



Reconstructing the origin and the main drivers of conflict between Tiv farmers and Fulani herders in Benue state, Nigeria

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Abstract

As a multi-ethnic society, Nigeria has been battling with various intergroup conflicts since independence. These ranges from religious conflicts to ethnic and resource-based conflicts. One of the most prevalent inter-group contestations is farmer-herder conflict. Virtually all states in the country are suffering from this long-standing insecurity. However, Benue state is more affected in terms of frequency and gravity. Despite the attention the conflict has received from government, researchers, international and community-based organisations, there seems to be no end in sight. Understanding the origin and drivers of the conflict therefore is very critical to finding lasting solutions that are conflict sensitive, community oriented and context specific. Data were sourced from interviews and secondary sources, and were historically analysed in order to understand the relationship between past events and contemporary issues in the farmer-herder conflict. Findings shows that, the presence of Fulani herders in the Benue Valley can be traced to 100 years back; and their relationship with host communities was cordial up until the late 20th century when the country's population began to increase astronomically, leading to fierce competition over scarce land and water resources. Data also revealed that there are many drivers of the conflict such as drought and desertification, loss of grazing lands, new livestock and farming practices, rural banditry and cattle rustling, escalating conflict across northern Nigeria, and collapsed of traditional mechanism for conflict resolution. Ranching and afforestation in Northern Nigeria are some of the recommendations made in the paper.

Keywords: Benue State, Conflict, Drivers, Farmer-Herder, Fulani.

1. Introduction

Conflict is an inevitable phenomenon that is part of human civilization (O'Reilly, 2023). It is good when properly managed because its present opportunities for dialogue, cooperation, and more peaceful co-existence. It is however bad when mismanaged which can lead to violence and even outright war (Alimba, 2018). Nigeria has experienced and still experiencing its fair share of violence and war as a result of mismanaged conflicts. The farmer-herder conflict is one of the most violent conflicts in the country today. It is a national menace

that is predominantly active in Benue State due to its strategic climatic position and good agricultural features (Madu & Nwankwo, 2020). The relationship between majority Tiv farmers and Fulani herders in the state has been antagonistic in modern history. There are constant suspicious and violent attacks that have led to so many deaths and destruction of property. In a recent study, Akpabio (2023) observed that the intensity of the conflict, and animosity between these two groups have led to a situation where there are no Fulani herdsman in Agatu area of the state again.



A place they once called home. Benue state was created on 3 February 1976 by General Murtala Muhammed. The state has 23 local government areas (LGAs). To the North, it is bordered by Nasarawa state, to the East Taraba state, to the South Ebonyi and Cross River states, and to the West Kogi state. It is named after its main natural resource, the river Benue (Adamu & Ben, 2017).

The social problems associated with this perennial conflict in Benue state cannot be overemphasized. The immediate effects on human security have been the destruction of crops, farms and properties, cattle rustling, loss of livelihoods, killings, and general violence (Yikwabs et al, 2020). Vanguard Newspaper of February 5th 2017 reported the former governor, Samuel Ortom to have said that more than 1,878 people were killed from 2014-2016 as a result of the conflict. On socio-economic front, the conflict has affected a lot of economic activities in the state. Daodu & Igbekoyi (2020) observed that over 5,000 people have been displaced in Benue state as a result of the conflict. These Internally Displaced persons (IDPs) are scattered in many IDP camps and host communities straining the already scarce resources and social amenities in those locations. Both farmers and herders are constantly afraid of moving into the hinterland for farming and herding, thereby causing shortage in supply of agricultural products and livestock, leading to food insecurity (Sarah et al, 2023). There is, therefore the need for more research into this social problem with a view to finding lasting solution.

Scholars have highlighted various economic, social, political and environmental factors responsible for this conflict. One of the major articles of discourse in this regard is the climate-cause factor. Tyav et al (2020) have attributed climatic problems such as soil erosion and draught as some of the major push factors of farmer-herder conflict. They further argue that climate change is a natural problem but, there are man-made factors

responsible for the conflict such as destruction of crops, rural banditry, and cattle rustling. Other causes include indigene-settler dichotomy, assault and rape against women by both farmers and herders, incessant bush burning, contamination and poisoning of water bodies by both farmers and herders, drought and desertification, loss of grazing lands, new livestock and farming practices, rural banditry and cattle rustling, escalating conflict across northern Nigeria, and collapsed of traditional mechanism for conflict resolution International Crisis Group Report (2017) Obi (2023); Tsuwa & Odigbo (2019); Yikwabs et al (2020); Daodu & Igbekoyi (2020); Emem (2023).

The farmer-herder conflict in Benue state has, not doubt, received a lot of attention in academic and policy literature. However, not much has been written on the origin of the conflict. This study therefore contributes to this knowledge gap by revisiting the historical context and drivers of the conflict in Benue state, Nigeria. This study is also significant because, managing or resolving this protracted farmer-herder debacle requires a holistic conflict analysis that takes into cognizance the history, the actors, the needs, and interests that make up the profile of the conflict. A deep knowledge of the underlying and precipitating factors of the conflict is also very relevant to resolving the conflict. To this end, two research questions were raised: what is the historical context of the farmer-herder conflict in Benue States, Nigeria? and what are the drivers of the conflict? Following the introduction, the paper is organized into the following sections: review of literature, theoretical framework, methodology, discussion of findings, conclusion and recommendations.

2. Review of Literature

The origin of the Tiv identity group has been traced to the late 18th and 19th centuries when they migrated from the Congo (Zaire) into the Benue Valley (Tyav et al, 2020). As



it is with classical civilisations, people always move from one place to another in search of food, physical safety, and other socio-cultural factors. The Tiv people migrated because of intermarriages, conflict, famine, increase in population and a host of others. Because of this historical attachment to Congo, the Tiv people are generally seen to be from the Bantu identity group. Idyorough (2015) summarizes the origin of the Tiv people thus:

The Tiv are classified by anthropologies and linguist as a semi-Bantu ethnic group. They presently inhabit Benue, Nasarawa, Taraba, Plateau and Cross River States. They are mostly found on both sides of the River Benue about 240 kilometers up the confluence of River Niger and Benue in Nigeria. This area is known as the Benue Valley... the area situated between the high plateau and Cameroon Mountains. Tiv are largely peasants and produce yams, millet, sorghum, cassava, maize, etc. in addition to farming; pottery and brewing beer. These were the preoccupation of Tiv women. Prior to colonialism, the Tiv economy was subsistence economy supported by their farming activities.

The herders, predominantly from the Fulani ethnic group, also known as Fula, Fulbe, or Peul are a group of homogeneous people known widely by their nomadic lifestyle (Eyekpimi, 2016). The concept, Fulani herders is used to describe their identity with their occupation- cattle rearing. This is because of the cultural and religious significance attached to their nomadic lifestyle. According to Omilusi (2016), the origin of the Fulani people is shrouded in mystery as regards different opinions. He argues that, though many scholars see the

Fulani as people of Judaeo-Syrian origin, “it is generally recognised that Fulani descended from both North Africa and from Sub-Sahara Africa” (p. 51). The Fulani are predominantly pastoralists. Few of them are both semi nomads and semi-sedentary in nature. Because of the need for fresh water and grass for their livestock, they engage in what Iheanacho (2017) refers to as random and planned transhumance movements. The full-time nomads engage in random movements while the semi-nomads engage in planned movements. As a result of these movements, Fulani herders migrated into the Savannah and tropical forest of West Africa (Issifu et al, 2022). They are spread across twenty nations in Africa with an estimated population to be around 7-8 million while the settled Fulani is around 16 million (Amzat et al, 2006, cited in Omilusi, 2016). Iheanacho (2017) stated that, “the herders are found in countries such as Nigeria, Niger, Senegal, Guinea, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Benin, Cote d’Ivoire, and Cameroon.”

In Nigeria, the Fulani herders are largely found in Northern part of the country, but are spread across the Middle Belt and Southern regions in search of pasture and fresh water for their livestock. McGregor (2017) contend that, this migratory lifestyle has brought them into contact with natives, developing a symbiotic relationship where farmlands are fertilise by cattle in exchange for vegetative debris left over after crop harvest. However, these relationships were not without occasional conflict. Abati (2016) observed that their movement in Nigeria is in two folds: during dry season they move into the South, while at the onset of the rainy season, they move back to the North. Omilusi (2016) is of the opinion that the war-like nature of the Fulani can be attributed to their conversion into Islam through Jihads (holy wars). In fulfilling the Jihadist mandate, they became foot soldiers in the spread of Islam in West Africa, and successfully established themselves as both religious, political and economic force. In



Nigeria, this opinion can be corroborated with the Usman Dan Fodio Jihad that conquered aboriginal Hausa people of northern Nigeria and moved into the South establishing the Ilorin Emirate from which Islam was to spread into the Niger (Audu, 2014). Reaffirming this view, Idowu (2017) concluded that, it is this nature of migration, settlement, and conquering host communities of the Fulani herdsmen that have placed them at loggerheads with indigenous people all over Nigeria, and off course, Benue State particularly. He further asserts that Islam is widely and perhaps the only religion of the Fulani people. The urban and settled ones are the strictest adherent of the faith, while the pastoral Fulani are shallow in practice and sometimes are not even Muslims.

Jibo (1994) is of the opinion that a male child from Benue State is primordially prone to violence. To him, it is a natural tendency that drives a male Tiv to stop his neighbor from succeeding. This perspective can be seen as reductionist at best. It is the nature of every human to be conflictual when interests or needs are at stake. So, a male Tiv will not just wake up and start fighting his neighbor without any causal factor. Vanger & Nwosu (2020) views the farmer-herder conflict from the prism of indigene-settler dichotomy. They argue that, there is a general discrimination against people living in places other than their state of birth or where their ancestral origin cannot be traced to. To Them, this is a major cause of farmer-herder conflict. This view has earlier been mentioned by Okoli and Atelhe (2014) when they opined that the indigene-settler question has been politicised. In the same reasoning, the politicisation of the conflict along primordial sentiments of religion and ethnicity has been acknowledged by Nchi (2013). To Nchi, a mere misunderstanding between a Christian farmer and a Muslim herder can escalate into a sectarian crisis. This can also be attributed to the nature of identity politics in contemporary Nigerian

political system. In this regard, Danjibo (2014) stated that “the political elite use ethnicity mainly as an instrument of electoral victories” (p. 78). By this, Danjibo is saying that politicians are using ethnicity as an instrument of political mobilization to weep up sentiments along primordial differences of religion, language, ideology, colour, belief system etc, for personal gains. With these arguments, one can see the import of the ethnic dimension of the conflict and how it can be used in explaining the root and trigger causes of the farmer-herder conflict in Benue State.

Similarly, Audu (2014) opined that there is a primordial sentiment attached to the cattle by Fulani herdsmen. To the Fulani man, the cattle is relevant not just as wealthy possession “...but are also social, cultural, and spiritual assets that define social identity” (p: 5). What this means is that, the entire essence of living, for the Fulani man, is tight to ownership, increase, and wellbeing of his cattle. Abbas (2011) quoted a Fulani herder thus:

our herd is our life because to every nomad life is worthless without his cattle. What do you expect from us when our source of existence is threatened? The encroachment of grazing fields and routes by farmers is a call to war

Furthermore, Adamu and Ben (2017) agreed that the causes of the conflict are a combination of ethnic, socio-economic, environmental and political factors, to indigene-settler ideology. They argue however that, limiting these factors as the causes of the conflict is first, “a politically-correct perspective of the Benue conflict. Secondly, they represent the elite expert-consultant oriented opinions that sometimes marginalise and exclude the voice of the ordinary victim of the conflict” (p. 19). To these scholars therefore, the conflict is not unconnected to the Islamic Jihad. They hold the view that herdsmen have played important role in Islamic expansion in



Africa. The conflict is ideologically motivated based on the prism that “*komai na Allah ne. kowa ne fili na Allah ne, ba naku ba. Ba na kafirai ba, na Allah ne* (Translation: Everything belongs to Allah. Every piece of land belongs to Allah and not you; it is not for you infidels but for Allah). With this mentality, the herdsmen have found justification for terror, particularly in Benue State, from religion. The tactic is to conduct jihad by terrorizing communities leading to displacement while they occupy their lands and spread Islam (Adamu & Ben, 2017). This view can be said to be plausible considering the historical spread of Islam through Jihad (Holy War) from the Middle East to Africa (the Maghreb particularly) and to Nigeria through the Usman Dan Fodio Jihad of 1804 (Audu, 2014). However, this view is unconventional in mainstream media and academia, perhaps due to its sensitive nature, or the urge to appear politically correct in a country too sensitive to primordial differences.

Theoretical Framework

The adopted theory for explaining this study is Human Needs Theory (HNT), which is based on the proposition that conflict arises when basic human needs are unmet. This theory can be traced to the 1973 classic work of Paul Sites, *The Basis of Social Order*. However, in literature today, HNT resonates with one name, John Burton because he “...he gave it its most impassioned and uncompromising expression” (Richard, ND). To Sites (1973, cited in Richard) human needs are categorized into eight which included consistency of response, stimulation, security, recognition, justice, meaning, rationality, and control. Meeting those needs therefore, to Sites, is the basis of social order.

One of the most notable works on HNT is the Pyramid of Human Needs by Abraham Maslow (Danielsen, 2005). Maslow divide human needs into five hierarchical orders. First, physiological needs which is made up

of basic life needs- air, food, drink, shelter, warmth, sex, sleep etc. The second is safety needs which includes security, protection, order, law, limits, stability etc. At the third pyramid is ‘belongingness and love need as it relates to family, affection, relationships, work group etc. The fourth level is self-esteem- the need for achievement, status, responsibility, and reputation. At the peak of the pyramid is self-actualisation which entails personal growth and fulfilment (Kaur, 2013). To Maslow, the pursuit of these needs starts with the most basic at the bottom of the pyramid up to the top. The achievement of one lead to the pursuit of another based on the hierarchy. A man looking for food or shelter will not be bothered with belongingness, love or self-esteem, let alone self-actualisation. Conflict or violence becomes inevitable when even the most basic human needs of food, water and shelter are threatened or not met (Danielsen, 2005).

As an international mediator, Marshall Rosenberg developed the Non-violent Communication (NVC) tool as a strategy for recognizing other peoples’ needs and ‘our’ in order to resolve conflict. Marshall identifies some universal human needs as physical nurturance, interdependency, integrity, autonomy, play, celebration, mourning, and spiritual communion (Danielsen, 2005). As an economist, Manfred Max Neef outlined nine universal needs based on Human Scale Development. These needs include subsistence, protection, affection, understanding, creation, identity, leisure or idleness, freedom and participation.

The nexus between this theory and the conflict under study is that, there is an existential threat to both farmers and herdsmen as a result of the inability to meet their most basic needs - food, water, land, and shelter which are physiological. There are two contrasting theses to this argument. One is that, commercial farming and high increase in population has made it necessary and possible for virgin lands and



water ways that were hitherto used as grazing routes by herders to be overtaken by farmers. This meant scarcity of pasture and water for ruminant cattle, thereby threatening the nomadic lifestyle and business of herders. The second argument is that; Benue state is an agrarian society with majority making a living out of subsistence farming. The persistent destruction of farmlands and crops by cattle as they roam about grazing, is threatening the survival of these peasant rural dwellers who depends solely on their farm produce from each harvest year. The import of this is that – if a farmer’s farm is destroyed by cattle, that farmer has nothing to harvest for that year and can live in hunger for a long time because he/she must wait for another year to cultivate and plant. It is these interconnected cases that results to conflict and violence as both farmers and herders have resulted to self-help in order to protect their basic needs.

3. Methodology

The paper employed qualitative research design and made use of both primary and secondary data. The study was set in Benue State, Nigeria, and three Local government Areas (LGAs) were selected as study area. They include Guma representing Zone A, Logo representing Zone B, and Agatu representing Zone C respectively. According to the 2006 national census, the population of Benue state is 5,181,642. According to the same census, found in the Benue state website, the three Local Government Areas (LGAs) under study have the following populations: Guma has a population of 191,599. Logo has a population of 169,063. While Agatu has a population of 80,000. The combined population of these three LGAs is 440,662 respectively. However, this study did not carry out a general study on the above population. Rather, a sample population was drawn from groups and individuals who were directly or indirectly affected by the farmer-herder conflict.

A structured interview guide was used to elicit information on the historical context and drivers of the conflict from a sample population that included ten farmers, five Fulani herders, six leaders of farmers-herders associations (Miyetti Allah), six government/humanitarian officials (BSEMA), six traditional rulers\chiefs, six Nigeria security agents, three Benue State Livestock Guards, and two Focused Group Discussions (FGD), with each session consisting of six participants. In total, there were 54 respondents for this study and they were purposively sampled because of their knowledge and experiences on the subject matter. Secondary data included published books, journal articles, reports, newspapers and internet materials. Data were historically analysed in order to understand the relationship between past events and contemporary happenings in the farmer-herder conflict. Interview transcripts were carefully analysed and thematically fitted into the study objectives.

4. Discussion of Findings

This section answered the two research questions raised in this study. They embody the aim of the study which is to explore the historical context and drivers of farmer-herder conflict in Benue state, Nigeria.

Question 1: What is the historical context of farmer-herder conflict in Benue State, Nigeria?

This historical overview examined the views of respondents’ vis-a-vis extant literature on Fulani migration into the Benue, pre-violent inter-group relations, and the breaking point. Farmer-herder conflict is an old phenomenon in the Benue confluence of North Central Nigeria. It is not just a 21st century phenomenon. It can be traced back to pre-colonial times when nomadic Fulani started migrating into the Benue valley for greener pastures and water for their cattle. As a result, there were little misunderstandings between farmers and herders over land and water resources. However, in this modern time, the



dynamics and modus operandi of the conflict has changed drastically, involving monumental killing of human beings that has been termed in some quarters as “genocide.”

According to the traditional ruler of Akwu community in Agatu LGA, the migration of the Fulani into the Benue can be traced back to the Usman Danfodio Jihad of 1804. To him, stories of the coming of the horse-riding Fulani have been told to him by his parents since childhood. But his contact with them was in the early sixties when he saw the cattle rearing Fulani instead of the horse-riding ones. This oral tradition means that the presence of the Fulani has been noticed in the Benue Valley even before colonialism. Though Abgebgedia, (2014) posits that up until the 1950s, the Fulani herdsmen were not allowed into Southern Benue by Tiv farmers who claimed that cattle are trampling on agricultural land, making them stiff for crop production. The import of this is that there were Fulani settlers in other part of Benue even before the 1950s. The Secretary of Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association of Nigeria (MACBAN), Benue State Chapter also hold this view that the Fulani have been staying in Benue state since the colonial era. He dated their existence in Benue State to about 100 years back. The Chairman of MACBAN, Benue State Chapter reaffirm this perspective when he stated that “*I am 57 years old. My father was born here in Benue State and he lived all his life here till he died.*” The correlation can therefore be clearly seen in the narratives of these two Fulani men who have lived all their lives in Benue State. According to him, the pull factor was and is still the rich vegetation in the Benue Valley and the presence of water, which makes it attractive for grazing of cattle. This view was shared by many respondents during focused group discussion with farmers on why the Fulani are migrating into Benue State. Based on the Nigerian constitution therefore, the Fulani cannot and should not be seen as

non-indigenes as a good number of them have no place they can call home than Benue State because their grandparents were also born and died in the State. However, this group of Fulani are mostly the town settlers, while the bush settlers are nomadic who come to Benue during dry season and move back to the North during rainy season. The indigene-ship of the latter therefore cannot be substantiated.

Pre-violent inter-group relations between native farmers and Fulani herdsmen in Benue State has been cordial. Responses from the field corroborate with Idowu, (2017) when he asserts that the Fulani lived peacefully with the farmers in Benue State. There were cases of language assimilation, intermarriages (though rare), trade by barter, and general socio-cultural relations. Though few respondents denied the existence of such cultural affinity, majority of respondents attested to this fact that there was peaceful relationship between farmers and herders. Most resounding were the words of a respondent who relates that:

When they came, they were very friendly with our people. I’m telling you that, when I was very small, in the night, the Fulani boys and girls will come to the village, we will dance together. They thought us how to dance and we thought them how to dance also (65 years, Male/Married/Akwu village, Chief/ruler of the community, Agatu Local Government).

This is a testimony to the peaceful nature of pre-violent inter-group relations between farmers and Fulani herdsmen in Benue State. A point of interest from the field was that, there was a general agreement from respondents that there were occasional conflicts over cattle grazing on farmlands. However, these conflicts were settled between the farmers and the herders right there in the farm. If they couldn’t, they were then taken to traditional chiefs who invites



the Fulani heads (known as *ArDOS*) to the village where the cases will be settled peacefully by paying compensations for damages. Sometimes the Fulani herdsmen doesn't even pay any compensation based on goodwill of the farmers. This traditional method of conflict resolution between farmers and herders was very effective and efficient. A respondent had this to say on this traditional method of conflict resolution:

Yes, we had conflicts over grazing in the past. But whenever we have issue like that, we invite the Fulani to the village, they sit with *Gago* (chief) here and settle it amicably" (45 years, Male/Married/Adagbo village, Agatu LGA).

On the point where this peaceful relation metamorphosed into violent conflict, most respondents who were not educated pointed to recent events of 2012-2013. But this violence is way beyond that timeline. Towards the end of the 20th century, there was a monumental increase in population of human beings and livestock in Nigeria and Benue State was not an exception. This implies that, there were more people to farm and more cattle to rear than the available land. Thus, the ensuing competition between farmers and herders for scarce land and water resources. The herders feel that it is their right to move freely with their cattle, and to interact socially anywhere in the country, while the indigenous farmers see their movement as a threat to their source of livelihood and right to communal property. Among the educated respondents, MACBAN Secretary's submission on the timeline when the conflicts started becoming violent was more accurate in relations to existing literatures like Idowu (2017). He stated that:

The point where this conflict becomes violent was the return to democracy in 1999. During the military era, local chiefs as

well as community elders had a lot of power and influence over their people, especially the youths. But with the coming of democracy, power and influence shifted to the politicians who started empowering jobless youths to serve as political thugs during elections. These young men have become so powerful that they decide what happens in the society (45 years, Male/Married/ Secretary of MACBAN, Benue Branch, Makurdi).

The import of the above narration that, these youths in turn became rebellious to traditional and conventional security institutions. They became more powerful than the chiefs and the elders. They decide what happens in cases of conflicts that were hitherto resolved by the chiefs and *ArDOS*. This led to an era where the Fulani herdsmen started paying exorbitant compensations that do not equal the level of destructions on farmlands or the monetary value of crops eaten by cattle. This started becoming a business avenue for the youths. The Fulani herdsmen in turn became frustrated, thus the ensuing violence.

Question 2: What are the drivers of farmer-herder conflict in Benue State, Nigeria?

Through interactions with respondents, many issues have been identified as the causes of the farmer-herder conflict in Benue state. They include but not limited to indigene-settler dichotomy, religious colouration, politics, ethnic contestations, poverty, unemployment, criminal gangs, assault and rape against women by both farmers and herders, incessant bush burning, contamination and poisoning of water bodies by both farmers and herders, climate change, commercial farming, rural banditry and cattle rustling. These causes have been summarized into six drivers as discussed by the International Crisis Group



Report (2017) to include drought and desertification, loss of grazing lands, new livestock and farming practices, rural banditry and cattle rustling, escalating conflict across northern Nigeria, and collapsed of traditional mechanism. These are discussed below vis-a-vis the opinions of respondents from the field.

Drought and Desertification

Climate change is a reality that has caused drought and desertification in northern Nigeria- an already arid region close to the Sahara Desert. According to the Federal Ministry of Environment (2008, cited in International Crisis Group Report, 2017) “in the last six decades, over 350,000 sq km of the already arid region turned to desert or desert-like conditions, a phenomenon progressing southward at the rate of 0.06km per year.”. This situation, no doubt, has led to the influx of Fulani herdsmen into North-Central Nigeria, thus, the contestation for scarce land and water resources. A Fulani respondent stated in Hausa language that:

I am from Katsina state and I grew up to this lifestyle of moving from my place to Benue state every dry season because there is always water and grass for us to feed our cattle there. During rainy season, we normally go back to the North until another dry season. But I am married now with children and I decided to stay in permanently because even in rainy season, the rain in Katsina is not like before. The streams are constantly drying and that is affecting our business (51 years, Male/Married/ Logo LGA).

This is in line with the work of Abado (2022) who posit that climate change has caused water scarcity, which in turn, forces herdsmen to move into lowlands for available water, thereby coming into contact with farmers engaging in irrigation or dry season farming. Climate change has led to scarcity

of water, more heat, less rain, as well as drought in the North.

Loss of Grazing Reserves

The Chairman of MACBAN, Benue State Chapter explained that, some large expanses of lands were reserved for grazing in the Northern region during regionalism in Nigeria. But after the division of the region into 19 states, with lack of legal document, increase in population with associated high demand for farmland, urban settlements and commercial activities, these grazing fields were taken over, leaving Fulani herdsmen to compete for the remaining scarce land or seek pasture in central and southern part of the country. This view corroborates the work of Audu (2014) who opined that Fulani herdsmen are always in search of grazing land with sufficient “grass or crop residue for their animals to eat. In a situation where leftover crop gets eaten, it creates conflict with the farmer” (p. 5).

Changes in Pastoralism and Farming Practices

On one hand, the advancement in technology has helped farmers to cultivate more lands and engage in irrigation practice during dry seasons with the help of government policies like Agricultural Development Projects (ADPs) in the 1970s and the National Fadama Development Projects (NFDPs) since 1993 (Tyav et al, 2020). This means that more wetlands have been taken over by farmers, lands that were hitherto used by herdsmen for grazing of cattle. Pastoralists on the other hand, have left grazing in the hands of teenagers from 9-25 years old. This makes conflict resolution at incidence spot difficult because of naivety, lack of civility and maturity from the side of the young herdsmen. In this context, conflict can easily degenerate into violence, and even protracted violence as seen in Benue State.

Rural Banditry and Cattle Rustling

Cattle rustling and theft are prevalent phenomena in Northern Nigeria. All Fulani respondents recounted a lot loses in cattle and even human beings to the criminal



activities of gangs engaged in cattle theft. Farmers have also attributed the violent activities of criminal youth to escalating the conflict. This view supports the statistics of Samuel (2015), who observed that more than 64,750 cattle were stolen and at least 2,991 herders killed in North-central Nigeria in 2013 alone. Respondents also observed that the lack of security presence in these forests and villages have encouraged these criminals. Ofuoku and Isife (2010) also alluded to the fact that cattle theft and rustling is a major cause of reprisal killings by herdsmen. This means that the criminal activities of youths from both sides of the divide are fueling the conflict.

Escalating Conflicts across Northern Nigeria

The proliferation of small arms and light weapons in Northern Nigeria has caused a lot of political, ethnic, religious, and socio-cultural conflicts in this part of the country. The high level of poverty, lack of education, inequality and general underdevelopment are some of the causal factors of these rising conflicts. In terms of conflict, the Boko Haram insurgency is the main push factors for herders moving South. Alhaji Mafindin Danburam, vice chairman of Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association of Nigeria (MACBAN) in Borno State asserted that the association members have lost over one million cattle to Boko Haram insurgency (Daily Post, 12 January, 2017).

Erosion of Traditional Mechanisms

The Secretary of MACBAN, Benue branch stated that, the decisions of traditional mediators such as village heads or chiefs were strictly respected and adhered to in the past. *Ardos* (heads of herders) in collaboration with village heads resolves conflicts over cases of damaged crops or otherwise. But the involvement of police and court after 1970s brought a new era of distrust. The police and court system are marred with bribe taking without justice. So, both farmers and herders result to jungle justice as self-help approach.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has shown that the presence of Fulani ethnic group in the Benue Valley can be traced to pre-colonial era when transhumance was a major practice in order to gain economic and socio-cultural advantages. Their movement was aided by the Uthman Danfodio Jihad of 1804, where the Fulani spread into Northern and Middle Belt of Nigeria through conquest. The data also showed that farmers and herders have been cohabiting together peacefully for decades, though with occasional conflicts that do not result to widespread violence. There were instances of intermarriages and other activities that ensured social cohesion between the two groups. However, the coming of democratic governance in 1999 and the attendant increase in population, led to the collapse of traditional institutions that were managing this conflict effectively. On the drivers of the conflict, many factors were identified and subsumed under drought and desertification, loss of grazing lands, new livestock and farming practices, rural banditry and cattle rustling, escalating conflict across northern Nigeria, and collapsed of traditional mechanism. The data and the discussion that followed shows a clear path to the historical origin and drivers of the farmer-herder conflict in Benue State. Generalisation can be made that the menace of farmer-herder conflict in Nigeria is an age long problem that transcend recent history. It is rooted in pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial era, and have found expression in different dimensions of our national life as a people. To curb this reoccurring violence therefore, the study recommends thus: both federal state governments should come together to establish ranches in Northern states particularly. This will help to ameliorate or halt the incessant transhumance lifestyle of herders in search of pasture. Ranching is a global best practice in livestock production. It is only wise and appropriate that Nigerian herders embrace this method to avoid destroying farmlands either by error of



omission or commission. The government should also look into the menace of desertification in Northern Nigeria in order to provide pasture and water for herders and farmers alike. Deterrence is another aspect the government should take seriously. If criminals get punished quick and proportionally, the cost-benefit analysis of engaging in crime will definitely tilt toward the former.

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