

An Assessment of Ethno-Religious Interpretation of Pastoralist-Farmer Conflict in Northern Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Since the return to Nigeria's Fourth Republic, the Northern parts of the country have experienced recurring conflicts between pastoralists and farmers. The conflicts have assumed a new dimension with the proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW) among non-state actors, which further intensified the violence. Despite concerted efforts by the state to restore peace and security, the conflict has persisted and has been narrated through ethnic and religious interpretations. Existing literature has explored the conflicts in relation to climate change and the indigene-settler dichotomy, while recent scholarship has examined it alongside armed banditry. However, the ethnic and religious angles through which the conflict has been framed remain understudied. This study fills the gap by investigating how resource-based conflict intersects with ethno-religious appellations across Northern Nigeria. Adopting a qualitative analysis of secondary sources, the study argues that the conflict is essentially resource-based and that ethno-religious appellations are mobilised for group support during conflict. The study contributes to the understanding of the relationship between resource users and identity-based interpretations in the pastoralist-farmer conflicts in Northern Nigeria, and concludes that the conflicts stem primarily from resource-related grievances while identities shape their interpretation.

KEYWORDS

Pastoralists, farmers, conflict, ethnicity, religion

I. INTRODUCTION

Conflicts between pastoralists and farmers have become a recurring decimal since the return to Nigeria's Fourth Republic. The conflict is more predominant in Northern Nigeria and has caused loss of life, property, and disruption of agricultural and pastoral livelihoods. The climate and soil of the region make it conducive for the cultivation of crops and rearing of animals. Conflict sometimes arises as pastoralists and farmers interact in the course of their livelihood and productive activities. Historically, relations between pastoralists and farmers have been harmonious. They co-exist in a symbiotic relationship where the cattle of pastoralists would fertilise the farmers' land in exchange for grazing rights. Where disputes arose, they were resolved through traditional conflict resolution mechanisms. However, the breakdown of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, alongside the proliferation of small arms and light weapons, has contributed to the escalation of violence between pastoralists and farmers. Over the last two decades, the conflict has spread across Northern Nigeria, although its intensity varies geographically. The frontiers of the conflict in Northern Nigeria are Plateau, Benue, Taraba, Kwara, Kogi, Adamawa, Niger, Kaduna, Zamfara, Katsina,

Borno and Sokoto have experienced recurrent clashes with their attendant displacement, loss of lives and property.

The conflict between pastoralists and farmers, though resource-based, has often been interpreted along ethnic and religious lines because the pastoralists are Fulani and predominantly Muslims, while the farmers are from different ethnic and religious blocs. In predominant Muslim communities in the North East and North West geopolitical zones, the conflict assumes an ethnic colouration, while in the North Central, it is interpreted as religious. This appellation has the potential to trigger religious uprising. This article examines how such interpretations relate to disputes over land rights, grazing routes, theft of cattle and destruction of crops and how they escalate and influence the interpretation of the conflict.

A. *Historical Background to Pastoralist – Farmer Conflict*

Conflict between pastoralists and farmers in Northern Nigeria is not a recent phenomenon but dates back to the pre-colonial period. However, the conflict has escalated in recent decades due to urbanisation, climate change and other factors. The Fulani, also known as Fulbe, are a distinct ethnic group found in Nigeria and other West African countries. They do not have a single history of migration but trace their identity through migration, settlement and interaction with other people across sub-Saharan Africa. Scholars such as Blench (1994), Shehu and Hassan (1995) and Blench (2010) posit that the Fulani originated from Senegambia and then spread across the Sahel. According to Azarya (1996), the Fulani of West and Central Africa trace their ancestry to the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Usman Danfodio jihad in Sokoto. The jihad sedentarised them within the conquered communities.

Questions of land ownership and land rights were important in the aftermath of the Sokoto jihad. In the *Ta'lim al-radi fi Ashab al-Ikhtisas bi-Mawat al-Aradi* (Guiding the Seeker on the Grounds for Acquiring Rights over Uncultivated Land), a treaty written by Sheikh Abdullahi ibn Fodio (c. 1766-1829) answers these questions by broadly dividing landholding into three categories. The first is the state land reserved for official purposes and administered by political office holders such as the Sultan and Emirs. These lands were inalienable and could not be sold. The second is the private estate owned by the aristocrats and could be transferred through sale, lease or other means. The third is communal land, which includes areas for grazing, cemeteries and forests (Fodio, n.d.).

Laws governing state land and private estates were enacted, including the *hurumi* and *caffa*. *Hurumi* was a land-grant and tax-exemption system associated with land obtained through a political official who administered state-controlled, uncultivated or abandoned land. Beneficiaries could receive rights to cultivate and exploit the land. *Caffa* was another arrangement through which land associations were distributed through aristocratic patronage. The land could be allocated by an aristocrat to clients or dependents and could include tax privileges. Lovejoy (2016) documents several land sales and leases in Sokoto from the mid-nineteenth century until the European conquest of Sokoto in 1903-1904.

The conquest and subjugation of the Sokoto Caliphate between 1903 and 1904 significantly altered the social, economic, and political landscape of the Caliphate. During the colonial period, the introduction of *jangali* (cattle tax) marginalised the Fulani and caused them to disperse to the interior of Northern Nigeria. The North Central was conducive for their settlement due to the absence of tse-tsefly, conducive weather and abundance of pasture

for their cattle. The introduction of *burti* allowed for the creation of specific migration routes for pastoralists with mutual agreement from farmers, pastoralists and local authorities (Blench, 2010). The collapse of the *burti* system in the 1970's was partly attributed to an increase in population and land ownership claims along cattle migration routes by farmers, leading to conflicts (Blench, 2010).

British colonial rule altered existing traditional institutions through which land had been administered replacing native and caliphate authority with colonial state control. The Lands and Native Rights Proclamation 1910 and its re-enactment 1916, were measures put in place for the regulation of land in Northern Region. Natives could hold and use land under native law and custom, while Europeans and other foreigners needed the Governor's consent for a lease or right of occupancy.

After independence, the Northern Region government repealed the colonial proclamation and replaced it with the Northern Nigeria Land Tenure Law of 1962. The law did not depart from the colonial principle: all land remained under the control of the Governor, who held it in trust for the people. Rights of occupancy over village land and farmland were granted to the people, while statutory rights were reserved for commercial, urban and leasehold purposes. For pastoralists whose land use depended on movement, this arrangement offered no clear right to graze or pass through the land of others.

The Land Use Act of 1978 extended state control of land to the whole country (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1978). It was intended to regulate ownership and ensure equitable access, but in practice access to land depends on local institutions, customary landholding and the distinction between indigenes and settlers. Pastoralists who rarely hold certificates of occupancy are often treated as foreigners on land they may have used for generations. These conditions have contributed to tensions between farmers and pastoralists.

Understanding how these land proclamations affect pastoralists requires a closer examination of who they are and how they make a living. The Fulani are predominantly pastoralists and rear different species of cattle such as *Zebu*, *Keteku*, *Muturu* and *Kuri* (Iro, 1994). In the pastoralist system, boys and men tend the cattle while women sell the milk (Shehu & Hassan, 1995). Pastoralists and farmers have contributed significantly to the national economy. Nigeria is estimated to have about 15.3 million pastoralists who contribute around 3.5 per cent of the nation's gross domestic product (GDP) (Alhassan, 2013). Abbas (2012) distinguishes three groups of pastoralists: nomadic, sedentary and transhumant. Transhumance involves the seasonal movement of herds and has lately become a source of conflict with farmers.

Farmers contribute 23 per cent of Nigeria's GDP. The 2022 Nigeria's National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) estimated that the country has an approximately 40,221,060 agricultural households representing about 30.1 percent of the country's labour force (National Bureau of Statistics, 2024, p. 17). A 2017 survey by the Consultative Group to Assist the Poor (CGAP) found that farmers make up 83.6 per cent of the population in the North East, 82.9 per cent in the North West and 75.8 per cent in the North Central (CGAP, 2017). Most farmers operate on a small scale with individual landholdings of less than two hectares.

Subsistence farming remains the predominant form of agricultural production. Farmers cultivate approximately seventy per cent of the arable land, and most of the crops they produce are meant to meet the food needs of their families and local communities (CGAP, 2017). . As farmers expand the land for cultivation, traditional grazing routes and access to

water and forage have become restricted. The Land Use Act 1978 recognises pastoralism as a livelihood and its rights to use land, but because access to land depends on local institutions, many farmers regard pastoralists as intruders who have no right to use the land. This situation gives rise to disputes that sometimes escalate into violence.

B. Causes of Pastoralist – Farmer Conflict

Empirical reviews of literature identified several factors as the causes of pastoralists-farmers conflict in Northern Nigeria. Higazi (2016) reported that the primary causes include crop destruction, climate change, indigene-settler relations, breakdown of traditional mechanisms, cattle rustling and reprisals. Ajibefun (2018) identifies crop destruction by stray cattle, harassment of pastoralists by local youths, sexual harassment of women by nomads, indiscriminate bush burning and cattle theft. Blench (2003) attributed the immediate cause of the conflict to illegal farm invasions and destruction of crops during planting and post-harvest. Blench (2024) identified access to small arms and light weapons, pastoral incursion on farmland due to an increase in migration from the semi-arid zone, crop burning and cattle poisoning. While different factors are responsible for the pastoralists' and farmers' conflict, they can be categorised as ecological, socio-economic, and political.

Ecological factors are among the most frequently cited causes of the pastoralist-farmer conflict in Northern Nigeria. Changes in climate affect ecology in various ways, including drought, flooding and desert encroachment. Desertification and inadequate rainfall in the North West and North East have contributed to the shrinking of arable land, grazing lands and water scarcity. Additionally, camels from the Sahel consume leaves from the trees that are meant to provide vegetation cover for the earth, thereby worsening the situation.

Traditionally, the flood-prone areas found along river banks and other water sources were used for wet- season farming and left to fallow during the dry season for livestock grazing. Farmers often engage in farming in the lowland due to the dryness of the upland areas, which led to competition over land and water resources. As a result of these ecological problems, pastoralists migrate to the interior of the region in search of forage and water. As farmlands lose nutrients, farmers migrate to more fertile lands, some of which had been designated as cattle routes and have been fertilised by cattle droppings. Farmers and pastoralists lay claims to these lands. While Farmers lay traditional claims to the lands, pastoralists claim that they were paths appropriated to them by the government.

Socio-economic factors are also responsible for pastoralists -farmer's conflict in Northern Nigeria. The economic activities of the people are mainly farming and herding. They also engage in trading to generate income as they sell their farm produce, milk and meat gotten from their production. There are cases of social unrest resulting from insurgency, banditry, and religious intolerance. The challenge of expansion of farmlands contributes to the conflict. Furthermore, the continuous movement of pastoralists in search of pasture for their herds often brings them in contact with farmers. Poverty and unemployment in the region have compelled many communities to go into farming, which requires them to expand into lands that were hitherto left for grazing, thereby leading to conflict. According to Fadeyi and Adamu (2023), the Fulani believe that every land belongs to Allah and not humans; therefore, no one has the right to deny them access to land. This position contradicts traditional views of most communities in North Central, where they believe that land belongs to the ancestors, and they are the custodians of it. Differences in religious views and interpretation of landholding contribute to conflict.

Another factor contributing to conflicts between farmers and pastoralists is population increase. For example, the growth in the size of the population between 1991 and 2006 shows a 4.2 per cent increase. With a population of over 53 million, most of whom reside in the rural areas, Northern Nigeria has a potential for being the hotbed of conflict between farmers and pastoralists as more people are engaged in farming.

Similarly, cattle rustling has exacerbated the conflict between pastoralists and farmers. This view is similar to the findings of Jumba and Mu'azu (2019) who argued that cattle rustling has evolved from its traditional roots to an organised criminal enterprise perpetrated by both pastoral and non-pastoral syndicates. They also align with the findings of Saleh, Nfor and Saleh (2024), who were of the view that cattle rustling has contributed to the violent clashes between pastoralists and farmers. Similarly, the findings corroborate those of Rabi'u and Muhammad (2022), who concluded that cattle rustling has resulted in the loss of human lives and properties. Furthermore, Brottem's (2021) findings extend this argument by demonstrating how proceeds from cattle rustling have been used by armed groups to finance their activities, thereby establishing the link between cattle rustling, organised crime and the perpetuation of the conflict.

The emergence of banditry in Zamfara State is attributed to cattle theft emerging from farmer-pastoralist conflicts. The conflict escalated in 2011 and involves village raids and kidnapping for ransom (Rufai, 2021). Bello and Abdullahi (2021) observe that between twelve and twenty-five persons were killed and many properties destroyed in Anka in January 2016 as a result of the violence between pastoralists and farmers. Similarly, in February 2016, ten persons lost their lives in pastoralist-farmer clashes in Maradun, Zamfara State.

The increasing demand for weapons enriches criminal syndicates that are involved in arms trafficking. This is consistent with the empirical findings of Okoli and Okpaleke (2014) who observed the persistent illicit circulation of arms through Nigeria's seaports, major highways, and border crossings and at the conflict sites. The proliferation of sophisticated weaponry has further exacerbated and intensified the disputes by increasing the lethality of violent confrontations between pastoralists and farmers. This contributes to the risk of violent altercations and led to a rise in the number of community-based armed groups to guard against cattle theft and engage in reprisals. Demand for arms enriches criminal syndicates involved in arms trafficking. All these factors raise the risk of violent altercations. Northern Nigeria shows how a localised dispute between resource users can be transformed into organised crime, which complicates any interpretation of it being ethnic or religious.

Political factors have also contributed to the conflict, particularly weak policy implementation and the failure to protect pastoralists. The Grazing Reserves Act, 1964 set aside land for livestock grazing and pastoral activities in Northern Nigeria. Of the 415 areas designated for grazing, only 114 were officially designated as grazing reserves. Many of the designated areas therefore lacked the pasture and water that pastoralists needed, which increased competition with farmers. The policy also failed to encourage the sedentarisation of pastoralists.

Land administration worked against pastoralists as well. Under the Land Use Act, rights of occupancy are issued by the government, which favours sedentary farmers who live near these offices and understand the need to obtain the certificate. Pastoralists, in contrast,

whose notion of land rests on customary use that has passed through generations, were often unable or unwilling to secure formal title for land they had long used. This left them without legal protection when farmland expanded into grazing areas. These policy failures turned a dispute over resources into a question of who belongs on the land, which is the terrain on which ethnic and religious interpretations of the conflict are built.

C. Ethnic and Religious Interpretation of the Conflict

The pastoralists – farmers conflict in Northern Nigeria has often been interpreted from an ethnic and religious angle. Although these identities provide an important context for understanding how the conflict is represented, they shape how the conflict is framed and mobilised and not what causes it.

Ethnicities and religion shape the conflict in the region. The predominantly Fulani pastoralists are a distinct ethnic group whose source of livelihood revolves around pastoralism. Their livelihood depends on mobility, which has been passed down from one generation to the other. Farming communities adopted a sedentary lifestyle to access agricultural land. The differences in livelihood patterns can generate claims and tensions over territory, especially when grazing lands are encroached into by farmers or where cattle destroy crops.

The interpretation of the conflict as principally a confrontation between two resource users obscures the identity of the affected populations. The pastoral Fulani communities are neither politically nor economically homogenous. Economically, not all Fulani are pastoral, as most have adopted a sedentary agricultural lifestyle. Similarly, farmers comprise numerous ethnic groups with different histories, cultures, religions, and traditions. Despite their differences and conflicts, there are numerous cases of cordial relationships and peaceful coexistence between farmers and pastoralists in communities spread across Northern Nigeria.

Ethnic interpretations are consequential when local disputes over access to water or land are framed as collective attacks against an entire ethnicity. Such appellation can transform the dispute into broader narratives of ethnic victimisation. Violence against an individual member of an ethnic group is often interpreted as evidence of hostility against their ethnicity. Consequently, the individual employs the ethnic narrative in mobilising members of his ethnicity for retaliation or to mete out punishment on the other party.

Religion is a second dimension through which the conflict is constituted, especially in parts of North Central Nigeria, where disputes between pastoralists and farmers are given religious colouration. Idachaba (2024) argues that the conflict in North Central involves not only competition over land use and water but also differences in worldview concerning land and communal identity. In these communities, violence arising from disputes over access to land and its resources is interpreted through broader historical grievances. Pastoralists are predominantly Muslims, while farmers in these communities are mainly Christians and adherents of African Traditional Religion (Idachaba, 2024). The continual framing of religion into the conflict has broadened its scope, deepened mutual suspicion and complicated efforts to separate it from ideological violence. Studies on the conflicts in Southern Kaduna, Plateau and Benue show how localised insecurity is interpreted through religious narratives (Higazi, 2016; Eburuoh & Adams, 2025; Angerbrandt, 2015).

Media reporting can contribute to the identity-based interpretation of the conflict through ethnic, religious or regional framing. In their study, Nwachukwu et al. (2021) identify ethnic framing in selected newspapers in Nigeria, including their use of negative labels such as Fulani herdsmen. Similarly, Ogunkunle et al. (2026) demonstrate that newspaper representations vary across outlets, with newspapers in the southern Nigeria more likely to frame the conflict in ethnic terms. In a newspaper article, Jega (2018) offers a critical assessment of a religious interpretation of pastoralists and farmers conflict. He states that:

"The notion promoted by politicians and the mass media that herdsmen are all out to eliminate the Tivs, Southern Kaduna natives, Middle Belters or Christians is a political stretching of the fact because the herdsmen hardly know that there is a north-central geopolitical zone, much less aim to extinguish it. Despite their supposed ethnic affiliation to Shehu Dan Fodio, most of today's herdsmen practice Islam nominally and are preoccupied with survival, not religion (Jega, 2018)."

Though this argument is a newspaper commentary and not an empirical study, nevertheless, it shows how the ethnic and religious interpretation of the conflict is a product of media and political framing, and that many pastoralists are preoccupied with survival not religious ideology. This supports the view that identity is used to interpret the conflict more than to cause it.

Historical grievances contribute to the ethnic and religious interpretations. Vinson (2018) demonstrates that the conflict in North Central between pastoralists and farmers has been associated with the nineteenth-century jihad. The migration of pastoralists from the North West and North East to the North Central due to climate change and other factors has led some to perpetuate the idea of a continuation of territorial domination and religious expansion. At the same time, the Hausa farming communities share the same Islamic religion with the pastoral Fulani, yet this did not protect them from being attacked by some pastoralists or armed groups.

In predominantly Muslim community like Kebbi State, violence between pastoralists and farmers in Wasagu/Danko and Zuru left 21 people dead (Daniel, 2020). Until 2020, the area had experienced fewer clashes between pastoralists and farmers. Ojoye (2019) notes that the intensity of the conflict had forced 350 farmers to abandon their homes in Argungu, Yauri, Ngaski, Zuru, Danko and Wasagu. Religious interpretation of the conflict cannot explain the conflict between pastoralists and farmers in Muslim areas. Tuki (2025) examines the relationship between religious identity and conflict resolution. The study concludes that though religious identity can facilitate dialogue and resolution, it does not eliminate violence.

The ethnic and religious polarisation of the conflict is important for political mobilisation. Existing research has revealed that political actors, community leaders or interest groups often perpetuate identity interpretation to advance their particular objectives. The framing of pastoralists as a collective ethnic threat and the portrayal of farmers as hostile to pastoralists have transformed the disputes into a broader narrative of indigene-settler dichotomy (Vinson, 2018). For instance, in June 2002, a dispute over grazing land in Tonga village, Mambilla Plateau, Taraba State led to violence that displaced about 23,000 herders to Cameroon (IRIN, 2002). The scale of the conflict drew national attention despite it not being the first conflict in the community since there had been conflicts in the 1970s and 1980s.

According to Blench (1984), the Fulani pastoralists had migrated to the Mambilla since 1875, yet they are still regarded as settlers. When the Mambila people assumed office in the local government council in 1979, they used their position to revoke the certificate of occupancy issued to the pastoralists so as to obstruct their annual movement to the valley of the River Donga (Blench, 1984). The description of the Fulani pastoralists as settlers suggests that the dispute involves more than a competition over shortage of land, but concerns about the legitimacy of residence and right to determine who could use and access land.

Ethnic and religious interpretations of the conflict have influenced perceptions of government support to either of the competing parties. Where communities are attacked, they often conclude that the government, security apparatus and judiciary protect the aggressors. These accusations may extend to accusations of political marginalisation and unequal protection between the farmers and pastoralists. These perceptions often hinder peace processes and encourage communities to rely on vigilante or self-help groups to protect them against attacks.

The perception of government support to one group over another is exemplified in Kebbi State, where in 1999 the Speaker of the House of Assembly announced the allocation of the gazetted reserve at Yelwa to farming communities (Blench, 2004). The pastoralists felt disenfranchised and, together with the National Livestock Projects Department, protested. The government did not reverse its decision to convert the grazing reserve to farmland. Farmers continued cultivating the land.

II. CONCLUSION

It is clear that conflict between pastoralists and farmers in Northern Nigeria is essentially a resource-based conflict; the causes are viewed in terms of socio-economic, political and ecological. The recurring disputes over scarce resources have degenerated into violent conflicts between pastoralists and farmers in Northern Nigeria. Since most of the pastoralists do not own or possess land rights or a certificate of occupancy, they mostly have to depend on the farmers' land to graze their cattle.

Government policies on agriculture, particularly the Fadama project, risk being a threat to pastoralists as they have depended on the lowland to graze, while the farmers cultivate the upland. The expansion of land for cultivation by farmers has encroached on traditional cattle routes, reducing their access to pasture and water. The breakdown of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms and the use of modern courts to resolve disputes between pastoralists and farmers has been effective.

All these have contributed to the competing parties mobilising self-help groups to defend them and their properties, which is a threat to the sustainability of the federation. Therefore, it is in the interest of the State to take concrete measures in addressing the needs of pastoralists for the availability of grazing land, while farmers are encouraged not to encroach on grazing routes. The interpretation of the conflict along ethnic and religious lines did not establish that the resource conflict is ethnic or that religious hostility is absent, but it is used in mobilisation for group support. Identity may influence how disputes are understood and how people mobilise support, but they are not universal across the region.

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