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# The Ethno-Religious Complications of Farmer-Herder Conflict in Contemporary Nigeria

## Abstract

This paper explores the ethno-religious complexities of the farmer-herder conflict in contemporary Nigeria, offering a detailed analysis of its evolution and implications. Through qualitative discourse based on an extensive literature review, as well as primary and secondary data, the study argues that this conflict, originally driven by competition over resources, has evolved into a deeply entrenched identity-based struggle. The transformation of this conflict is framed within the concept of elite manipulation theory and the theory of eco-violence, illustrating how the contestation has shifted from resource-related tensions to more complex, culturally and religiously charged disputes that are usually constructed, activated, mobilised, and manipulated in advancement of the interests of the political elite who resort to that as a means of engendering socio-political capital for the purpose of ensuring competitive political advantage. By tapping into long-standing ethnic and religious divides, the farmer-herder conflict has escalated into a form of ethno-communal crisis that has dramatically altered its scope and intensity. This paper further contends that the shift from economic motivations to identity-driven violence has significantly heightened the stakes, making the conflict a serious threat to Nigeria's national security. The examination highlights how these transformations have been opportunistically exploited by different actors, leading to wider regional instability, particularly in the North-Central region of the country. In conclusion, the study emphasises the need for a nuanced understanding of the conflict's ethno-religious dimensions, as well as the urgent need for targeted interventions to address both the immediate and long-term security challenges it poses.

**Keywords:** ethnicity, religion, farmer-herder conflict, culture, Nigeria, North-Central Nigeria.



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## Introduction

Nigeria is a large and diverse polity. It is characterised by immense heterogeneity in terms of ethno-cultural composition and complexion. Hosting a multiplicity of cultural, religious, linguistic and sectionalist formations (Ngare, 2012) and over 250 ethnic nationalities, Nigeria represents a typical instance of a poly-

ethnic and multi-ethnic society (Diamond, 1983; Barth, 1998; Ademoyega, 1962; Okoli and Iortyer, 2014). The ethnic groups that make up the country are not monolithic in themselves. In effect, each of the ethnic nationalities is also characterised by marked divergences in terms of religion, language, and other aspects of culture (Laitin, 1986; Okoli, 2003).

The ethnic and religious dimensions of ethnicity has remained a crucial aspect of national life in Nigeria. The country's peculiar socio-cultural mix makes it possible for people to define and differentiate themselves along ethno-religious lines. For instance, the Hausa-Fulani people of northern Nigeria are largely Muslims, and the people of southern Nigeria are predominantly Christians. The differences between these groups of people have the tendency to assume religious or ethnic characterisation. In this respect, the majority of inter-religious conflicts in Nigeria often develop into inter-ethnic conflicts, even where they started obviously as religious disagreement or resources-related issues. This has been the situation in most parts of northern Nigeria where ethnic conflict often switches into religious conflict, or vice versa. Cases in point include the perennial Jos crisis between the Hausa-Fulani and the ethnic Birom people of Plateau State (Ngare, 2012). The Jos crisis as referred to in the above citation constitutes the fulcrum of the inter-communal conflicts in the state since the 1990. The crisis situation has been episodic in occurrence with prominent instances being the 1994, 1998, 1998, 2004, and 2012 episodes. The context of these series of conflicts is the changing dynamics of power relations in the state (Egwu, 2004). The groups involved in the conflict are indigenous ethnic groups (Birom, Anaguta and Afizere) and settler ethnic groups (Hausa/Fulani). The indigenous peoples are largely Christians while the Hausa/Fulani are predominantly Muslims. This conflict, which was originally ethnic, has over time assumed ethno-religious dimensions, pitching the Christians against the Muslims. Most herders are adherents of Islam, while most farmers are Christians or native worshippers. The conflict between these two occupational groups has often turned into ethno-religious conflagrations in view of the ethno-cultural mix of the people. The contradictions have over the years given rise to internecine violence, leading to catastrophic humanitarian consequences and complications. This situation is not only peculiar to Nigeria but involves Global South countries involving Africa, Latin America, Asia, Oceania depicted as low income countries with underdeveloped economies, fraught with high incidences of various forms of violent conflict (Dados and Connell, 2012). These conflicts are often associated with contestations for ownership and control of resources (Kucera, *et al.*, 2011). Conflicts over resources are common where there is a high premium on available resources as the means of livelihood and survival (Adisa, 2012; Idowu, 2017; Okoli and

Atelhe, 2014). In West Africa, conflicts over resource use, especially natural resources, have remained on the increase and have been quite devastating. One critical dimension of such resource conflict is the farmer–herder conflict, which has been noted as a common feature of the livelihood crisis in West Africa (Tonah cited in Ofuoku and Isife, 2010, p.15).

Nigeria has continued to experience more than its fair share of natural resource conflicts, especially those involving farmers and herders, which often have grave implications for society. Chukwuma Okoli and Godwin Atelhe assert that, “this appears to be most prevalent and pervasive in the North-Central region of Nigeria, which has witnessed the worst occurrences of pastoralist/farmer violence as a result of livelihood struggles.” (Okoli and Atelhe, 2014, p. 76). In effect, of all the other forms of resource conflict in Nigeria in contemporary times, the farmer-herder conflict has remained one of the most prevalent, intractable and destructive (Blench, 2004).

The parties to the farmer-herder conflict are migrant cattle herders and settled-farmers. Hence, “the phrase ‘farmer – herder conflict’ refers to conflict between herding and farming groups.” (Turner, *et al.*, 2003, p. 2). This form of conflict that pitches farmers against herders has often been triggered by contestation over the use of the land-based natural resources for grazing or crop cultivation. Umeh and Chukwu (2016, p. 135) note that “among competing resources, however, use resources has remained an overwhelming source of conflicts among various land users, groups, as well as individuals at varying thresholds.” The conflict takes the form of violent clashes over the use and/or ownership of arable land, grazing fields/routes and fresh water, which remain vital to the achievement of livelihood aspirations of the parties. This scenario is common in densely settled rural landscapes where livelihoods, and food security is substantially tied to these resources (Fasona, *et al.*, 2016).

Clashes over the use of arable land resources have overtime manifested in enmity and conflict among the two groups, the herding and the farming communities, in many parts of Nigeria. (Umeh and Chukwu, 2016). In most instances, the conflicts have been induced or fueled by a scarcity of environmental resources (land and water) and escalated by feelings of marginalisation and outright deprivation by these resource-use communities (Idowu, 2017).

The contemporary trajectory of farmer-herder conflict in Nigeria indicates that the conflict is degenerating into a genre of ethno-communal or religious conflagrations, especially in the North-Central area of Nasarawa and Plateua states, which are characterised by immense ethnic diversity. In fact, this is second only to the North-East zone in terms of ethnic spread and diversity. Prominent ethnic nationalities that are found in the region are the Tiv, Idoma,

Igede, Birom, Katang, Hausa, Egbira, Yoruba, Igala, Eggon, Kambari, Alago, Migili, Mada, Fulani, Nupe, Gwari, and Gbagi (Gwari). In terms of cultural characteristics, the North-Central region is also equally diverse. It has a fair distribution of adherents of Islam, Christianity and traditional beliefs. It is also characterised by complex communal and linguistic divergences (Ngare, 2012). No fewer than fifty languages are spoken in the region. This tendency is evident in the apparent ethno-religious articulation and convolution of the conflict over the years, especially in North-Central Nigeria.

The main aim of the paper is to explore the nature, causes, dynamics, effects and implications of the farmer-herder conflict in the Plateau and Nasarawa states. This is against the backdrop of the rising incidence and prevalence of hostilities and tensions between herders and farmers in the region and Nigeria at large. What is the nature and character of this conflict's transformation? What underpins its incidence and saliency? What are the effects and implications of this conflict? The remainder of the paper is thematically structured as follows: situating farmer-herder conflict in a theoretical context: nature, causes and dynamics; the ethno-religious fault-lines/dimension of the farmer-herder conflict in Nigeria; and conclusions.

### **The Farmer-Herder Conflict in Theoretical Context: Nature, Causes and Dynamics**

Scholarly literature on the subject abounds, much pointing to climate change as the major driver and complication of the conflict (Blench, 2004; Sayne, 2011; Ofouku and Isife, 2010; Hanson, 2013; Okoli and Atelhe, 2014; Olaniyan and Uzodike, 2015; *The Global Hunger Index*, 2016; *The Global Food Security Index*, 2015). This perspective explores the impacts climate change, such as desertification in the north, drought, massive soil erosion and drying up of water bodies, and how these outcomes have engendered large scale migration of herders to regions hitherto dominated by settled farmers, thereby engendering hostilities. Sayne captures it succinctly when he asserted that "Nigeria's climate is likely to see growing shifts in temperature, rainfall, storms, and sea levels throughout the 21<sup>st</sup> century." He adds that "poor adaptive responses to these shifts could help fuel violent conflict in some areas of the country" (Sayne, 2011, p. 1).

Research on the impact of climate change in Nigeria as reported by Sayne (2011) indicates that a combination of rising temperatures and lower rainfall has raised the specter of widespread desertification, especially in northern Nigeria. It is thus estimated two thirds of Bauchi, Borno, Gombe, Jigawa, Kano, Kaduna, Kastina, Kebbi, Sokoto, Yobe and Zamfara states could turn

into desert or semi-desert in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Sayne, 2011, p. 4). This has led to the migration of grazers away from the areas affected by climate change in the far north towards southern regions (Olaniyan and Uzodike, 2015). Again, since the Sahelian drought of the 1970s and 1980s and the accompanying migration of a huge number of pastoralists into the fringes of the humid forest zone of West Africa, there has been a massive increase in incidences of farmer-herder conflict (Ofuoku and Isife, 2010). This in turn has led to depletion in the productive capacity of both groups and huge shortages in food availability in the country. A plethora of scholarly views exist on the nature and causes of this conflict. Anecdotal evidence suggest that the clashes arise when the Fulani herdsmen wander into the fields during cropping or growing season and their herds eat or trample the crops (Adebayo and Olanyi, 2008). Conflicts between farmers and herders occur because, “universally, the pastoralists depend on moisture and vegetation in the right place, time, quantity and quality” [...] “It is generally known that there are competing uses of resources between pastoral and crop farmers this then leads to conflict” (Adebayo and Olanyi 2008, p. 71). De Haan’s work as cited in Adisa (2012, p. 101) claims that the conflicts result from the “destruction of crops by cattle and other property (irrigation and infrastructure) by the pastoralists themselves are the main causes for conflicts cited by farmers, whereas burning of rangelands and *fadama* and blockage of stock route and water points by crop encroachment are important direct reasons cited by the pastoralists.” This conflict as a social phenomenon takes place when there are incompatible group interests. Audu (2013) prefers to trace the cause of these conflicts to competition for access to water and grazing land between farmers and pastoralists. Others see these conflicts resulting out of the overlap of farmlands with cattle routes, even as farmers take over such routes for growing of crops (Muhammed, Ismaila and Bibi, 2015).

Others trace the causes of these conflicts to factors other than the direct migration of cattle herders’ from the desert north to the more fertile southern axis. One such account points to the introduction of irrigation farming in the savannah belt of the country, which was meant to boost food security for the growing population. According to this narrative, this led to increased farming activities, which limited access to a vast area of land initially used by the herdsmen, thereby resulting to conflicts (Musa, Shabu and Igbawua, 2014). Other scholars claim that the conflict between farmers and herders cannot be divorced from the introduction of improved veterinary medicines, such as *Trypanocides*, which has led to the successful control of diseases that affect herds, prompting larger herds and inducing migration of herds out of their traditional ecological zones southwards in search of ‘greener’ pastures (Blench, 2004).

There exist abundant cases of farmer-herder conflict within the North-Central region of Nigeria that are basically endemic, perennial and intractable, and have threatened the agricultural fortunes of the region (Okoli and Atelhe, 2014). Adogi noticed that, since the 1990s especially, these conflicts have touched many rural areas of the region where the dwellers are predominately small-scale farmers (Adogi, 2013). He also points to climate change induced migration of herdsmen from the northern part of the country to the middle belt region of the country in search of greener pastures for their herds. This brings the migrant population into direct conflict with the root and tuber farmers of the region (Adogi, 2013).

Theoretical inquiry into the nature and causes of the farmer-herder conflict in Nigeria has disproportionately implicated the issue of climate change. This does not provide a full account of the conflict. Okoli and Ayokhai (2015) associate the increasing spate of farmer-herder conflicts to the migration of herdsmen from the humid and semi humid zones of the north in search of greener pastures southward. However, their position does not clearly show the direct triggers of such devastating conflict and clashes between these two land-resources users. Adekunle and Adisa (2010) provides a reason for the eruption of conflict between farmers and herdsmen when they claim that the movement of the herdsmen into farmlands during the growing season, which leads to destruction of farm plants, leads to tensions between farmers and herdsmen, resulting in clashes. Implicit in this position is the fact that the farmer-herder conflict is a necessary dimension of climate change.

Audu (2013) asserts that the major cause of the conflicts between farmers and herdsmen in Nigeria is climate change-induced fresh-water scarcity, which dovetails into competition for access to this diminishing natural resource. He points to visible signs that show the intensification of water scarcity, which includes hitherto flowing rivers drying up, diminishing rainfall, shrinking arable land for farmers and fewer pastures for pastoralists. All of these constitute critical indicators of climatic variability and volatility in the era of climate change. From the standpoint of the climate-demography nexus, Blench (2004) provided a more causal relationship between demographic changes and the farmer herder conflict when he notes that the cause of the continued conflict lies in the increase in population within the affected areas owing chiefly to the migration of large number of cattle herdsmen from the drying savannah region of the country to the grassland areas of the middle belt. For him, this trend is buoyed by the introduction of cheap *Trypanocides* and other veterinary drugs, leading to the migration of pastoralists from the drying north towards the greener south and thereby leading to huge competition over the use and ownership of land resources.

A different strand to the nature and dynamics of the conflicts between farmers and herders was provided by Musa, Shabu and Igbawua (2014) and Ofuoku and Isife (2010) who argued that the farmer-herder conflict results principally from the introduction of irrigation farming in the savannah belt of Nigeria in order to boost food production. Their claim remains cogent but can only be better placed when seen as a direct impact of the climatic changes in the country within the first few decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The climate change theory of farmer-herder conflict is a clear manifestation of the impact of climate change in the affected areas and has been a subject of scholarly polemics. The theory is predicated on the assumption that the farmer-herder conflict is a direct result of the vicissitudes and adversities of climate change, as evident in increased desertification, drought, and the like. This position is plausible. Yet it fails to account of other important critical political, demographical, structural, socio-ecological and socio-economic factors that have shaped conflict dynamics. Such factors include governance and identity questions.

Beyond climate change as the major cause of the farmer-herder conflict, Coser (2000) as seen in Kucera *et al.* (2011) and Idowu (2017), posit that the main cause of the incessant farmer-herder conflict is failure to harness scarce resources and the inadequate management of these resources, chief amongst which is land. This viewpoint is closely linked to the position espoused by the United Nations Institute for Peace Report (2007) and corroborated by Adebayo and Olaniyi (2008), which holds that unmoderated competition over natural resources leads to intensified and sustained violent conflicts between natural resource users like farmers and herders in Nigeria.

Another contrary view to the climate change position was provided by the 2012 Natural Resources and Conflict Management report of the Economic Commission for Africa, which argues that population increase remains the major reason for the increased spate of natural resource-based conflicts in Africa, including farmer-herder conflicts (*Economic Commission for Africa*, 2012). In this regard, Fosona and Omojola (2003) quoted in Umeh and Chukwu (2016), claim that the conflict between farmers and herders was as a result of rising population in the affected areas. This position remains tenable but it has not fully answered the crucial question of what have given rise to this.

In their seminal work, Muhammed, Ismaila, and Bibi (2015) argue that the farmer-herder conflict arises out of the apparent failure to ensure the proper demarcation of grazing lands and areas, a situation according to them that has given rise to these conflicts. They stress that available lands are diminishing at an alarming rate and livestock pathways are blocked through land use,

urbanisation and frontiers. They also blame an increasing spate of overlap of farmlands with cattle routes as a major cause of the conflicts between farmers and herders.

From the standpoint of Zamfara state, Farouk (2015) provides a different perspective and standpoint to the understanding of the origin and causes, arguing that the conflicts between farmers and herders result from the erosion of customary property rights as a result of the state's incapacity to administer nationalised pastures efficiently. His position reinforces our earlier mention of governance failure. The various viewpoints expressed above on the origins and causes of the farmer-herder conflict seem to revolve around the impacts of climate change resulting in mass migration of people and herders in particular to the fertile grassland savannah region.

In respect of Nasarawa State in North-Central Nigeria, Okoli and Atelhe (2014) posit that the conflict between farmers and herders there is caused by the continued pattern of migration by herdsmen from the drying north to the grassland area of the middle belt, which cannot be unconnected with climate change. Sylvester Ayih (2003) notes that the conflict between farmers and herders in Nasarawa State is a result of the recent upsurge in the population of the state in what he terms a population explosion, arising principally from high birth rate and immigration. According to Ayih, "people tend to move from Northern and Southern Nigeria into the Middle Belt region where population is relatively low and where there is availability of vast arable land. The consequent rapid growth in population has caused the farmers to struggle for farmland which is becoming scarce by the day. With this development, grazing areas that were hitherto abundant are being taken over by scattered small farms, making grazing in these areas difficult." (Ayih, 2003, pp. 10–15).

The above affirms the position of Adogi (2013), who suggests migration of herders from the desert-encroached northern part of the country to the middle belt area of the country is the main reason for the increased spate of farmer and herder conflict in Nasarawa State.

## **Methodology**

The study is a qualitative and exploratory research. It adopts a synthesis of primary and secondary research, enabled by a combination of key informant interviews (KII) /focus group discussions (FGDS) and library sources. The creative application of primary and secondary data in this context makes for methodological hybridisation, which ensures that the limitations of both data sources are moderated in such a manner that enhances research validity and reliability (Singleton and Straits, 1998; Flick, 2009).

In presenting the analysis proper, the study adopts a qualitative descriptive approach based on thematic consideration of the salient issues. The KII was in the form of semi-structured interviews whereby the views of selected respondents on the causes, nature, character, dimensions of ethnicity, and triggers of ethno-communal as well as farmer-herder conflict and its impact were solicited based on both scheduled and 'chance' contacts. The FGDS were conducted in series of rounds. These took the form of group conversations whereby the researcher interfaced with a selected number of groups deemed to be knowledgeable on the various aspects of the study.

Field interviews and discussions targeted selected individuals and groups drawn from the population under investigation based on purposive and non-probabilistic sampling. Field research activities were systematically guided so as to ensure that the sampled population was reflective and representative of the socio-demographical characteristics of the focal areas where the crises occurred in North-Central Nigeria. This period encompasses the era of the current democratic dispensation in Nigeria, which many analysts have characterised as being marred by ethno-communal conflict, particularly in North-Central Nigeria. Field investigations were conducted with the aid of *ad hoc* research assistants recruited and trained for that purpose. Proceedings of the field interviews (oral) and discussions were recorded by means of audio recorder and transcribed verbatim. Interviews and group discussions focused on sundry themes, namely: origins, nature, patterns, trends, dynamics, drivers, triggers, and impact of communal conflict in the focal areas.

The FGDs were held only in the capitals of Nasarawa State. Two rounds of FGDs were held, with each comprising a total of 25 persons capturing both male and female adults and male and female youths. In all, a total of 50 persons were resorted to for FGDS. The rest of the respondents, numbering 20, were interviewed through the KII technique. Hence, the actual sampled population for the field research amounted to 90. The sampled population for the study was purposively chosen from relevant community, public/government, and civil society stakeholders tentatively in the ratio of 5:3:2.

Data generated in the course of the field research and secondary data were qualitatively harnessed and weaved into synthesis. The thrust of analysis was schematically laid out under select themes and sub-themes carefully designed to answer the basic research question in fulfillment of the research objectives (Rossman and Rallis, 1998). Conclusions were reached at the end of the analysis in the light of the assumptions of study.

## **Theoretical Framework: Eco-Violence and Elite Manipulation Theory**

This paper is anchored on elite manipulation theory and the theory of eco-violence. Eco-violence theory as an emerging perspective seeks to explain the nexus between environmental factors and violent conflicts in society. The theory was developed by Homer-Dixon (1999). Homer-Dixon posits that scarcity of resources such as water, arable land, and forests in combination with other social factors can lead to violence as groups struggle or compete for available limited resources. The people who are affected could be forced to migrate to newer land, which could trigger ethnic conflict as they move to newer places, regions or areas and lead to “decreases in wealth [that] can cause deprivation conflict (Homer-Dixon, 1999, p. 30).

Linked to this paper, the theory throws more light on the nature and dynamics of the herder-farmer conflict in Nigeria and Nasarawa and Plateau states in particular where the conflict is also linked to the need for survival and the desperation of the people concerned to protect their means of livelihood in the face ecological challenges characterised by scarcity of resources, population increase and livelihood dilemma. This paper links eco-violence theory with key tenets formulated with contemporary elite theorists (Putnam 1976). It highlights the importance of ethnic identities in local politics, the vulnerability of those identities to political manipulation by the key political actors; and it stresses the dialectics of elite politicking in a pluralistic society. In fact, it endorses the view that ethnic politics and accompanying communal conflicts are to a large extent products of elite competition in a pluralistic societal context (cf. O’Brien, 1993). Even more, elite manipulation theory is concerned with the abusive influence of political elites in the context of high-stake inter-group political relations (Putnam, 1976). According to Etzioni-Haley (1989, p. 215), it looks at “the manner in which power is used, and frequently abused” by the ruling elites often in advancement of vested interests that are primordial. The theory thus explains ethno-religious conflicts as elite-driven clashes and contestations (*Journal of Nationalism Studies*, 2008). Being elite-driven, ethnic and religious conflicts result from political manipulation of subjective ethnic consciousness in a manner that passes for politicisation of ethnicity and religion (Putman, 1976). The process of ethnic manipulation reflects the dialectics of subjective political mobilisation in primordial polities where ethno-communal ties and cleavages play a crucial role in conditioning the political processes and determining political outcomes (Nnoli, 1978).

The point being underscored here is that ethnicity lacks innate political saliency. It is usually constructed, activated, mobilised, and manipulated in advancement of the interests of the political elite, who resort to it as a means

of engendering socio-political capital for the purpose of ensuring competitive political advantage. It is this politicisation of ethnicity and religion that accounts for its saliency in the context of inter-group political relations.

Elite manipulation based on ethnicity and religion is a fundamental challenge to peace and stability in most African countries with ethnic pluralism. In respect to Nigeria, “this acquires more significance because of shrinking ecological space and the struggle for access to a variety of limited resources which could include grassland, water spots for animal, rival claims to land” (Tenuche, 2002, p. 3).

### **Summary of the findings on the Ethno-Religious fault-lines of Farmer-Herder Conflict in Nigeria**

The data showed that Nigeria is a typical instance of a hyper-plural country with a high degree of heterogeneity in terms of ethnic diversity and mix broadly polarised in a manner that precipitates sectionalism and primordialism. This is evident in the country’s immense ethnic and religious diversity. Nigeria is one of the most ethnically diverse countries globally, with estimates of 250 to over 300 distinct ethnic groups (*Central Intelligence Agency, 2022; Pew Research Center, 2023*). This range reflects differences in classification criteria (e.g., language, cultural practices, or self-identification). This is in addition to the existence of a variety of religions, ranging from Christianity to Islam, including traditionalists (Nlewem, 2016).

This peculiar aspect of Nigeria’s national heritage accounts for its socio-cultural richness and dynamism. Nonetheless, it has also provided pretexts for ethnic and religious crisis, especially when struggles for power or resources exploit existing identity fault-lines (Okoli and Ayokhai, 2015). “Fault-lines are hypothetical dividing lines between group members based on various social attributes (familial, communal, ethnic, religious, etc.) that can potentially split the overall group into sub-groups” (Tian, Tuttle and Xu, 2016, cited in Okoli and Nnabuihe, 2019, pp. 123–138). When contestations that are innately political or economic hit the fault-lines of social identity, such as religion and ethnicity, complex communal conflict becomes inevitable.

As this paper is inclined to argue, farmer-herder conflicts are not necessarily identity-based but are not innately ethno-religious as most extant literature in Nigeria would tend to suggest. Essentially, the conflicts result from ecological or economic struggles (resource-based conflict) with identity factors serving as the catalysts. The conflict gets rather complicated and politicised when it plays into the hands of power-seeking politicians who capitalise on the prevailing identity-based differences and prejudices to foment crisis in service of their partisan interests.

Following the hypothetical ethno-religious fault-lines, the farmer-herder conflict in Nigeria has over the years assumed dimensions of either religious or ethnic violence. The two livelihood categories that are involved in the conflict, namely the farmers and the herders, incidentally, can be nominally categorised as members of one ethnic or religious stock. For instance, most of the nomadic herders in northern Nigeria are members of the Fulani ethnic group. Their local adversaries in that context are mostly members of diverse native communities that are not Fulani (Abbass, 2012). Expectedly, the conflict between these categories often assumes an ethnic dimension as parties import ethno-communal narratives into the conflict situation. This has been the case with the internecine Fullani-Habes (Hausa) conflicts in Zamfara and Kebbi State in the far North West Nigeria (Rufa'i, 2018). *Local Participant No.1* explains how the conflict began:

We had less land for farming, which is how the conflict began. We had very little crops, and the herders brought their cattle, and we had no way to keep them safe. These crops are essential to our family's diet and to our market sales. Not only is food lost, but our means of subsistence is also lost (*Local Participant No.1*).

More apparently, the farmer-herder conflict in Nigeria has been associated with religious violence in keeping with its opportunistic manifestations. The nomadic herders have corollary identity as Muslims. In effect, most of the migrant herders in northern Nigeria are non-Christians by faith, while a substantial percentage of the settled crop farmers are Christians. The ecological confrontation between these two communities has often taken a religious dimension as parties are inclined towards mobilising along such primordial lines. This tendency has brought about orgies of violence in states like Plateau, Taraba, Nasarawa, Kaduna, and Benue, all in the North Central Nigeria (Okoli, 2016). This participant explains the conflict as a lack of government intervention on policies to resolve these issues. *Local Participant No. 5* says that:

The government is failing both sides. There are no clear lines separating where we can farm and where they can pasture their cattle. Without proper policies or intervention, we are forced to fight for survival, which has turned neighbours into enemies (*Local Participant No. 5*).

Available anecdotal and empirical evidence reveal that the incidence of the farmer-herder conflict in northern Nigeria has been most pronounced in states that have a combination of Christian and Muslim native populations. In these states, violence by herdsmen has been more or less focused selectively on communities that are not Muslim. This has been evident in the hinterlands

of Kaduna, Plateau and Nasarawa States, where Christian communities have often been selectively attacked by Fulani herdsmen in reprisal of a perceived 'Christian confrontation' orchestrated by the native farmers. In most of these attacks, Muslims have been discreetly spared. This has given rise to the popular local narrative in the North Central Nigeria that the recrudescence of Fulani nomadic herdsmen's militancy against the settled communities in the area represents a neo-jihadist grand-design by the Fulani Islamic Establishment to further forced Islamisation of the wider northern Nigeria (Okoli, 2016).

The ethno-religious nature of the farmer-herder conflict has been one of the major drivers of crisis and instability in North-Central Nigeria. It has accounted for the seeming intractability of communal conflict in the area. It has also led to dire complications that negate sustainable human security and rural stability in that context. The prevalence of this pattern of conflict has further more brought about volatile inter-group relations among communal groups in the region, thereby threatening the unity and corporate existence of the country.

### **Conclusion and Recommendation**

The phenomenon of the farmer-herder conflict has been a major national security threat in Nigeria. From a rudimentary stage of localised skirmishes between farming and herding communities, the crisis has gravitated towards militancy, involving a great deal of arms bearing and criminal impunity.

Thus, from this study, the articulation of ethnic and religious factors into the crisis has complicated the scenario, making it seemingly intractable. So, rather than being resource-based contestations between two livelihood communities, the crisis has assumed an identity-based essence and characterisation in its apparent dynamics of degeneration.

To mitigate the perennial incidents of herders-farmer conflict in Nigerian in general, the federal government in liaison with the various state governments should create grazing reserves for pastoralists. Existing but moribund grazing reserves should be re-activated and modernised. In addition, there is a need to map out grazing routes leading to the reserves in such a manner that would forestall the incessant encroachment of herders on crop farms.

Finally, there is a need for the revision of the Land Use Act in Nigeria: The current Land Use Act reserves propriety rights over land for both state and individual citizens. Land issues therefore double as both civil and customary matter. The lacuna in this creates pretexts for crisis of land tenure and land holding in Nigeria; hence the need for its review.

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