

The Trajectories and Dynamics of Herdsmen Militancy in Central Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper explores the phenomenon of herdsmen militancy in Central Nigeria with a view to situating its contemporary trajectories and dynamics. By means of qualitative descriptive analysis of secondary data, anchored by the theory of political ecology, the paper posits that herdsmen militancy in the region under reference is a consequence of ecological contestation in a context characterized by insecurity and governance failure. The paper argues that prevailing socio-economic and livelihood insecurities in Central Nigeria has inter-mixed with the prevalence of ecological scarcities in that context to engender a wave of volatile inter-group relations whose contradictions find expression in ethno-communal violence. The paper contends that the phenomenon of herdsmen militancy is a degeneration of the long-standing struggle for survival between herders and farmers in a context of stiff ecological struggles un-meditated by the state. In view of its adverse impacts and complications, the paper submits that the crisis is inimical to human security and national sustainability. To mitigate the crisis, the paper makes a case for a land use system that is capable of moderating the farmer-herder differences as well as a social security measure that can mitigate the myriad of civil and socio-economic insecurities in the focal area.

Keywords: Militancy, herdsmen, political ecology, insecurity, human security.

1. Introduction

Militancy is a pattern of extremist civil action, based on abusive application of military-style coercion, or irregular military techniques to perpetrate a group cause (Okoli and Atelhe, 2014; Okoli and Ugwu, 2014). Fulani militancy refers to the manifestation of violent extremism by the Fulani-nomads in their livelihood contestations with crop-farmers within their common ecological domain. The concept of ‘Fulani militancy’ is relatively new in the lexicon of contemporary social discourse in Nigeria. Media reportage from popular dailies and periodicals in Nigeria has widely designated the phenomenon under reference as ‘Fulani insurgency’. This conception is at best erroneous for ‘militancy’ and ‘insurgency’ are not swappable synonyms. To be sure, insurgency is “a form of armed rebellion against the Government, in which the rebels have the support or acquiescence of a substantial part of the populace” (Pajet, 1967:4). Differentiated from militancy,

The key characteristics are that insurgency is waged by a non-state actor (although often with overt or covert support of other states) with the aim of changing a government or removing an occupier; by way of sapping the will of the authorities and winning over the

support of a targeted population; using a combination of political and irregular military means (which may or may not include terrorism), in conjunction with some form of information campaign (Benbow, 2013: xiv).

The herdsmen/herders are an important transnational occupational group in Africa. They largely found among the nomadic Fulani in Central, East, North and West Africa, particularly in countries like Central African Republic (CAR), Cameroun, Kenya, Egypt, South Sudan, Mali, Nigeria, to mention but a few. It is estimated that about 20 million Fulani live in various parts of Africa today (GTI, 2015:49). Among these Fulani are nomads that predominantly specialize in traditional animal husbandry.

The herdsmen are traditionally primary land users, whose livelihood depends on mobile pastoralism (Tenning, 1957; Lembrecht, 1976). This occupational heritage of the herdsmen has been increasingly endangered in the contemporary times by forces of nature, modernity and societal development. Rapid urbanization, industrialization and explosive demographic changes have since circumscribed the livelihood opportunities of the herders. So also have large-scale mechanized agriculture and mega infrastructural projects (Okoli, 2015). The phenomenon of climate change is threatening to plunge herders to the margins of ecological inclusion (Blench and Dendo, 2005; Okoli and Atelhe, 2014.).

In effect, the herders are both ecologically and structurally marginalized. In addition to contemporary climatic and demographic changes that jeopardize the sustainability of mobile pastoralism, the bulk of extant legal cum policy mechanisms governing land-use and urban development in most African states does not seem to be favourable to the practice. Thus, the average herder today lives in a perceptible hostile and indifferent environment where he must struggle to survive, fending for himself.

The struggle for survival for the herder is an existential imperative. He has to take his destiny in his own hands, even if that means going restive and violent. In this circumstance, the herder is poised to defend or redeem his endangered livelihood with a stake of his blood. This perspective resonates in the ‘eco-survivalist theory’ of farmer-herder conflict (Okoli and Atelhe, 2014; Okoli, 2015). The theory holds that the herder deems the farmers’ unwarranted incursions into his grazing zone as an effrontery that must be reprimed. More importantly, he sees the farmers’ attack on his herd as “a call to war” (Abbass, 2010: 331).

The herdsmen militancy in Nigeria festers in a volatile, precarious public security ambience characterized by communal strife, arms proliferation, rural banditry, and insurgency. The rising incidence of cattle rustling has complicated the problem (Okoli and Okpaleke, 2014). This is also true of the Boko Haram insurgency that has exacerbated the wave of tension in parts of northern Nigeria (Okoli and Iortyer, 2014). Most importantly, there is a seeming governance failure that tends to conduce arms bearing and violence by non-state actors (Egwu, 2015).

The prevalence of herdsmen militancy is not restricted to Nigeria. It also occurs in varying degrees in other African states, such as Central African Republic (CAR) and Mali (Hay, 2015). The Global Terrorism Index (GTI, 2015) identifies such militancy as the fourth deadliest instance of organized terror in the world. The Report indicates that Nigeria is a critical flashpoint of the occurrence. According to the Report, causalities associated with herdsmen militancy in the

various States of Nigeria rose from 80 in 2012 to 2013 period to 1,229 in 2014 alone (GTI, 2015: 49).

In spite of the rising incidence of herdsmen militancy in Nigeria (Omitola, 2015), only little is known concerning the phenomenon. The bulk of prevailing ideas on the subject has been largely and unnecessarily journalistic and anecdotal, lacking in intellectual depth, fecundity and rigour. The issue has remained scarcely documented by way of organized research. There is therefore a need for a systematic investigation that would leverage scholarly and policy insights on the subject. It is this need that has informed the proposed study.

The study, therefore, seeks to examine the contemporary trends of herdsmen militancy in Nigeria with particular reference to the central region of the country. Specifically, the study intends to answer the following research questions:

- i. What is the relationship between insecurity and herdsmen militancy in Central Nigeria?
- ii. What are the trends and dynamics of herdsmen militancy in Central Nigeria?
- iii. What are the impacts and implications of herdsmen militancy vis-a-vis national security in Nigeria?

2. Theoretical Framework: Political Ecology

Political ecology deals with the study of the relationship between political, economic and social factors with environmental issues and dynamics. It seeks to interrogate ecological social sciences with political economy in an attempt to evolve an inter-disciplinary synthesis (Okoli, 2008; Okoli, 2013). As an eclectic theoretical paradigm, political ecology was influenced by the scholarly contributions of development geography and cultural ecology in the 1970s and 1980s (Bryant, 1998:80). Since its emergence as a theoretical perspective, political ecology “has sought primarily to understand the dynamics surrounding material and discursive struggles over the environment in the third world” (Bryant, 1998:89).

The major concern of political ecology constitutes largely issues revolving around “access to and control over resources” (Haman et al, 2004 cited in Okoli and Atelhe, 2014:77). Hence, Sutton (2004 cited in Okoli and Atelhe, 2014:77) sees political ecology as an attempt to come to terms with “the day-to-day conflicts, alliances, and negotiations that ultimately result in some sort of definitive behaviours; how politics affects or structures resource use”. In effect, political ecology seeks to contextualize political and ecological undercurrents and implications of human behavior in the context of resource contestation (Okoli, 2013).

Applied to the purpose of the study, political ecology situates the phenomenon of herdsmen militancy between governance failure and the rising farmer-herder confrontation. The inability of the Nigerian state to properly regulate land-use and resource exploitation through effective policies has informed un-moderated struggles between the farmers and herders in the current era of climate change induced environmental scarcities. The struggles have in the recent years become rather fatal as the parties resort to desperate means of self-protection and survival through arms bearing and militancy (Abbass, 2012). The violent confrontation tends towards impunity given the apparent inability of the relevant

governmental agencies to address the crisis. The rising phenomenon of herdsmen militancy in Nigeria is a manifestation of this trend.

3. Contextualizing the Incidence of Herdsmen Militancy in Central Nigeria: The Insecurity Nexus

The focal point of this study is Central Nigeria. This encompasses Plateau, Nasarawa, Kogi, Benue, Niger and Kwara States. It also includes the Abuja Federal Capital Territory, the politico-administrative headquarters of Nigeria. The rationale for concentrating on this area was based on its status as the most volatile zone in terms of ethno-communal incidence. Virtually all the States in the zone have recorded incidents of ethnic and communal in the years. Within the zone, the study takes its research cases principally from three particular States, namely Benue, Nasarawa and Plateau.

The Central Nigeria has been inundated with high prevalence of security crises. There has been perennial occurrences of communal skirmished, often leading to brutal confrontation, in the region. Prominent examples include Birom-Hausa/Fulani conflict in Plateau State, Bassa-Egbura as well as Eggon-Kambari conflict in Nasarawa State, and Tiv-Jukun crisis along the borderlines of Benue and Taraba States (Okoli, 2015). There has also been a rising incidence of ethno-communal militancy in the region, as exemplified in the phenomenon of Ombaste uprising in Nasarawa State (Okoli and Uhembe, 2014).

The volatile ambience of communal conflict and violence in Central Nigeria has been exacerbated by the inter-mix of rural banditry and urban violence in the region. There has been recurring occurrences of cattle rustling in the hinterlands of Plateau, Nasarawa and Benue States (Egwu, 2015). This is in addition to the incessant incidents of village/market raids and high-way attacks by bandits in the area (Okoli, 2014). Land-use related conflicts have also been pervasive in the region, with farmer-herder contestation taking its toll (Okoli and Atelhe, 2014).

In respect of socio-economic condition, the Central Nigeria is characterized by livelihood crisis as exemplified in high prevalence of poverty, HIV/AIDS pandemic, low literacy and school emolument rates, high child mortality rate, and generally, appalling indicators of human development/security (NBS, 2009). The Nigeria Poverty Profile published by the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2012:16) indicates that the region performed below the national average in relation to various dimensions of poverty by 2010 (cf. table 1).

Table 1: Poverty Incidence in Central Nigeria, 2010

Food Poor	Absolute Poor	Relative Poor	Dollar (per day) Poor
38.6	59.5	65.5	59.7

Source: NBS (2012:16)

In addition to its poor socio-economic and livelihood profile, the Central Nigeria ranks second to none in terms of severity in rural poverty (Obayelu, 2014:175). This is affirmed by the scale of perceived rural destitution and livelihood crisis in the region (Okoli, 2015).

More importantly, the Central Nigeria is characterized by delicate inter-group relations, with high propensity to inter-communal conflagrations (Okoli and Iortyer,

2016). The region ranks next to the terror-ridden North East in terms of heterogeneity of ethnicity and sub-nationality in Nigeria. In addition, the region has a peculiar religious character and outlook. With the exception of Benue and Plateau States, that have a clear-cut Christian dominance, the rest of the States in the region are almost evenly divided between Christianity and Islam. There is also a strong persuasion of African Traditional Religion (ATR) in the region. The manifest peculiar ethno-religious diversity of the region, more often than not, makes it prone to vagaries of communal disturbances (Uduma, 2013; Okoli and Iortyer, 2016).

How does the foregoing imply for societal co-existence and inter-group relations? Firstly, the incidence of poverty and allied socio-economic malaise makes the civil population insecure and therefore vulnerable to criminality, violence and unrest. The prevailing material insecurity conspires with the existing fault-lines of ethno-religious divides in the region to breed crises. Secondly, there are desperate struggles for the depreciating ecological and socio-political opportunities by the different groups in the region. The inherent contradictions of this struggle have often occasioned antagonistic social relations, pitting one group against another. This explains the incidence and prevalence of indigene-settler, farmer-herder, Christian-Muslim, as well as inter-communal conflicts/violence in the region (Okoli, 2015). The phenomenon of herdsmen militancy is only but one of the latest contradictions of inter-group relations in the Central region.

4. The Trends, Dynamics and Drivers of Herdsmen Militancy in Central Nigeria

Herdsmen militancy is the contemporary manifestation of the contradictions of farmer-herder conflict in Africa. It is driven by an interplay of ecological, cultural and socio-political factors, namely climate change, environmental scarcities, cultural prejudices and intolerance, failure of resource governance, and ethno-political manipulation (Egwu, 2015; Okoli, 2015). Historical trends of herdsmen militancy in Nigeria show that the phenomenon has progressively metamorphosed from rudimentary communal skirmishes to organized armed confrontation in its apparent dynamics of degeneration. In its latest manifestation, the phenomenon depicts a genre of violence characterized by immense arms bearing and brutal sophistication (Okoli and Atelhe, 2014).

The incidence of herdsmen militancy in Central Nigeria is substantively related with the socio-ecological factors already elaborated in this paper. It suffices to note, moreover, that it has been exacerbated in the recent years by the prevailing civil and livelihood crises in the region. The paramount contextual stimulator of herdsmen militancy in this region is the long-standing ecological struggle between farmers and herders over access to, and control of, land and fresh water. The dire effects of climate change, such as desertification and drought, have occasioned a compulsive Southward movement of herders from different parts of North East and North West to the Central axis of Nigeria, driving them inevitably into hazardous inter-group relations.

Furthermore, the reality of Boko Haram insurgency has made grazing activities in many parts of the North East increasingly hazardous. Same is also true of the incidence of cattle rustling in the far North, which has equally necessitated Southward movement of herders to the Central region. The resultant concentration of grazing activities in Central

Nigeria has resulted in high pressure on land resources in the area. It has, more importantly, raised the stakes of ecological contestations between the two communities of land users -- herders and crop farmers. Oftentimes, the sedentary farmers and herders are at loggerheads over competitive land access, control and use. Hence, there have been accusations and counter accusations by farmers and herders pertaining to trespass on farmland or range-route and/or grazing reserves as the case maybe. This has often led to altercations and violent confrontations (Okoli and Ayokhai, 2016).

The inability of the Nigerian State to moderate the agrarian relations through enabling policies and laws has not helped matters at all. Thus, when the differences are not resolved in an efficient and timely manner, grievances are inevitably allowed to escalate. Then, aggrieved groups would seek 'jungle redress' by taking law in their own hands in an attempt to fend for oneself, given the apparent vacuum of governance by the state and its agencies. For the farmer, the possible option would be raiding the herder's flock; and for the herder, the option would be to invade and ravage the farmer's farmland. It is this scenario that has informed the pattern of resource militancy in Central Nigeria for which the nomadic Fulani herdsmen have been particularly notorious (Okoli and Ayokhai, 2016). The phenomenon of Fulani militancy has been pervasive throughout the Central Nigeria with its critical flash-beds spread across the various states of the region (cf. table 2).

Table 2: Critical Flash-beds of Herdsmen Militancy in Central Nigeria

State	Flashpoints
Benue	Agatu, Guma, Katsina Ala axis
Nasarawa	Obi, Lafia East area
Plateau	Barikin Ladi, Riyom, Wase

Source: Adapted from Okoli and Ayokhai (2016).

In the areas indicated in table 2, incidents of Fulani militancy have led to multiple human fatalities and morbidities. The Global Terrorism index (GTI, 2015: 49) indicates that 1, 229 persons were killed in the various episodes of Fulani-herdsmen militancy in Nigeria. Most of this number derived from incidents within the Central region, notably Benue and Nasarawa States (GTI, 2015).

Extant scholarly narratives on herdsmen militancy in Nigeria point to the fact that the reality is fast metamorphosing into a sort of organized crime. This is apparently true considering the extent of organizational sophistication, efficiency and resilience associated with the criminal practice. The use of foreign mercenary fighters enlisted from Mali and Niger to prosecute the act also point to its overt transnational dimension (Okoli, 2015).

The issue of herdsmen militancy in Central Nigeria has been all the more worsened by the nature of internal security situation in the area. Cases in point include the proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW), the incessant communal conflicts/violence, and the extended ripples of Boko Haram insurgency in the region. These variables reinforce, and are in turn reinforced by, the ambience of livelihood and socio-economic insecurity in the region to give impetus to herdsmen militancy.

5. Implications of Fulani Militancy for National Security in Nigeria

The primary victim of herdsmen militancy is human security. Human security presupposes the protection of human population from all forms of socio-existential threats and vulnerabilities (Okoli, 2014; Okoli and Ayokhai, 2016). Herdsmen militancy has led to dire socio-economic and humanitarian consequences, including loss of livelihoods, population displacement, loss of life and property, and decline in rural productivity and agricultural output. Loss of livelihoods in turn exposes the affected population to material hardships, exemplified in hunger, disease and malnutrition. Population displacement involves of abrupt dislodgment of rural population from their natural abode – the place of optimal productivity. There has been mass sack of households by marauding herdsmen-militants in places like Agatu in Benue State, Obi in Nasarawa State and Barkin Ladi in Plateau State. The displaced populations are exposed to stiffer socio-economic ordeals in the course of their refugee-like sojourn.

Much destruction of lives and property has been lost as direct and indirect consequences of herdsmen militancy in different parts of Central Nigeria. There have been serial killings in the hinterlands of Plateau, Nasarawa and Benue state as result of the herder's onslaughts. The Barkin Ladi incident in Plateau state (2012) led to the killing of about 500 villagers in an over-night brutal escapade perpetrated by the herdsmen-militants (Okoli and Orinya, 2013). Scores of villagers in Agatu area of Benue State have occasionally been massacred in cold blood in the various episodes of herdsmen's attacks. In the aftermath of the tragedy, breadwinners of many families are killed, exposing the affected households to acute material hardships. In terms of property wastages, herdsmen militancy has been associated with the worst degrees of material vandalism. It has been associated with arson, leading to burning of family houses, assets and farmlands. Oftentimes, it has led to desolation of rural villages in places like Nasarawa and Benue States.

The impact of herdsmen militancy on rural productivity and agricultural output has been particularly devastating. With the mass displacement of farmers from areas affected by herders' attacks, there is a significant decline in agricultural production and output in those areas. This has been amply demonstrated by the relative shortage of farm produce in the rural and urban markets of Central Nigeria. The trend is also palpably evident in the soaring prices of farm produce in the area. A market survey in Makurdi and Lafia suggests a rapid rise in the prices of staple produce. This has been an observable trend given the deterioration of farmer-herder crisis in the States since 2012.

Beyond the issue of human security, herdsmen militancy has been a veritable threat to cordial intergroup relations in Central Nigeria. It has resulted not only in mutual distrust between the farmers and herders, but also between the ethnic Fulani and the rest of the native/settled communities. This scenario has complicated the indigenes-settlers schism in that context. It has also brought about rapid polarization between Christians and Muslims who, coincidentally, are symmetrically categorized in the locality as either herders or farmers. Thus, as the inter-group tension and hostility blossom, the traditional symbiosis that had hitherto characterized the affected group becomes increasing interred in the cemetery of mutual animosity and vendetta.

The logical implication of the foregoing is that herdsmen militancy poses a threat to human security, agricultural productivity/output as well as inter-group co-existence. The collateral complications of the above impacts create a volatile societal scenario that is

inimical to national security and sustainability. This has been the situation in Central Nigeria since the advent of herdsmen militancy.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

Herdsmen militancy in Central Nigeria is essentially a consequence of governance failure amidst prevalent security crises in the region. The rising ecological struggles between farmers and herders in the area have been complicated in the recent years by the dynamics of climatic and demographic changes, leading to stiffer confrontations. The atmosphere of civil and livelihood insecurities in the region had further complicated the situation, making violent conflict rather pervasive and intractable. The whole crises have drawn impetus from the existing fault-lines of ethnicity, religious and communal affiliations to degenerate. Amidst this scenario, the inability of the Nigerian state to regulate agrarian relations by moderating herder farmer contestations through effective land-use system has created a vacuum of governance that is exploited by the herdsmen to take laws into their own hands in an effort to defend themselves. The solution to the crisis lies with structural remediation that comprehends:

1. recovering and revitalizing the existing grazing reserves and routes;
2. creating new gazing reserves to take care of the growing need for grazing field;
3. reinventing the agricultural extension settlement schemes to promote the endeavours of crop farmers;
4. provision of social security packages to mitigate in the incidence of poverty and allied socio-economic malaise among the population;
5. evolving a land use system that is capable of moderating agrarian relations in the interest of sustainable agricultural development.

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