

ROLE OF THE LEGISLATURE AND THE TRADITIONAL RELIGIOUS LEADERS IN HERDERS-FARMERS CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper investigates herders-farmers conflict in Nigerian society. The research intends to show how some contemporary Nigerians have lost their lives, and properties as a result of the said conflict, and why the Nigerian legislature, and the traditional religious leaders, should contribute significantly to the efforts to adequately manage herders-farmers conflict in Nigeria. Methodologically, this study generated data through the secondary source, thus, books, journal articles, internet materials, etc., that are relevant to the subject under discussion were consulted. Data were analyzed using the phenomenological and the sociological methods. Two (2) theoretical models were adopted as framework in which this study is built upon. They are: the structural conflict and the economic theories. The findings reveal that arms proliferation, kidnapping, banditry, etc., have become rampant in Nigeria, especially, in North Central, Northwest, and the Middle Belt, in recent times. The discussion further indicates that some Nigerians (the perpetrators) are benefiting from these unwholesome acts to the detriment of fellow Nigerians. This poses a threat to sustainable development in Nigeria. Therefore, contemporary Nigerian legislature, and the traditional religious leaders such as the medicine men, diviners, etc., who are the custodians of the law, and traditional religious values, respectively, in Nigeria, must be committed to their duties. This study intends to contribute to existing knowledge by creating awareness on the negative impact of herders-farmers conflict in Nigeria, today.

Keywords: Role, Legislature, Herders, Farmers, Conflict Management, Nigeria.

Introduction

Herders-farmers conflicts in Nigeria, to a very large extent, are impinging on sustainable development in the country. A situation which cannot be treated with a wave of the hand, if we really want Nigeria to move forward. The said conflicts have become deadlier and horrible in recent times, as a result of population pressures, climate change, etc. During the British colonial era, herders and farmers would agree on a system called “burti”, in which specific migration routes were set up for herders, with mutual agreement from the farmers, herders, and local authorities. Be that as it may, the “burti” system, in Nigeria, collapsed around the 1970s when farmers claimed ownership of lands along cattle migration paths; this led to conflicts (Roger, 2010).

It is worthy of note that in the past, herders frequently exchanged milk for cereal grains with farming communities. However, today, milk is no longer being widely bartered; so many packaged beverages are now witnessed in our various towns. There is no gainsaying that modern medicines have also made it possible for herders to move their livestock further south into the “tsetse fly zone” in the south, whereas before, herders could not keep their cattle on a large scale due to tropical diseases in humid climate zones. Permit me to state here that tsetse control programmes have reduced the threat of diseases like trypanosomiasis. In Nigeria today, herders have easy access to drugs for trypanosomiasis and dermatophilosis and this helps them to keep their livestock alive (Roger, 2010).

Over the past decades, herders, in Nigeria, have crossbred trypanosome-intolerant Zebu cattle with trypanosome-tolerant humpless breeds, thereby increasing the cattle's tolerance of tropical diseases. These are encouraging the widespread migration of Fulani herders into the southern most areas of Nigeria, where they can easily sell their livestock for higher prices due to very high demand for beef and other meat products. Unfortunately sedentary communities in the southern part of Nigeria have not, historically, had any experience with peacefully negotiating and co-existing with nomadic herders. Increasing ease of access to weapons, and religious polarization among both Muslims and Christians, have added to the potential for violent conflicts between certain herders and farmers in contemporary Nigeria (Roger, 2010). Since 1999, herders-farmers violence, in Nigeria, has killed more than 19,000 people and displaced hundreds of thousands more (ICON, 2020). From the foregoing it is obvious that herders-farmers conflict in Nigeria is posing a great threat to the unity of the country. It is also clear that the legislative bodies in contemporary Nigeria have not properly managed herders-farmers conflicts in this part of the globe, a situation which is, negatively, affecting peace and sustainable development in our country. The Nigerian legislative bodies must rise to the occasion; they must make laws that will ensure that the fundamental human rights of the Nigerian citizens, like right to life, right to acquire and own immovable property, etc., are adequately, protected. As regards the Nigerian traditional religious leaders, they must carry out their duties diligently, promoting African traditional values of peace, respect for human life and dignity.

Research Problem

Herders-farmers conflicts are negatively impacting the fabric of the contemporary Nigerian society, a situation that has created tension, and hatred among certain Nigerians and led to the loss of lives and properties in the country, thereby retarding sustainable development in this part of the world. Though, some scholars have examined the causes, the effects, and the management of the above conflicts, the role of the legislature and the traditional religious leaders in herders-farmers conflict management in contemporary Nigeria is yet to be adequately considered. Hence, this study focuses on the role of the contemporary Nigerian legislature, and the traditional religious leaders in herders-farmers conflict management in the country.

Research Objectives

The general objective of this research is to proffer a lasting solution to the problem associated with herders-farmers conflict in Nigeria. Specifically, the study intends to:

1. Examine herders-farmers conflicts in contemporary Nigeria.
2. Highlight the findings about herders-farmers conflicts in Nigeria for adequate government intervention. This is necessary to save the country from underdevelopment and disintegration.

Conceptual Clarification

Ordinarily, conceptual frameworks describe the relationship between the major concepts of a study. Thus, their relevance in an academic enquiry of this nature cannot be overemphasized. The text of Shedrack, in Shedrack (2006, pp.93-95), is the fulcrum around which the concepts employed within this conceptual framework revolve. In his article titled "The Methods of Conflict Resolution and Transformation", Shedrack, in Shedrack (2006, p.95), writes that conflict management is the process of reducing the negative and destructive capacity of conflict through a number of measures and by working with and through the parties involved in that conflict. He further maintains that conflict management covers the entire area of handling conflicts positively at different stages, including those efforts made to prevent conflict, by being proactive. It encompasses conflict limitation, containment and litigation. In the words of Burton (1990, p.16), this may include "conflict prevention; a term he uses to connote containment of conflict through steps introduced to promote conditions in which collaborative and valued relationships control the behaviour of conflict parties.

A proper understanding of the meanings of the other concepts used in this study like legislature "a body of men empowered to make laws for a country or state; the legislative body of a state or territory" (The New International Webster's Comprehensive Dictionary of the English Language, 2013, p.728), herder "a pastoral worker responsible for the care and management of a herd or flock of domestic animals, usually on open pasture" (en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/herder, 2024, p.2), and farmer "one who follows the occupation of farming; an agriculturist" (The New International Webster's Comprehensive Dictionary of the English Language, 2013, p.459), is indeed a treasure; it will enable the honest student and inquirer to appreciate the significance of the symbiotic relationship between peace and sustainable development.

Research Methodology

This study generated data through the secondary source. Therefore, books, journals, newspapers, internet materials, etc., that have information that is relevant to the subject under discussion were consulted. For data analysis and application the phenomenological and the sociological methods were used. The employment of the phenomenological method is made necessary by its capacity to protect an academic work from being influenced by bias, sentiment and prejudice. Concerning the use of the sociological method, it was necessitated by the involvement of Nigerians, the Nigerian society and the attempt to promote authenticity in this research.

Literature Review

Academic discourse on the herders-farmers conflict management in Nigeria has moved beyond sectional and materialist interpretations towards holistic theoretical frameworks.

Usually, theoretical framework is based on an existing theory or theories in a field of research that is related and/or reflects the hypothesis of a current study. It is a “blueprint” or a guide for a research (Grant and Osanloo, 2014, p.12). Fulton and Krainovich-Miller, in Obilor (2021, p.44), compare the role of the theoretical framework to that of a map or travel plan. Theoretical framework, therefore, guides the researcher so that he would not deviate from the confines of the accepted theories to make his or her final contribution scholarly and academic (Ibe, 2021, p.25).

This academic work has employed the structural conflict theory and the economic theories. The structural conflict theory has two main sub-orientations. The first is the radical structural theory represented by the Marxist dialectical school with exponents like Marx and Engels, V.I. Lenin, etc. The second is the liberal structuralism represented by Ross (1993), Scarborough (1998) and the famous work of Johan Galtung (1990) on structural violence (Faleti, in Shedrack, 2006, p.41). It is also, sometimes, similarly to transformative theory which addresses the reactions of individuals, groups, cultures, institutions and societies to change. It further sees incompatible interests based on competition for resources, which in most cases are assumed to be scarce, as being responsible for social conflicts (Collier, 2003, p.2).

It is pertinent to observe at this juncture that the main argument of the structural conflict theory is that conflict is built into the particular ways societies are structured and organized. In the words of Faleti, in Shedrack (2006, p.41), the theory looks at social problems like economic exclusion, injustice, poverty, inequity etc., as sources of conflict. Concerning the economic theories, there is a tendency among economists to provide an economic explanation for the existence and endurance of conflict. This is largely because people in conflict are assumed to be fighting over, not about, something that is material (Faleti, in Shedrack, 2006, p.49). The question then becomes: is the conflict a result of greed or of grievance (anger arising over feelings of injustice). Collier (2003, p.4), states that some persons actually benefit from chaos, while the overwhelming majority of the population are affected by the negative impacts of conflict; the leaders of armed formations that are actually perpetrating the violence often profit from the chaos; and that while the prospect of pecuniary gains is seldom the principal incentive for rebellion, it can become for some insurgent groups, a preferred state of affairs.

From the foregoing it is clear that the best application of the said theories is in the area of the major causes and effects of the herders-farmers conflict in contemporary Nigeria. One of the principal causes of violent conflict between herders and farmers in Nigeria today, is the presence of drought and desertification in the Northern part of the country, made necessary (mainly) by climate change. This has forced pastoralist herdsman to seek grazing lands further south resulting in competition over resources and clashes with settled farmers. Some innocent Nigerians have lost their lives and properties, some have been displaced, as a result of the above ugly situation. There is no gainsaying that the above conflict is encouraging proliferation of small arms, insecurity, etc., in Nigeria, in recent times. Therefore, it must be properly managed by the Nigerian government, and the traditional religious leaders in the country.

Countries like Mexico, the Western United States, Western Canada, etc., practice ranching, little wonder herders-farmers conflicts are not common in these countries. The Nigerian legislature can contribute meaningfully towards the proper management of the aforementioned conflict, by enacting laws that will make ranching mandatory for herders in Nigeria. It is evil to make one to believe that for him to survive in life he must trek from the north to the southern part of Nigeria tending livestock. Man is rational (Obi-Okogbuo, 1997, p.4). He has dignity (Iwe, 1987, p.156). Any attempt to make mockery of his genuine values and qualities must be strongly resisted.

Herders-Farmers Conflict in Nigeria

Lord Frederick Lugard, the governor of both the Northern Nigeria Protectorate and the Colony and Protectorate of Southern Nigeria on January 1, 1914, signed a document consolidating the said two protectorates, thereby creating the Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria. Forty-Six years later in 1960, Nigeria became an independent state (Jack, 2018, p.1). Nonetheless, the name Nigeria was taken from the Niger river running through the country. This name was allegedly coined in the late 19th century by British journalist Flora Shaw, who later married Baron Frederick Lugard, a British Colonial administrator. Since the foundation of the Nigerian republic herder-farmer conflicts have constituted one of the major causes of violence and untimely death in this part of the world. The Institute for Economics and Peace (2019), expects the aforesaid idea when it maintains that the above conflicts resulted in over 800 deaths by 2015. In the words of Kazeem (2018, p.27), in June 2018, over 200 people were killed and 50 houses were burnt in clashes between farmers and Fulani cattle herders in Plateau State, including one devastating attack from the night of the 22nd to the morning of the 23rd which killed 21 villagers in the village of Dowaya, Adamawa State. The casualties were reported to only consist of women and children. On 23 January 2024, suspected Fulani herders killed at least 30 people and burned and ransacked schools, places of worship, and houses in Kwahaslalek village, Mangu (AL Jazeera, 2024), etc.

Notwithstanding, the conflicts have been prominent, mainly, in the middle belt that is, North central, since the return of democracy in 1999. It is pertinent to observe here that today, the said disputes over arable land resources between the mostly-Muslim Fulani herders and the mostly-Christian non-Fulani farmers in Nigeria, have deteriorated into attacks on farmers by certain Fulani herdsmen. There is no gainsaying that attacks have also occurred in Northwestern Nigeria against farmers who are mainly Hausa, and are almost entirely Muslim. A good number of Fulani communities, who are ordinarily farmers, have also been attacked and raided by some Fulani bandits and other militias (Salkida, 2020).

Though the above conflict is, fundamentally, a land-use conflict between herders and farmers across Nigeria's Middle Belt, it has taken on dangerous religious and ethnic dimensions mostly because most of the farmers are Christians of various ethnicities, while most of the herders are Muslim Fulani who make up about 90% of the country's pastoralists (International Crisis Group, 2018, p.24). Once again, a reasonable number of Nigerians have lost their lives and properties since the said attacks began. Sedentary farming in rural

communities are always target of attacks because of their vulnerability. (Ilo, Jonathan-Ichaver & Adamolekun, 2019).

Permit me to state here, once more, that the conflicts between farmers and herders in contemporary Nigeria are to an extent, the consequences of the problem of access to land. The beginning of the 21st century witnessed an expansion of the agriculturist population and its cultivated land at the expense of pasture lands in the Middle Belt. In an already politically unstable region, it has never been possible to ascertain a legal title to land for every farmer. As a result, transhumance routes of herders were no longer available, especially in a context of global warming (Amnesty, 2018, p.17).

Deteriorating environmental conditions, desertification and soil degradation have led some Fulani herds men from Northern Nigeria to change their transhumance routes. Access to pastureland and watering points in the Middle Belt became essential for herds men travelling from the North of the country (Eduresource World, 2013). It is always assumed that climate change is the driver of the conflict between herders and farmers in Nigeria, but the fact is that climate change does not automatically cause the conflict. Regions vulnerable to climate change (Northern regions) witness less herder-farmer conflict. It is indeed argued that ethnic conflict between herding and farming groups is the primary mechanism behind the herder-farmer conflict nexus, in Nigeria (Madu & Nwankwo, 2020).

Regrettably, the contemporary Nigerian government is yet to properly deal with the root causes of the aforementioned conflicts. Since 2012, there have been projects to create transhumance corridors through the Middle Belt. Mostly supported by Northern lawmakers and opposed by their Southern counterparts, these efforts have been rarely successful. In 2019, former president, Muhammadu Buhari tried to create Rural Grazing Area (RUGA) settlements. His proposal was met with fierce criticism. On 17 May 2021, the 17 Southern governors in Nigeria issued the Asaba Declaration, aimed at solving the crisis (Channels TV, 2021, p.6). Again, this did not resolve the above conflicts.

It is the view of this paper that if ranching is properly and genuinely introduced in Nigeria, herders-farmers conflicts in this part of the globe will be reduced to the barest minimum. The Nigerian legislature should make laws that have the capacity to encourage a viable and vibrant form of ranching in Nigeria. Any system or practice that directly or indirectly supports gross abuse of the fundamental human rights, and dignity, and indiscriminate disregard for the human life is evil; it must be vehemently dismantled.

The Nigerian Legislature

According to the National Assembly of Nigeria (2024), the parliament in Nigeria, right from inception had robust and historic developments which dates back to the colonial and post-colonial independence. Be that as it may, we shall focus on the legislative chronicle of the Fourth Republic Parliament till date. There is no gainsaying that with the return of democratic rule in 1999, Nigeria has had six consecutive legislatures spanning a period of 24 years. It is pertinent to observe at this point that our country operates a Bi-Cameral

legislature; made up of two independent chambers, the Senate and the House of Representatives.

In Nigeria, the Senate is referred to as the Red Chamber, and it comprises of 109 Senators representing three Senatorial Districts of each of the 36 states of the Federation. Membership of the Chamber is based on equal representation. It is led by the Senate President and his Deputy as well as eight principal officers namely Senate Leader and his Deputy, Minority Leader and his Deputy, Chief Whip and his Deputy as well as Minority Whip and his Deputy. While the House of Representatives also known as the Green Chamber is made up of 360 Federal Representatives. Each Member represents one Federal Constituency of Nigeria. The number of constituencies per state varies since population strength is the criterion used to determine the number of each state's federal constituencies. The Green Chamber is led by the Speaker and assisted by the Deputy Speaker along with eight principal officers that include Majority Leader, Deputy Majority Leader, Minority Leader, Deputy Minority Leader, Chief Whip, Deputy Chief Whip, Minority Whip and Deputy Minority Whip.

It is important to state here that in Nigeria, the National Assembly is constitutionally vested with several functions. Prominent among them are lawmaking, representation, oversight and a host of others. Most activities of the National Assembly are done through the committees. The committees are populated by Distinguished Senators and Honourable Members of both Chambers based on professionalism and vast experiences in life. These experiences prepare them to be able to scrutinize bills, motions, and other legislative proposals. The legislators also intervene in the conduct of public institutions and officials. Accordingly, the apex parliament operates the committee system. Both Chambers of the nation's highest law-making body appoint members into its special and standing committees. The committees have the role of studying and researching bills, motions and other legislative proposals referred to them and report their findings to the whole chamber (National Assembly Nigeria, 2024, p.4)

A cursory look at the said views indicates that the contemporary Nigerian legislature can properly manage herders-farmers conflicts in this part of the globe, if it handles the aforementioned disputes without bias. Both herders and farmers are human beings. The genuine spirits of their businesses impact the Nigerian economy and populace positively. Therefore, all efforts must be made to protect their lives, dignity, occupations, goods and services, etc., from the shenanigans of miscreants who sometimes cause havoc in our country under the guise of herdsmen and farmers. A situation where a Nigerian citizen, unlawfully, slits the throats of his or her fellow citizens, or snuffs out their lives with "AK47" (gun), and the matter is swept under the carpet, perhaps due to certain ethnic, religious, political, etc., affiliations is indeed unfortunate.

The legislative bodies in Nigeria must live up to expectations; they must make and ensure that laws that have the capacity to check the excesses of some erring herders and farmers in this section of Africa, are adequately implemented. This is really necessary to avert further destruction of the lives and properties of innocent Nigerians.

African Traditional Religious Leaders

Traditional religious leaders in Nigeria include the traditional priest, the medicine man and the diviner (Quarcoopome, 1987, p. 74). The traditional priest is the servant of the divinities and he ministers in temples, shrines, etc. As the means of establishing contact between God and the divinities and the ancestors he is the chief intermediary between the divine beings and man. African (Nigerian) traditional priests, especially in the indigenous setting, are men and women of integrity and of respectable disposition. They are very prominent at the installation of kings and chiefs.

As regards the medicine man, he is more mobile and his work takes him to places at odd times. The primary concern of the medicine men are with sickness, disease and misfortune. These maladies are believed to be caused mainly by magic, witchcraft and sorcery. It is the duty of the medicine men to find out the cause of the sickness, discover who is responsible, diagnose the nature of the disease, apply the right remedy and supply means of preventing the misfortune from occurring again. This process is partly spiritual and partly physical. Medicine men symbolise the hope of the society with regard to good health, protection from evil forces, prosperity and good fortune and ritual cleansing when harm or impurities are contracted (Quarcoopome, 1987, pp. 77-82).

Diviners belong to the category of medicine men. They are basically concerned with the art of divination. This is a method of finding out the unknown by means of mediums, oracles, being possessed, divination objects, etc. Through this system of divination the diviners seek to interpret and explain the mysteries of life, convey the messages of God, divinities and the ancestors and other spirits to the members of the community. They also give guidance in daily affairs, settle disputes, reveal the past, diagnose diseases, etc.

A careful look at the above view shows that the said traditional religious leaders occupy a significant position in Nigeria especially, in the indigenous set up. A good number of contemporary Nigerian politicians, businessmen and women, etc., still patronize them in spite of condemnation from Christianity, Islam, etc. As custodians of African traditional religion, and morals, it is the duty also of the said traditional religious leaders in Nigeria today, to propagate the relevance of adequate observation of the genuine spirit of the African traditional morals, norms, and values which encourages love, peace, mutual respect and understanding, respect for human life, etc., among their numerous followers.

Discussion

The result of the conflict between certain herders and farmers in contemporary Nigeria is indeed devastating. Currently some Nigerian Farmers dread entering their farms, for fear of being molested, raped or killed by certain herdsman. A situation which is promoting severe hunger, restiveness, theft, etc., in the country. One of the major demands of the organizers of the “Hunger Protest” which rocked Nigeria, from 1st to 10th of August, 2024, was that the Nigerian government must combat insecurity and hunger, which are bedeviling the nation. Regrettably, some well-meaning Nigerians lost their lives and properties during the above protest. It is worthy of note that herders-farmers conflicts in

this part of the world today, have increased the numerical strength of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPS) in the country. They are also stretching the financial expenses of the government on security. Really, if we must witness sustainable development in this part of West Africa, issues concerning herders-farmers conflict in our country must not be treated with a wave of the hand. Peace is a sine qua non for the said kind of development, thus, all hands must be on deck. This notwithstanding, the contemporary Nigerian legislators must work as a formidable team in order to find an enduring solution to the said problem. To achieve this, all forms of divisiveness encouraged by religious intolerance, ethnic bigotry, unpatriotism, etc., must be avoided like the plague. The conflicts between herders and farmers in Nigeria today, are posing a tremendous threat to peace, unity and sustainable development in the country. Some Nigerians have lost their dignity, properties and lives, due to the above conflicts. Regrettably, the perpetrators of these heinous crimes still walk freely on the Nigerian streets. The contemporary Nigerian government is yet to employ a head-on approach towards the above violent disputes. This has led to the distrust of the said government, by certain Nigerian citizens.

Farming in places like Plateau, Benue, Southern Adamawa, etc., in Nigeria currently has been ruined; the result of this, is severe hunger in almost all the nooks and crannies of our country. Youth restiveness, kidnapping, prostitution, drugs and alcohol abuses, internet fraud, etc., are now rampant in this part of the globe. A situation which to an extent, has dented the image of the country. Unfortunately, the contemporary Nigerian government, which the Nigerian legislature is a significant part of, is yet to live up to expectations in terms of proper management of herders-farmers conflicts in the country. Today, there are so much hatred, disunities etc., among some Nigerians. It is pertinent to observe here that this is impinging sustainable development in this section of the globe. This might continue unless the current Nigerian legislature makes stringent laws, and in alliance with the other arms of the Nigerian government ensure that herders and farmers in the country carry out their actions according to the dictates of the laws of our land.

Recommendations

Against the backdrop of the findings of this research, the study recommends the following:

1. There should be outright ban on open grazing in Nigeria.
2. The Nigerian police and law enforcement agencies should ensure that laws for ranching are adequately adhered to by herders.
3. Nigerian traditional religious leaders should always encourage peace among contemporary Nigerians.
4. Punitive measures against law offenders must at all times be carried out without prejudice.

Conclusively, the legislature is a governmental body with the power to make, amend and repeal laws. As regards law, usually, it is the body of rules and standards issued by the legislative body, or to be applied by courts and similar authorities. A careful look at the above ideas shows that the Nigerian legislature possesses all it takes to end, or at least reduce the violent conflicts between herders and farmers in this part of the world to the barest minimum. It is quite unfortunate that the said disputes have continued in spite of the

enormous power which the Nigerian legislature wields.

Some contemporary Nigerians have lost their properties, lives, etc. There are so much anger, hatred, poverty, etc., in our country, today, due to the said conflicts, and this is having a devastating effect on the sustainable development of the country. If this persists the unity of Nigerian might be completely jeopardized. Therefore, it is high time the contemporary Nigerian legislature, and the indigenous religious leaders began to live up to expectations. Nigeria needs a vibrant law, and traditional values that have the capacity to promote viable ranching system, and curtail the excesses of some herders and farmers in the country. The Nigerian government must always be ready to, adequately, punish perpetrators of heinous crimes like murder, arson, rape, cattle rustling, etc., to save the unity of the country from disintegration.

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