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THE PERENNIAL HERDER-FARMER CONFLICTS IN NIGERIA: HISTORICAL ROOTS, CLIMATIC DRIVERS, AND SOCIO- POLITICAL DYNAMICS OF FULANI PASTORALISM IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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Abstract

Conflicts between nomadic Fulani herders and sedentary farming communities represent one of Nigeria's most persistent and destructive socio-economic challenges. Although often framed in contemporary discourse as a 21st-century crisis, this paper demonstrates that the phenomenon has deep historical antecedents, with documented clashes dating back to at least the early colonial period. Drawing primarily on C. K. Meek's seminal 1921 ethnographic and census report on Northern Nigerian tribes, alongside climatic, ecological, and socio-political analyses, the study examines the multi-layered causes of these conflicts. The research identifies four interlocking categories of drivers: geographical and climatic factors (particularly the movement from the arid Sahel and Sudan savannas to the Guinea Savanna in search of pasture); pastoral and economic imperatives; religious and political dimensions; and the quest for land and territorial control. Special attention is paid to how British colonial administrative policies, informed by racial theories of superiority, institutionalized differential treatment that privileged Fulani Muslim elites over indigenous Middle Belt communities, thereby entrenching structural imbalances that persist today. The paper argues that environmental pressures—exacerbated by deforestation, changing rainfall patterns, and desertification—interact with historical narratives of ethnic and religious superiority to transform what was once a largely symbiotic relationship into recurring cycles of violence. By revisiting colonial-era ethnographic records and situating them within contemporary realities, this study provides a historically grounded framework for understanding the roots of herder-farmer conflicts and their implications for national cohesion, food security, and sustainable development in Nigeria.

Keywords: Herder-farmer conflicts, Fulani pastoralists, Northern Nigeria, Colonial policies, Desertification, Land control, Ethnic-religious tensions.

Introduction

The conflict between Fulani herders and farming communities in Nigeria is not a recent phenomenon but a perennial feature of the nation's socio-economic landscape. Its roots can be traced back several decades before the 1914 amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorates. One of the earliest systematic documentations of these tensions appears in the ethnographic and anthropological investigations conducted by British colonial officer C.K. Meek as part of the 1921 census of Northern Nigeria. Meek observed that disputes between nomadic Fulani cattle herders migrating southward and indigenous farming communities frequently arose over crop damage, often escalating into physical confrontations. This study seeks to unravel the historical, ecological, economic, and socio-political underpinnings of these enduring conflicts. It engages Meek's foundational report as a primary historical framework while extending the analysis to encompass contemporary realities. The paper argues that the migratory patterns of Fulani pastoralists, driven largely by the search for viable grazing lands, have been shaped by Nigeria's diverse vegetation zones—particularly the transition from the Sahel and Sudan savannas in the north to the Guinea Savanna of the Middle Belt and, increasingly, the rainforest zones further south. Four major categories of factors are identified as central to understanding the persistence and intensification of these clashes: (1) Geographical and Climatic Factors, including rainfall variation, desertification, and the ecological advantages of the Guinea Savanna for livestock; (2) Pastoral and Economic Factors, centered on the livelihood needs of nomadic cattle rearing; (3) Religious and Political Factors; and (4) the Quest for Land and Territorial Control. These elements are further complicated by colonial legacies that institutionalized notions of ethnic and racial superiority, particularly the differential treatment accorded to Fulani Muslim elites under the system of indirect rule. By examining the interplay between environmental pressures and historically constructed identities of superiority and subordination, this paper illuminates how what was once a mutually beneficial seasonal interaction between herders and farmers has evolved into a complex and often deadly contestation over resources. Understanding these dynamics is essential not only for historical scholarship but for crafting sustainable policy responses to one of Nigeria's most pressing national security and development challenges in the 21st century.

The journey to unraveling the perennial herders and farmers' conflicts in Nigerian history dates back to some decades before the amalgamation of Northern and Southern protectorates in 1914. C. K. Meek's ethnographic studies on the Northern tribes of Nigeria observed that there had been conflicts between Fulani herders who moved down from the upper north with their cattle into the middle Belt in search of grazing fields. He notes that constant clashes are often observed between the local indigenous tribes and the nomadic Fulani herders, resulting in violence. "Disputes between Fulani and inhabitants on the ground of injury to crops are, however, of constant occurrence and frequently lead to a display of physical force (Meek, 1971a). This quote formed part of Meek's report on a survey of the ethnological and anthropological investigation and census report of 1921. His report would, therefore, serve as the first-ever recorded account of Fulani herders and farmers' conflicts in the history of Nigeria. This would serve as historically documented evidence of Fulani herders and their host communities. It would also help the present generation of Nigerians to have historical accounts and facts on the genesis of Fulani herders and the autochthonous people of northern Nigerian conflicts.

In its efforts to get the root cause of constant Fulani herders and local inhabitants clashes, the author would engage the report of Meek's ethnographic and anthropologic investigation and census report of 1921 findings to have first-hand recorded historical documents on clashes between both parties.

His work or report forms the framework or the basic structure of ideas in X-raying the historical antecedence of the perennial farmers and Fulani cattle herders' conflicts in Nigeria.

Having identified the basic historical facts and ideas that would shape and govern this paper, it is saddled with unraveling the immediate and remote causes of sustained farmers and Fulani herders' conflicts in Nigeria. Historical records have shown that the conflicts between Fulani and indigenous tribes may have lived over a century, looking at when Meek conducted his ethnographic studies in Northern Nigeria.

Fulani herders and farmers' conflict in Nigeria can be tied to several factors. These factors can be classified into four category factors.

Climatic factor

Pastoral/ economic factor

Religious/ Political factor

Quest for land factor

Each of these factors shapes the Fulani nomadic style of life and eventually forms the basis for foundational elements of the Fulani worldview. Each influences their pastoral pattern of movement, migration from one location to another, settlement, political instinct, economic well-being, and religious life.

With these few preambles that shape the Fulani nomad's worldview, we will see how each acted on the essential of primordial order in every given point of origin. These essentials can be classified into four categories:

Ethnography (ethnicity, history, identity Geography (Land and Territory), Religion, and Culture tribes may have existed for over a century. Still, looking at the time, Meek conducted ethnographic studies on north Nigerian tribes. His studies showed that there have been conflicts between Fulani and farmers, which most often result in violent clashes. His studies went further to show that most of the violence is witnessed mainly in the Middle Belt of Nigeria. Still, recently, the whole of the southern parts of the country are under the severe menace of Fulani herders.

In our survey and the continuation of Meek's report, we can tie these constant Fulani and farmers clashes to several factors. These factors can be classified into four major categories, and each category is driven by its motives:

Geographical and Climatic Factors

Economic and Pastoral Factors

Religious and Political Factors

Quest for land Factor

Geographical Climatic Factor

Climate is a geographical term that helps explain a given area's weather situation. It describes how weather conditions affect rainfall in a given area's temperature and pattern or distribution. It helps to explain how these factors, as well as the vegetation and humans, respond to vegetational differences. O. A. I. Wena holds that climate is the average temperature condition over a very long period. The elements of climate are rainfall, temperature with relative humidity, pressure cloud, and sunshine" (Iwena, 2012a). Affect a place at a given period. Our understanding of a region or country's climate condition will help us examine how this weather conditions affect livestock animal husbandry in the northern, Middle Belt, and southern regions. Since we focus on cattle rearing, we will discuss how the vegetation in these regions has helped us understand Fulani pastoralism and its relationship to other regions. Our primary focus is on the type of vegetation that is the foundation of the country's north, middle belt, and south. The Nigerian vegetation can be classified into two major categories, each with its own sub-category. The two categories are forest vegetation and savanna vegetation. The

forest vegetation is divided into two sections: mangrove swamp forest and rainforest, and the savanna vegetation comprises three belts: Guinea Savanna, Sudan Savanna, and Sahel Savanna (map) (Iwena, 2012b).

We noticed that each belt is in two major vegetation areas in Nigeria, and each belt largely influences nomadic pastoralism. But in this work, we are looking at where nomadic pastoralism may have started, what influences its migratory pattern, the approach and the relationship between the host communities and the nomads, and lastly, factors that necessitated the migratory pattern of nomadic pastoralism.

Forest vegetation has two belts, the mangrove swamp forest and the rainforest mangrove belt, which are found in the country's southernmost part (the coastal areas). Its vegetation characteristics are mainly woody tall trees with evergreen broad leaves, swamp terrain, and raffia palms. This belt does not encourage any form of pastoralism since the swamp terrain makes cattle movement difficult, with leaves far from human reach. All green broad leaves are out of reach to humans and animals.

The Rain Forest belt has a similar environmental structure but with slight differences. The terrain here is not as swampy as the mangrove. Still, it has taller trees with buttress roots, evergreen leaves, climbers, creepers, and numerous plants with heterogeneous trees such as Iroko, obeche, mahogany, etc. The belt provides lucrative opportunities for lumbering entrepreneurship and farming activities such as cultivating tree crops in plantations, e.g., rubber, cocoa, oil palm, etc. (Iwena, 2012c).

In this belt, we also found that the terrain does not support grazing activities because the belt cannot adequately produce the type of ecosystem found in the Guinea savanna- the grassland. However, Fulani herders are in great numbers during the dry season here because grasses in both Sahel and Guinea are getting dried up. Nevertheless, the Guinea Savanna offers a conducive habitat for herbivorous animals.

Guinea Savanna

Guinea Savanna is the largest of all the vegetational belts in Nigeria. It covers all the states in the Middle Belt of Nigeria. The states found in the Middle Belt are Benue, Taraba, Plateau, Nasarawa, Federal Capital Territory, Kogi Southern, Kaduna, Ilorin, and Niger.

Guinea savanna can also be classified as having the same characteristics as grassland vegetation since both have common environmental characteristics. Guinea Savanna has an ecosystem with a heterogeneous grass structure. It is characterized by high spatial heterogeneity in vegetation structure, aboveground biomass, and nutritional quality, with a short-grass grazing field. The belt has a diverse species of assemblage that exhibits various plant traits (<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.gov/2752268>). Which makes the belt an attractive grazing land compared to other belts in Nigeria. The rainfall in this belt is reasonably adequate to support the spatial and heterogeneous assemblage of plants. The belt's natural climate and vegetational factors promote and sustain a healthy heterogeneous assemblage of plants that make the belt commercial for grazing activities.

People of the Middle Belt should be encouraged to engage in commercial grass farming in (Guinea Savanna) for economically valuable exports, since the Belt is suitable for such farming activities. It is a multi-pronged strategy that provides the Belt for divestment from root crops, agrarian crops, to commercial grass farming. This approach leverages the region's heterogeneous grass structure, adequate rainfall, and diverse plant assemblages, which already make it suitable for grazing and forage production.

Key Strategies for Encouragement and Economic Viability

1. Government Policy and Incentives:

- Provide subsidies for seeds, fertilizers, mechanization (e.g., balers, harvesters), and irrigation to reduce startup costs.
- Offer tax breaks, low-interest loans, and grants through programs like the Agricultural Promotion Policy or new youth agribusiness initiatives.
- Establish land tenure security for commercial plots dedicated to forage to encourage long-term investment.

2. Research, Extension, and Capacity Building:

- Promote high-yielding, adapted species like *Andropogon gayanus* (Gamba grass), *Chloris gayana* (Rhodes grass), *Brachiaria* spp., and Guinea grass through extension services and demonstration farms.
- Train farmers in improved agronomic practices (e.g., optimal planting density, fertilization, rotational grazing/harvesting), hay/silage making, and quality standards for export (e.g., nutritional profiling, compression/baling).
- Partner with research institutions for cultivar improvement and climate-resilient varieties.

3. Value Chain Development and Market Access:

- Invest in processing infrastructure (baling, drying, pelleting) and logistics (storage, roads, export ports) to minimize post-harvest losses.
- Facilitate cooperatives or out grower schemes linked to exporters for collective bargaining and consistent supply.
- Target export markets in Asia (Japan, China, South Korea) and the Middle East (UAE, Saudi Arabia), where demand for fodder is high due to limited local production and large livestock sectors.
- Certify products for quality (e.g., protein content, low contaminants) to meet international standards.

4. Public-Private Partnerships and Financing:

- Collaborate with private investors for commercial farms that include smallholders as out growers, providing inputs, training, and guaranteed buy-back.
- Develop forage quality-based pricing systems and market information platforms to improve profitability.
- Integrate with livestock value chains to create domestic demand while building export capacity.

5. Sustainability and Risk Management:

- Promote mixed systems (e.g., agro-pastoralism) to avoid overgrazing or monoculture risks.
- Provide insurance against drought/pests and climate-smart practices.
- Raise awareness of income potential to shift mindsets from subsistence to commercial production.

These measures could significantly raise regional income per capita by creating jobs, increasing farm revenues, and generating foreign exchange, while reducing herder-farmer conflicts through dedicated fodder production.

Countries Currently Engaged in Commercial Grass/Hay Farming for Export

Several countries successfully export grass hays and fodders, providing models for Nigeria:

- *United States*: The world's leading hay exporter (alfalfa and grass hays like timothy, bermudagrass). Exports primarily to China, Japan, South Korea, and the Middle East, valued at over \$1 billion annually in recent peaks. High-quality grass hays make up a substantial portion.

- *Australia*: Major exporter of oaten grass hay and other fodders to Asia (Japan, China, Korea) and the Middle East. The export fodder industry contributes \$450–600 million annually.

- *Canada*: Exports timothy and alfalfa hay, competing in Asian markets like Japan.
- *Pakistan*: Successfully exports Rhodes grass hay to the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Cultivation expanded to over 18,000–20,000 acres for export, with strong profitability due to proximity to Gulf markets.
- *Other notable players*: Spain, Italy, Argentina, and Sudan also export significant volumes of hay/fodder.

Nigeria's Guinea Savanna has natural advantages (rainfall, native species like Gambia grass) that could position it competitively, especially for Rhodes or Gambia grass hay targeting Middle Eastern importers facing production bans or shortages.

Sahel Vegetation

The Sahel vegetation or belt covers a large area of northern Nigeria. The belt or vegetation is an offshoot of the grassland it is one of the most drought-prone belts. The Sahel region of West Africa is a transition zone between equatorial climate, vegetation to the south, and desert to the north. The region's climate has been dominated by dry conditions for most of the years (<https://www.science.gov/topicpages/s/sahel+region>). Studies done on the Sahel region of West Africa showed that the region is home to pastoral entrepreneurship. It cuts across the West African sub-region but with varying annual rainfall. Ousmall Tall, in his studies, notes that “In Sahel region of West Africa, herdsman traditionally head south across the semi-arid below the Sahara desert and above the Sudanian Savanna, towards the coasts during the long dry season to graze their animals. The farmers in the host regions used to welcome the herdsman’s arrival as the grazing cattle fertilized their compound. In the decades, however, economic environmental and population pressure have turned this mutually benefiting symbiosis into deadly conflict” (Tall, 2016). Tall’s observations did not provide the basis for the movement of cattle from the Sahel region to the Guinea savanna and further southern belts. Still, they also showed a mutual relationship between the herders and their host communities that later gravitate into conflicts. However, Tall’s observation is not the first to give the hermeneutical roots of conflicts between visiting Fulani herders and their host communities. Some centuries ago, before the amalgamation, a British ethnologist, C. K. Meek, unbiasedly gave a historical pastoral pattern of movement and the genesis of Fulani and farmers’ conflict in northern Nigeria.

Meek notes that Fulani's main desire is to find healthy grazing fields for his cattle. He says that Fulani's “Chief concern is to find suitable grazing grounds, and they are thus nomads. They are always found in the belt of parkland (pointing to Guinea savanna), which separates the tropical forest from the deserts” (Meek, 1971b). Meek further gave his readers the root cause of conflict between the Fulani nomads and farmers in Guinea Savanna. He traces constant conflicts between the host communities and Fulani nomads regarding space and disrespect to the right of ownership to the source of livelihood (means of support or subsistence). He writes, “Disputes between Fulani and the local inhabitants on the ground of injury to crops are, however, of constant occurrence, and frequently lead to a display of physical forces” (Meek, 1971c).

Rainfall Variation

We have earlier noted that “Almost half of the territory of Nigeria is occupied by a moist, so-called high grass savanna” (Adaption.option.com). The annual precipitation ranges from 1000 to 1400 mm on average. However, the rainfall range in the Sahel region is between 500 and 1000. This range can even decrease drastically in the season of extreme drought. The Sudan savanna records a similar range of annual rainfall.

Sahel Region

The Sahel vegetation or belt covers quite an extensive area in the West Africa sub-region; it covers countries like Niger, Mali, and Burkina-Faso, northern Nigeria; livestock production is the main occupation of these zones; the vegetation here is short-grasses that whether at the heart of the dry

season. The zone is simultaneously associated with the shortage of adequate rainfall, water supply, and trees that are still producing broad leaves. According to a study, these leaves have experienced livestock feeding problems for several years because of the lack of water and grass for sufficient farming livestock production in the Sahel” (Adaption.option.com).

Contributing Factors of Herders Movement from one Geographical Belt to the Other in search of Grassing Field.

Climatic

Findings Climate and vegetational factors have been identified as a fundamental primary root cause of the Fulani herder’s movement. We observed that searching for better grazing fields and other subsidiary factors necessitated Fulani herders' movement from their domain- the Sahel and Montane belts to the Guinea Savanna, Rain Forest, and mangrove belts.

Our study also discovered that the need for study and sustainable, nutritious grass and plants for cattle and other animals can only be abundant in the Guinea Savanna. The natural endowment of this belt with both sustainable and nutritious feeds for cattle and other herbivorous animals has made the belt the destination choice for grazing activities. This, however, has made the available space in the belt a contention issue and struggle for land between the autochthonous people, indigenous people, local communities, and Fulani herders.

Plants and grasses' adaptability in the Guinea Savanna is one of those natural endowments or factors that make the Guinea Savanna a unique belt and a hub for grazing destinations. The plants and grasses of this belt can survive dry or climatic conditions because of their thin leaf size and waxy coating stems.

Characteristics of Grass and Plants in Guinea Savanna

Desert plants and grasses have natural adaptive features that can withstand harsh desert conditions, such as water scarcity and scorching heat. Plants and grasses of this belt have small or thin leaves, which do not expose these plants and grasses to scorching heat because of the circumference these leaves cover.

Plants in this belt have leathery and waxy coating stems that help the plants reduce the evaporation of their water content. Reduced leaf size allows plants in this belt to become adaptive to harsh climate conditions because fewer surface areas are exposed to the sun. Hence, the loss of water is minimized. The growth point on the grasses is very close to the ground, thus making it difficult to survive or escape from windy and hot conditions (kids.nceas.u).

The adaptive features of plants and grasses in the Guinea Savanna give the belt natural climate advantages against the Sahel and Montane belts. These two belts are the homes of the Fulani cattle production nomads. But they cannot support cattle and sustain them. Grasses and plants of these belts cannot withstand the scorching heat, and they wither as soon as the dry season sets in. This makes cattle rearing a difficult practice and an unproductive venture, which places a demand for a better grazing field.

The British colonial administrators institutionalized hostility between the exogenous settlers and autochthonous peoples of Nigeria.

The British government that colonized Nigeria, assuming complete administrative control of northern and southern protectorates in 1914, carried out a survey through a British national. The then British Governor Hugh Clifford commissioned a British ethnologist, C. K. Meek, to study the ethnography of the new British colony. Meek’s scope of work covers the ethnic composition of her colony,

economic viability, climate conditions of the territory, and socio-political and religious structures of the people.

Clifford, who served between 1919 to 1925, commissioned Meek to conduct both ethnological and anthropological investigations of Northern Nigerian provinces. Meek also engaged the work or services of other ethnologists, such as Mrs. Temples. The engagement of Meek and the relevance of his assignment by Clifford serve as a piece of historical evidence on how the British government managed their Nigerian colony. Clifford writes, “On the eve of my departure from Nigeria, I have asked to write a few words of introduction on Meek’s great compilation of the census report of the Northern provinces of Nigeria for the year 1921” (Meek, 1971d). Clifford’s report further intimates to his home government that such an investigation has become necessary. He writes, “If they are not recorded and recorded with skill and care (which Meek has) at present, they will be lost to human knowledge forever” (Meek, 1971e). The highlights of Meek’s report, which are catalogued into two volumes cover; the basic primordial social factors of the people of Northern Nigeria: ethnography (ethnicity, History, and identity). Geography (land, territory, vegetation, and climate).

Religion and Culture

Economic structure

On receiving his report, the British government then used his report on how to run their Nigerian colony. We also found volume 1 of Meek’s ethnographic report on the Northern tribes of Nigeria so handy and comprehensive that we decided not only to look at some of the highlights of his report but also to use some of his highlights to trace the root causes of Fulani herders and farmers’ conflicts in Northern Nigeria. The Climate Report is one of those highlights in Meek’s Report. Our views are primarily drawn from his observations on the climatic conditions of Northern Nigeria.

Meek observes that the territory of Nigeria witnesses scanty rain in the North, while the South has a relatively well-distributed rainfall. He writes, “The provinces situated North of the central maintenance system suffer from a scanty rain supply. Thus, the average rainfall in Kano hardly exceeds 34 inches, and in Bornu and Sokoto, it is considerably less (12, 23 $\frac{1}{2}$, 25 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches)” (Meek, 1971f)

Meek further notes that because of the arid nature of the North, which is often associated with drought, the “vegetation becomes very scanty, consisting of long coarse grasses” (Meek, 1971g). Thus, making grasses of this nature dominant in the north. The prevalence of grasses of this nature is because the vegetation here finds it challenging to retain moisture that would help to sustain healthy grasses that would promote, enhance, and support extensive grazing activities. Meek validated his claim by stressing the period it took him to arrive at his findings. His findings contradict the common saying of the people that “the more northern provinces have a growing tendency to drought conditions” (Meek, 1971h). Meek’s observation contradicted this popular belief among the people of the North. He writes that “the evidence of twenty years observation in the Northern provinces cannot be adduced to support this theory, but the disappearance of game, the dried-up watercourse, and the constant deposits by the harmattan wind of sand from the Sahara, and the migrations from North to South, would all seem to favour this view” (Meek, 1971i). His findings strongly support an unending migration from North to South by the people, but most importantly, the herders who are in constant search of a better grazing field. Hence, the migration of Fulani herders from the north to the Guinea Savanna and beyond is inevitable. Meek also raised a striking observation that would be an indictment against the British colonial master. He noticed that the wholesale deforestation of the country by natives prior to the British occupation must also be reckoned as having had a detrimental effect on the rain-supply. Since the plantation of trees is essential to attracting rain to a place, Meek’s observation will stand as an indictment against the British government that would have taken positive steps to address and arrest the movement of herders from North to South. The British colonial master, Her Majesty, had knowledge of what would become the effect of deforestation in northern Nigeria. If the culture of forestation is not sustained, the colonialist should have known that the sustenance of

the forestation programme should have been legislated into law. The enactment of forestation laws would not only guarantee fresh, grassy vegetation but would also help enforce compliance and continuity of forestation programs in the north. But this seems to have been deliberately played down by the British government even when the government has received reports on clashes between Fulani herders and indigenous local farmers. Meek's finding showed that causes of clashes between these groups of people have always been linked to the search for a better grazing field by Fulani herders from the north. Meek writes, "Disputes between Fulani and local inhabitants on the ground of injury to crops are, however, of constant occurrence and frequently lead to a display of physical force" (Meek, 1971j). We observed that the British government's failure to address Fulani and local farmers' conflict way back in the late 1800s has metamorphosed into what is now known as Fulani annexation of middle Belt land and Fulanization of Nigeria. Since the Middle Belt has become the choicest destination for grazing activities because of its rich vegetation, the Fulani herders would always ensure they have access to land in this region. Meek writes, "The richest soil is found in the Benue Valley and on the islands of Lake Chad, which emerges during the dry seasons" (Meek, 1971k).

We have observed that a place's geographic and climate conditions essentially influence and determine the pattern of human movement, settlement, economic viability, agricultural potentiality, and population density. These natural phenomena are carefully captured in Meek's report as factors that brought about movement from north to south, particularly the Fulani herders of northern Nigeria. Meek writes "The influence of the geographical and other natural conditions just described has been of such paramount importance in directing the movements of tribes and moulding of their culture, social organization, and economic life" (Meek, 1971l). Meek's report has not only helped us to indict the British government but has helped us to see how the British colonial master has institutionalized tribal superiority and religious and socio-political superiority over the indigenous people of the Middle Belt of Nigeria.

The Institutionalization of Fulani Superiority over the Autochthons

Racial superiority is a thing of the mind. And since the consciousness of race is of the mind, the conviction that one is superior to the other is motivated by self-consciousness. So, for a proper understanding of racial disparity or ethnic superiority, one has to trace how a group conceives an assigned value to themselves and how their values have helped to express dominance over the other groups; values do not evolve on their own. Other phenomenal factors are primordial in nature and, when considered and interpreted by a group of people, provide the basis of self-consciousness, self-centeredness, self-awareness, and all the selves that are commonly known primordial factors are tied to ethnicity and geography, identity, religion, and culture apart from primordial factors, there are other sociological factors, such as economic strength education, knowledge political awareness, and civilization. Apparently, according to a source, any time groups from different religious and racial or ethnic sectors of society came in contact with one another, there was the possibility of one group challenging another for dominance, which continues today (www.universalclass.com/psychology). We realized that the assignment of the historical disposition of any group of people depends on how such a people have, over time, developed their understanding of any other tribe, which is often a historical, legendary account. So, for value to be conceived by any group, the group that feels superior would love to assert its dominance over the others whose values may have been considered inferior. The self-conceived superiority of a group creates the consciousness in this group to stand out from the rest. The willingness to stand out rests on the group's self-conceived values, which provide the group with the basis to express its dominance over the inferior group. Any group that assigns superiority consciousness to itself always ensures that the group maintains its hold over the rest. It can go to any length to resist any challenge or fight whatever threatens its dominance and superiority. When self-acclaimed superiority by any group has been conceived, established, and recognized, it provides such a group with a pseudo-advantage over the lesser but inferior groups. It is a false advantage because the group's acclaim contradicts creation order. Besides, the "lesser" assumed "inferior" group may seem not to recognize their superiority over them because what gives and

strengthens their self-confidence lies in their ethnic consciousness. But any group that shares the same falsehood, “superiority” consciousness theory, as is the case with the British colonial administrators and the Fulani Muslims of northern Nigeria.

When Lord Lugard assumed control of British interests in Nigeria, he employed superiority and differential treatment to establish his style of governance in northern Nigeria. Turaki, in one of his works, indicated the British colonial administrators as the architects of the enshrinement of both dichotomous and differential treatment in northern Nigeria, where indirect rule became the basis of administration in northern Nigeria. He notes, “European racial theories and views about the peoples of Africa formed the ideological basis of justifying differential treatment. The classification of peoples or Africans into the “advanced” communities” and the “primitive tribes” became a racial and prejudiced factor that dominated the attitudes and the administrative practices of the political office” (Lugard, 1993).

The pseudo-self-acclaimed superiority of the Fulani ethnic group gave them an advantage over other ethnic nationalities of the Middle Belt region and has now extended to the rest of the Nigerian people. The Fulani attitude of “self-superiority” could be seen even after the British had granted independence to the Nigerian people. The Fulani, as an ethnic group, still believe that they are of a superior race and that they have the right to lord themselves over the rest of Nigeria. Because the rest of the other groups have been considered either “primitive” or “inferior.” To them, the rest are either slaves or people whose right to their ancestral land is taboo. Do in line with the philosophy of self-acclaim superiority “indigenous administration gave autonomy to the Muslim rulers and peoples, but in the non-Muslim areas, some ethnic groups lost their independence to the Muslim Hausa-Fulani rule” (Turaki, 2010a).

Lugard and his administrative officers seemed not to be the only group of Europeans who had disproportionately devalued and reduced other ethnic nationalities as “primitive” or “uncivilized.” A reflection of devalued persons can be seen in the pictorial of peoples of northern Nigeria as captured by C. K Meek. Meek, whose works formed the foundation or root cause of perennial clashes between the Fulani and the rest of Nigeria, but particularly the ethnic peoples of northern Nigeria. His pictorial documentation of the peoples of Northern Nigeria showed how biased he was, and that can be seen from the pictures he used in representing the ethnic groups of Northern Nigeria and their Fulani counterparts. The images he used for them gave them a devalued mentality, uncivilized and uncultured. Their status is “primitive” in comparison to the Fulani people of the North. His document showed the nudity of other tribes as being primitive and uncivilized in comparison with the Fulani people, whom he showed respect and found to be a people who are modest in dressing and do not exhibit primitively. Meek's poor assignment of other ethnic groups in relation to the Fulani people could be traced to the racial disparity between people of Caucasian background and blacks. Racial disparity is an attitudinally influenced conception of one's identity that runs contrary to creational order, which sees all human beings as equal. So, attitudes and ideologies that trigger ideas of superiority and subordination of particular groups of people are embedded in the ways that these groups of people have their attitudes over others who are not of the same race as them. The kind of racial attitude being discussed influenced the way he saw other ethnic groups outside the Fulani circle. A few pictures he shot while conducting his ethnographic study of Northern Nigeria showed his misguided judgment and bias toward other tribes. His pictorial judgment revealed other ethnic groups as primitive and uncivilized, and governed by the Fulani. Some of the following pictures provided the basis for our judgment: figs 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 19 (a & b), 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 29, 34, 35, 36, 38, 65, 66, 69 & 73. Those pictures, as labeled and as contained in his report or book, suggested that he took them during his studies, were deliberate, and were designed to malign the indigenous people of the Middle Belt.

Perhaps, being perceived as primitive and uncivilized—as the people of the Middle Belt were assessed by the colonial masters—suggested that these communities, whose lands have been overrun by Fulani herders, were mentally deficient and unfit to maintain or defend their inalienable rights to their ancestral lands. The Fulani herders, in turn, viewed this as a legitimate right to convert the native farmers' lands into grazing fields, often with utter disdain. Such attitudes must be condemned and halted. The rights of local farmers must be respected and protected.

Similarly, the attitude of Fulani herders toward indigenous local farmers should be critically evaluated. This includes addressing the misconception—rooted in colonial racial hierarchies—that the local people are of an inferior race. The British colonial government forcefully imposed and legitimized these racial theories, not only regarding land ownership but also in the governance of these territories. This led to willful damage to farmlands without any meaningful commission of inquiry into the recurring menace posed by Fulani herders against native populations. The present government must legislate against such attitudes and bring them to a decisive end.

The colonial masters, through their representatives such as C.K. Meek, arrived in what became Nigeria armed with racial theory concepts. They took photographs that deliberately portrayed the natives as primitive, uncivilized, and inferior to their Hausa-Fulani counterparts. These images, as presented in this work, speak volumes about how British colonial policies entrenched inequality, destroyed the dignity and autonomy of the Middle Belt peoples, and effectively made them strangers in their own ancestral lands. A Commission of Inquiry should have been constituted to investigate the root causes of farmer-herder conflicts even before the 1914 amalgamation, and certainly before Nigeria's independence in 1960.

Failures of the British Government: Dual Racial Standards and Lasting Conflicts

The British colonial administration operated a dual racial standard of humanity that significantly contributed to the persistent farmer-herder conflicts in Nigeria today. This failure manifested in several ways:

1. Racial Hierarchization of Ethnic Groups

The British deliberately elevated the Hausa-Fulani (particularly the Fulani aristocracy in the North) as more “civilized” and administratively capable, while portraying Middle Belt and southern ethnic groups as “primitive” and “uncivilized.” This was not mere observation but a deliberate policy tool used to justify indirect rule through favored groups. Anthropologists and colonial officers like C.K. Meek reinforced these stereotypes through writings and photography.

2. Unequal Land and Governance Policies

By favoring the Fulani emirates and integrating them into the colonial administrative structure, the British undermined the traditional land rights and autonomy of Middle Belt farming communities. This created a structural imbalance where nomadic herding groups were implicitly granted superior rights of movement and access to land, while sedentary farmers were treated as lesser subjects.

3. Failure to Address Emerging Conflicts

The colonial government failed to establish any serious mechanism (such as a dedicated commission of inquiry) to address the growing tensions between farmers and herders before the 1914 amalgamation or during the lead-up to independence. They left behind a deeply fractured society without resolving underlying issues of land rights, ethnic hierarchy, or resource competition.

4. Legacy of Divide-and-Rule

By institutionalizing racial and ethnic rankings, the British sowed seeds of resentment and entitlement. Post-independence Nigerian governments inherited these distorted power structures, which successive administrations have struggled to correct. The resulting perception of superiority

among some Fulani herders, and the corresponding sense of marginalization among Middle Belt communities continues to fuel violence.

5. Absence of Equity in the Amalgamation

The 1914 amalgamation merged vastly different societies without addressing deep cultural, religious, and economic differences or establishing fair institutions to manage them. This artificial creation of Nigeria, built on racial double standards rather than justice and equity, has left the country with chronic instability.

Conclusion

The perennial conflicts between Fulani herders and farming communities in Nigeria represent a complex interplay of historical legacies, climatic realities, economic necessities, religious ideologies, and political power dynamics that have persisted for over a century. As documented in C.K. Meek's 1921 ethnographic report, these tensions originated from crop damage during southward migrations in search of pasture, a pattern driven by the ecological limitations of the Sahel and Sudan savannas contrasted with the resource-rich Guinea Savanna of the Middle Belt. British colonial policies, rooted in racial theories of superiority, further entrenched divisions through indirect rule, privileging Fulani Muslim elites while marginalizing indigenous Middle Belt communities. This institutionalization of ethnic and religious hierarchies not only disrupted previously symbiotic relationships between herders and farmers but also laid the structural foundations for contemporary violence, land dispossession, and the phenomenon often described as Fulanization.

Climatic factors, including desertification, erratic rainfall patterns, deforestation, and the southward shift of viable grazing lands due to climate change, remain primary drivers that compel nomadic pastoralists to encroach on farmlands. These environmental pressures are compounded by pastoral and economic imperatives inherent in traditional cattle-rearing livelihoods, where mobility ensures herd survival but increasingly clashes with sedentary agricultural expansion and population growth. Religious and political dimensions add another volatile layer, as narratives of ethnic superiority and historical conquests fuel claims of entitlement to land and resources, often manifesting in militarized herder movements and resistance from host communities defending ancestral territories.

The quest for land and territorial control ultimately transforms resource competition into existential struggles, threatening national cohesion, food security, and sustainable development. Left unaddressed, these conflicts exacerbate displacement, loss of lives, destruction of livelihoods, and deepening ethnic and religious polarization across Nigeria.

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