For instance, the Fulani ethnicity is increasingly being criminalized and associated with violence. Media outlets are dominated with stories of Fulani herdsmen clutching dangerous weapons while herding cattle rather than the traditional long sticks. This has reinforced the jihadist theory employed in interpreting herder-farmer conflicts in Nigeria. The seeming failure on the part of security apparatuses to contain the crisis has led to alternative forms of security, such as the mobilization of local hunters and vigilantes. This development often leads to the lynching of herdsmen who are seen as security threats in farming communities. A further corollary of this development could be seen in the proliferation of small arms and light weapons which is also threatening national security and the continuous survival of the Nigerian State.

Herder-farmer conflicts have also induced population displacement across Nigeria thereby increasing the number of refugees. This has created serious problems for State governments where displacements occurred in terms of providing shelter for refugees and relief materials. It has also stalled development as funds are diverted to security expenditures at the expense of national development projects. The opportunity cost of the conflict is therefore huge. For example, the Benue State government reported that ninety-five billion Naira was spent on herder-farmer conflicts between 2012 and 2014 alone (International Crises Group, 2017).

#### V. CONCLUSION

The chapter highlighted the variables that have informed the changing patterns of herder- farmer engagements in Nigeria. It noted that though herders- farmers' conflict is an age long challenge, the pre-colonial and colonial patterns of the conflict are markedly different from the post-colonial pattern particularly as from the year 2000. A number of correlative factors have catalyzed the contemporary pattern namely; land scarcity arising from environmental pressure related to climate change and a growing competition for land resources. But these factors are reinforced by the conflicting indigene question birthed by colonialism and strengthened by the post-colonial power elites. This is why contemporary conflicts have been largely lethal and frequent. It is a considered view that the solutions to the challenge must be knitted in broad policy constructions that recognize 21<sup>st</sup> century geographical peculiarities, plural sentiments and phobia. It is in this context that the chapter recommends the establishment of ranches and the de-ethnicization of cattle rearing in Nigeria. Grazing routes are not only outdated but out of tune with contemporary geographical and indeed population dynamics. Therefore, the nation-building project in Nigeria must be framed based on broad mutual consensus, smart economic prism that benefit all and targeted at national development.

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