

Fulani Herdsmen- Farmers Conflict in Benue State and National Security in Nigeria**Secunda Chizobam ONWUHARAONYE¹, Awu Chima ORJI², Georgenia Chinwe AHAMEFULA³, Orie I. IBEAWUCHI⁴**¹Department of History and International Studies, Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education, Owerri, NIGERIA²Department of Social Studies and Civil Education, Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education, Owerri, NIGERIA.³Department of Linguistics and Nigerian Language, Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education, Owerri, NIGERIA.⁴Department of History and International Studies, Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education, Owerri, NIGERIA.**Abstract**

The conflict between Fulani herders and farmers is one of the recent national intractable issues in Nigeria. Acknowledging this fact, this paper examined severity of this conflict in Benue state and, its adverse effect on national security. The paper adopted descriptive-qualitative design explored the importance of secondary sources of data collection (articles, textbooks, documentaries) as data elicited were content-analyzed in Conflict and Eco-violence theoretical frameworks. The study revealed upsurge and sustained carnage by the Fulani militia against farmers in communities in Benue state. The unpleasant situation stemmed from unresolved issues between Fulani herders and farmers which consequently constitute serious national security threats in widespread terror to neighboring states, shortage supply of food commodities to neighboring regions and national food inflation occasioned with proliferation of militia across communities in neighboring states. From these findings, the paper recommends for expedited government roles complemented by traditional institutions and community stakeholders among other measures to address the scourge of Fulani herders-farmers' conflicts in Benue state.

Keywords: Benue, Conflict, Fulani-Farmer's conflict & National Security.**1. Introduction**

Farmers and herders have long history of relationship and co-habitation in West Africa and Nigeria inclusive. Their differences have also lived with and among them over these years. The case of herds grazing on the farm of the farmers, and the farmer killing the cattle of the herders for grazing the farmer's crops, with minimal physical reactions was uncommon until most recent times. Recently, there has been a massive upsurge in the cases of conflict and violent clash in Nigeria between the farmers and the herders in spite of long history of commercial relationship (Nzeh, 2015; Goke, 2018). In a similar view, Olanijan et al (2015), Olayoku, (2014) and Okeke (2014) have respectively observed that there has been an upsurge in the number of conflicts between farmers and herders in Nigeria recently.

Furthermore, there are incessant frequent clashes between herdsmen and farmers in most parts of Nigeria including Benue State which has resulted in the destruction of lives and farmlands becoming a major threat to safety and development. These constant clashes between farmers and herders have adversely affected agricultural production which requires an enabling environment to reach its maximum potential (Thomas & Tsendzuul, 2019). Similarly, the big challenge facing agriculture and rural development in Nigeria is the problem associated with farmer-pastoralist conflicts for arable land (Adekunle, et al, 2022). More succinctly, Thomas & Tsendzuul (2019) observed that Farmers-herdsmen's conflict in Benue State has remained a major issue. So far, thousands have been killed while many have been expelled from their homes and the Nigerian government does not appear to be willing to initiate any forceful action against them. Rather, they are requesting for pieces of land from states in order to provide the rampaging herdsmen with permanent feeding ground. Unfortunately, Imo, (2017) revealed that a lot of killings by the nomads and reprisal killings of nomads by the host communities happened during these conflicts. Herds

of cattle belonging to nomads were also killed occasioned with reported cases of the trade and movement of small arms and light weapons which is inimical to the spirit of integration and peaceful co-existence in Nigeria.

The country is indeed circled by crises of security disturbances. For instance, in Nigeria today, the Boko Haram pandemonium is predominant in the North-East part of the country with the burdening case of militancy in the Niger- Delta and the new trend of cattle rustling and land disputes between herdsmen and farmers. There have been at least 370 clashes involving herders and farmers in Nigeria in the last five years compared to just 20 in the 15 years before (Idowu, 2017). For Tion & Terwase (2018), it was observed that the United States consider the Fulani herdsmen as the second most dangerous group to Boko Haram in Nigeria as the group in 2016 alone killed about 500 persons in Benue state. These ugly situations as observed in scholarly submissions therefore elicit the need for effective ways to handle the unpleasant Fulani-herdsmen-farmers' conflict in Benue state. To this extent, what are the factors responsible for the Fulani-herdsmen-farmers' conflict in Benue state and its effects on national security? These questions defined scope and essence of this paper.

2. Conceptualizations

Farmers: To define a farmer, Thomas & Tsendzuul (2019) posited that a farmer is regarded as one who follow the occupation of farming. Farmers are producers of arable crops both for consumption and commercial purposes. What this means is that they live on the land and find sustenance through its cultivation for food and income. Farmers settled in communities and carried out farming and farming related activities. Today, farmers, have maintained the cultivation of stretches of land available for food and income covering a wide variety of crops. Farmers comprise of women and men who engage in the cultivation of farmland and the planting of agricultural crops. The agriculturalist engages in the raising of living organisms for food and raw materials. Agriculture involves farming in all its branches as well as the cultivation and tillage of soil, harvesting of nay agricultural or horticultural commodities (Rileco, 2018). Agriculture is practiced for the purpose of providing food, clothes and shelter, and also for economic gains (Nwaoburu, 2025).

Herdsmen: Herdsmen are described as people who look after a large crowd or flocks of animals. It also means any person that owns or tends animals. Herdsmen refer to nomadic cattle realer who wander about with their cattle in search of pastures and water. They are mostly Fulani cattle owners. The Herdsmen, who are predominantly Muslims are pastoralist group who are by occupation traditional cattle herders. The search for conditions conducive for raising herds keep them on the move from one place to another, and specifically to areas with pasture and water availability and no tsetse fly infestation (Iro, 1994). Herdsmen or Herders are men are trained to breed and keep livestock such as cattle to earn a living (Yusuf, 2011). Again, Iro (1994), posited that herdsmen or pastoralist are nomadic or semi nomadic herders whose primary occupation is raising livestock. Herdsmen are largely found in the Sahel and semi-arid areas of west Africa, but as a result of climate change and desertification, many of them migrated further south into the savannah and tropical forests belt of West Africa. They are mostly seen in West African countries such as Nigeria, Niger, Senegal, Guinea, Gambia, Mauritania, Mali, Bukuna-Faso, Benin Republic, Cote'd'Ivoire and Cameroon. According to Toner (2002), the sale of cattle herd and dairy products such as milk constitute the primary source of income and livelihood of the herdsmen (Thomas & Tsendzuul, 2019).

Conflict: In reference to the scope of this study, conflict can be defined as a situation in which two or more human beings desire goals which they perceive as being obtained by one or the other, but not by both; each party is mobilizing energy to obtain a goal, a desired object or situation and each party perceives it as barrier or threat (Stagner, 2021). In other words, conflict is seen from the point of view of incompatibility of goals. Such conflicts may take place between individuals and communities. Furthermore, Thomas & Tsendzuul (2019) remarked that conflict may be conceived from different

perspectives one crucial defining element of it is the presence of two or more actors struggling to secure a thing of value or adjudged to be valuable of which the gain by any of the actors' amounts to a loss or deprivation to the other actor(s). The benefit that goes with access to or control of the 'valuable' and the deprivation or insecurity that follows denial of access underline the cause of most conflicts.

Subsequently, Pfalzgarff (2011) observed that the term conflict refers to a condition in which one identifiable group of human beings in a given environment (whether tribal, ethnic, linguistic, cultural, religions, socioeconomic, political, among others) is engaged in conscious opposition to or more identifiable human groups because these groups are pursuing what appear to be incompatible goal. In relation to herders and farmers' conflict, Herders and farmers, who in the past easily resolved disagreement are now involved in violent and fierce conflict in Nigeria and mostly the North-Central to Southern regions of Nigeria. According to Asishava, (2017), the dangerous experiences today in states like Benue, Niger, Nassarawa, Kogi, Plateau, Kwara and the FCT dates back to 2011 where the common feature across these states is the loss of lives arising from the violent attacks by the Herdsmen. A Human Rights Watch (2013) reported that violence between the herders and farmers in the villages have claimed the lives of over 3,000 persons since 2010. Attacks by the Fulani herders as at 2014, had killed about 1,229 persons in the Middle-Belt region of Nigeria comprising of Benue state, Nassarawa, Taraba and the southern part of Kaduna state. Between 2013 and 2016, these states had experienced the gruesome murder of over 5000 persons from about 100 communities. In one attack on Agatu Local Government Area of Benue state in 2016, over 300 persons were killed including children and women (Ihuah, 2017). There is also the movement of herders from neighboring countries like Mali, Niger Republic, Chad and Cameroon into Nigeria through the northern boundaries down to the middle belt in search of grazing lands for their herds (Takaya, 2017).

National Security: National security is defined as the safety of the people and properties in a country (Okoro, 2012). The clashes between herders and farmers reinforced circles of extreme poverty and hunger, destroy social status, food security and condemn to high risk to lives of women and children in Nigeria. National security therefore, deals with a situation where people live and go about their daily activities without any form of fears. It's a condition and state of peace and state of stable atmosphere, where people and properties are not destroyed. National security comprises of food security, economic development and growth, political stability and generally human security (Nwaoburu, 2025). Accordingly, Robert-Okah, (2014) remarked that the farmers/herders conflict has further worsened the security situations in the country. The security condition in Nigeria in recent times has become enormous and embarrassing to government. Nigeria in the recent period has experienced unprecedented level of insecurity. No wonder national security has become an issue for government, prompting huge allocation of the National budget to security (Robert-Okah, 2014). The emergence of herders and farmers conflict and cattle rustling has however compounded the national security challenges in the country.

3. Theoretical Framework

According to Le Meur and Hachet (2010), theorizing herders-farmers conflict remains very difficult, since the actors, causes and dynamics are complex and varied. However, this study will adopt a review of two-fold-theoretical perspectives to discuss the issues relating to herders and the farmers conflicts, to make for a more in-depth understanding of the variables. The two theories are conflict theory and Eco-violence theory. The study will be anchored on the conflict theory and the eco-violence theory. Conflict theory adopted as part of the study's framework of analysis. Conflict theory explains the root of violence in any sector whether organized or not. The interdisciplinary field of conflict studies aims to explain all kinds of conflicts from local to international conflicts. The theory defines conflict generally as any state in which two or more social entities or parties perceived that they possess mutually incompatible goals (Metchall, 1981). The theory also describes conflicts

explicitly as sequences of interaction. Arguably, conflict theory will be useful to explain herdsmen and farmers escalation.

The Eco-Violence Theory was developed by Homer-Dixon in 1999. The theory seeks to explain the relationship between environmental factors and violent conflicts. Its basic assumption is that: Decrease in the quality and quantity of renewable resources access acts singularly or in various combinations to increase in scarcity for certain population groups of cropland, water, forests, and fish, thereby reducing economic productivity occasioned with scarcity and adverse effects in regional and national economies. The affected people may move or be forced for new areas thereby causing ethnic conflicts when they migrate to new areas while decrease in wealth cause deprivation conflicts (Homer-Dixon, 1999). Competition over scarce ecological resources has been aggravated in contemporary times owing to the impacts of climate change, which exacerbated ecological scarcity across the world (Blench, 2004, Onuoha, 2007). This condition engenders violent conflicts. The eco-violence theory gives revelation to the nature and dynamics of the arable land, resource conflict and underdevelopment indices in Nigeria. The competition on arable land and the consequent conflicts become more intense amid their ever-reducing resources, herders and farmers conflict and the present inefficient and ineffective policies on grazing by the Nigerian politicians.

The destruction of crops and cattle rustling are the two competitive reasons given by the agricultural farmers and the pastoralist herders respectively for the increasing and incessant violent conflicts between them (Nwaoburu, 2025). Conflict theory underscores the inevitability of disagreement between individuals or parties over issues of mutual interests. To this extent, the conflict that emanate from Fulani herdsmen relationship with the farmers often revolves on issue of land passage and destruction of farm produce which result to killing of cows and sudden reprisal attack. Undoubtedly, the circumstances and events that drive this unpleasant situation of conflicts is found in Eco-Violence Theory where *Drought and Desertification in the Northern Nigeria*. Drought is one of the most important natural disasters that show its influences slowly by time. Also, the loss of grazing reserves and changes in Pastoralists/Farmers Practices Land acquisition by capitalist farmers exacerbates the upsurge of conflict as pastoralist can no longer find where to pass let to talk of where to stay (Abbass, 2012). Homer-Dixon (1999) argued that resource scarcity is the product of an insufficient supply, too much demand or an unequal distribution of a resource due to political, economic, social and environmental factors. This situation triggers unhealthy competition and violence among groups within the society due to conditions of deprivation and limited resources. In effect, resource scarcity raises the competitive stakes and premium that the various societal groups place on available resources, which may engender violent conflicts among groups. It acknowledges that human ingenuity can reduce the likelihood of conflict resulting from the resource scarcities, particularly in countries with efficient markets, capable states, and an educated populace.

The imperatives of this theory are that it stretches to the act that the conflicts between rural crop farmers and nomadic Fulani herdsmen are traceable to population increase without commensurate adequate resources. This has led to scarcity of natural resources such as farmlands, grazing lands, vegetation etc for economic activities. The increase in the cattle population and influx of "alien nomads" account for the problem as they deliberately move the cattle to graze on peoples' farms. The struggle, competition and conflicts over farming and grazing lands have been driven mostly by the scarcity of land as a result of increase in population and economic activities where land remain the key resources, and competition between the farmers and the Fulani herdsmen to ensure their viability in the area. The scarcity of land is due to the degradation and shrinking ecological space, human and cattle population explosion, and resource depletion. Therefore, the farmers need the land for cultivation, while the herdsmen need the land for grazing and rearing of cattle (Kazzah, 2018). The general environmental-pollution activities of Fulani herdsmen often provoke animosity and conflicting relationships between the herders and farmers. The farmers while resisting the herders and their cattle adopt confrontational approaches due to years of rancor and acrimonious. As Haman (2002) pointed out that the nomadic herdsmen or grazers suffer from material damages when the crop farmers inflict physical injuries on the cattle by using cutlasses, spears or guns or by poisoning the cattle.

This can then be situated within the broader context of the political economy of land struggle, traceable to a burgeoning demography in which there is fierce competition for fixed space to meet the demands of the growing population (Olabode and Ajibade 2010; Solagberu, 2012 in Imo, 2017). The quest for economic survival of Fulani nomads and rural farmers as well as weak institutional approaches has escalated the conflicts between the two groups.

4. Factors and Effects of Fulani Herdsmen-Farmers' Conflict in Benue State

In a historic analysis to herdsmen and farmers' conflict, Eyekpimi (2016) recalled that the Fula people also known as Fulani in Hausa language are a culturally diverse group in Africa but predominant in West Africa and live primarily in arid or semi-arid areas. The Fulani are widely dispersed and speak the *Fula language*. They are mostly nomadic in nature, herding cattle, goats and sheep across the vast dry grass lands of their environment making them the world's largest pastoral nomadic group. The Fulani are spread across several countries but found mainly in West Africa and northern parts of Central Africa as well as in Sudan and Egypt. The main Fulani sub-groups in Nigeria are: Fulbe Adamawa, Fulbe Mbororo, Fulbe Sokoto, Fulbe Gombe, and the Fulbe Borgu. Herder/farmer conflict has existed since the beginnings of agriculture, but in Africa the prevalence and frequency of these conflicts was not until the twentieth century. The marked expansion of riverine and valley-bottom (fadama) cultivation in Nigeria since the 1980s has meant that pastoralists and farmers now compete very directly for access to wetland areas with a consequent increase in conflict (Blench, 2004).

In other words, Pastoralists derive their livelihoods mainly from natural resources pasture, water, natural vegetation and livestock while farmers derive theirs from their farm produce and as an Internally Displaced Person in one of the camps in Benue State observed, the two cannot meet (cohabit) for if they do, there will be a spark. Reduced access to land and water, has increasingly put pastoralists under intense pressure, as a result, they are increasingly finding themselves fighting for their survival as they are forced to often migrate to greener lands. However, physical boundaries cutting across traditional migratory routes and wars in neighboring countries continually bring increased problems in accessing traditional grazing resources. On the other hand, as the pressure on arable land in the semi-arid zone increased, soil fertility inevitably decreased and farmers are obliged to move to regions of nucleated bush or to increase their holding size, often a problematic strategy. This attempt to survive by both sides, often pitch them against each other (Adebanjoko & Nwofor, 2024).

Invariably, majority of farmer-herder clashes have occurred between Muslim Fulani herdsmen and hostilities. Prior to 1999, security was considerably firmer and internal crises were containable easily. However, since the onset of civilian rule from 1999 till date there has been a poor and an inadequate response to the security of lives and property. The advent of democratic rule seems to have opened the gate of ethno-religious conflicts which manifested around the Farmer-Herder conflicts while some politicians have cashed on the land use conflicts to feather their nest. For instance, in Mambilla Plateau of Taraba State, herders and farmers have lived together for years when clashes suddenly broke out between the two groups believed to have been politically motivated. Politics or partisan interest also drive the conflict. While violent conflict involving pastoralists and farmers is widespread and increasingly severe in Nigeria, it is predominant in the North central with the most affected states like Benue, (Adebanjoko & Nwofor, 2024). The situation has not been the same in Nasarawa State where there have been persistent clashes between Fulani herdsmen and local crop farmers (Abdulrahman, 2017). In 2018, six communities in Logo and Guma Local government areas of Benue state were attacked by armed herdsmen who gunned down, machete and gruesomely murdered people including women and children. While recent killings in the State have been attributed to the passing of the anti-open grazing law in the State, there have been over 50 to 60 attacks by herdsmen in the area before this time. The law was the State's response to repeated attacks against residents, including the February 2016 massacre of over 300 villagers in Agatu (Adebanjoko & Nwofor, 2024). Also, Dimelu, et al (2017) carried out a study which

indicated that farmers indicated that violation of laws/tradition; livelihood interference and cultural factors were the major causes of conflict between crop farmers and herdsman.

In attempt to underline the strategic importance of North-Central region where Benue is located as regarding violent conflicts and national security threats, Alubo (2011) identified the importance of the North-central in terms of its strategic location, composition and as the producer of the bulk of Nigeria's food and the implications of these for the security of the nation. The strategic location of the Zone provides a vital link between the north and the south and by implication, a buffer for unity and stability of the country. The implication is that insecurity and instability in the area will no doubt affect the security, stability and unity of neighboring zones as well as the entire. For instance, many states outside the Zone have begun to show sympathy to the Zone in the recent onslaught by herdsman while supporting the anti-grazing law which has its origin in the Zone. The intensity, scope and frequency of Fulani pastoralists and farmers' conflicts have shown the fragility of unity of ethnic nationalities in Nigeria and the tendency to maintain a 'no retreat and no surrender' stance by all parties in the conflict indicates the porosity of Nigeria's national security (Abass, 2017).

Furthermore, the composition of the Zone is such that conflicts in the area have a spillover effect on other parts of the country. This is because the states in the Zone share boundaries with other Zone such as the South-South, Southeast, Southwest, Northwest, and the Northeast. People who have been displaced in the North-central often constitute refugees in these other Zone thereby heightening insecurity in such areas. The North-central Zone is centrally located and by virtue of its strategic location, conflicts in the area would impede movement of goods and persons across the country and consequently affect the development of the country. The Zone through Benue produces the bulk of Nigeria's food. Agriculture is the means of livelihood of the States in the region. Benue State for instance is referred to as the Food Basket of the Nation because of its rich agricultural endowment. The conflicts have not only heightened the level of insecurity, but have also demonstrated high potential to exacerbate the food crisis in Nigeria and other affected countries due to loss of farmers' lives, animals, crops and valuable properties (Cotula, Toulmin & Hesse, 2004). The incessant clashes between by herdsman and crop farmers have a drastic effect on food security and have caused a loss of \$14 billion in three years and in another research carried out between 2013 and 2016 on the causes and effects of the perennial clashes between herdsman and farmers in Nigeria, it found that ongoing conflict thwarts the country's economic development to an enormous extent with states affected by these conflicts losing an average of 47% of taxes (Internally Generated Revenue) during these attacks and if conflicts were resolved the average household affected today could see income increase by at least 64 percent, and potentially 210 percent or higher (Eyekpimi, 2016). Violent conflicts between herdsman and farmers also had very negative and severe impacts on the communities that are involved in these conflicts. As already noted, several lives and property have been lost to the crisis in addition to disruption of socioeconomic activities and livelihoods as whole communities have been sacked. The result is deepening humanitarian crisis resulting in several Internally Displace Persons (IDPs) and refugees within and outside the Zone. There is an estimated over 175,000 IDPs currently in Benue State alone (Adebanjoko & Nwofor, 2024).

Further implication is the emergence of various militia groups. Insecurity and violence have led many communities in Benue state to create self-defense forces and ethnic militias, which have engaged in further violence. The emergence of ethnic militia groups is because of the failure of the government to secure the lives and properties of the citizens. Many communities have lost faith in the Federal government and have thus resorted to self-defence (Adebanjoko & Nwofor, 2024). As Abass (2017) puts it, 'when the state pays a lip service to the security of the means of livelihood of its citizens, like farmlands; and there is no sufficient guarantee for safety, fear and suspicions among them emerge' and the people resort to self-defense. This accounts for why today there are different militia groups in several communities. The problem with the militia groups is that they sometimes unleash terror on their communities and innocent citizens in the name of security. The proliferation of militia groups therefore portends evil for the nation's security. Further

to the ugly incidents of Fulani herdsmen-farmers' conflicts in Benue state that undermined national security, Tersod (2016) revealed that its adverse effects of farmers-Herder conflict are visibly seen on food security in Benue state. It is also discovered that many human lives were lost, farmlands, residents and schools were destroyed leading to a decline in farm output (causing food insecurity) and human capital loss. These unpleasant incidents have enormously undermined food supply chain between Benue and neighboring states and zones of the federation. Hence, its national food security adverse effects are severe and endemic.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Benue is currently a flash point area with reference to security disturbances. Recently, there have been on going carnage of killings and destruction in Benue state which had elicited national and regional concerns. These unpleasant situations emerged when authorities and concerned persons fail in constitutional and statutory responsibilities to mediate, conciliate and secure. Thus, the following are recommendations in line to findings of this study: (a) The governments at national, state and local through appropriate agencies, legislations and advocacy can mitigate issues driving these conflicts. Also, the traditional institutions and community stakeholders can as well complement the obligations of the government and its agencies in addressing triggers of herdsmen-farmers conflict. (b) The security challenges of this incessant conflicts can also be mitigated through the prompt response of the military and state and local vigilante for the safety of these communities in Benue state. (c) Measures to mitigate these conflicts can be efficiently realized through committed political will and promptness of the appropriate state agencies and community stakeholders for peaceful co-existence of farmers and Fulani herdsmen.

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