



OPEN GRAZING AND NATIONAL SECURITY IN NIGERIA: THE BENUE STATE EXPERIENCE, 2015-2023

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the impact of open grazing and its associated problems on national security using the case of Benue State, Nigeria. The overall problem or argument of the paper was that the poor management of open grazing matters had accentuated land resources conflict with attendant threat to national security. Three research questions and corresponding research objectives guided the investigation. The study adopted environmental scarcity and social conflict theory otherwise called eco-violence theory to interrogate the relationship between open grazing and national security. This qualitative study adopted the correlational research design and collected data largely from secondary sources. The data were subjected to thematic and content analysis in an attempt to find answers to the research questions. The results showed that poor management of the anti-open grazing accentuated and exacerbated herders-farmers conflict in Benue State. It also showed that politicization and religiosization of land resource conflict in Benue State had become a serious threat to national security. Based on the findings, the study recommended amongst others that: the National Assembly should make laws for compulsory ranching for all cattle breeders and their owners; the North East Development and the North West Development Commissions with the support of the Federal Government should liaise with the governments of the northern states to establish ranches and grazing reserve areas for cattle rearing in the zones ; Federal Government should ensure stiffer border control to check the use of herders as agent for the smuggling of small arms and light weapons (SALW) into Nigeria through the northern borders.

Keywords: Open Grazing, Herder-Farmer Conflict, Religiosization, Eco-Violence, National Security.

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INTRODUCTION

Open grazing is the act of pasturing livestock to feed on growing grasses, shrubs, herbage and water in open field and water bodies under the guide of a herdsman or some herdsmen. National security on the other hand is the absence of threat to acquired values; and fear that the values may be attacked, the protection, safety and wellbeing of citizen and defence of the territorial integrity of the country against external aggressions and internal insurrections (Tyomlia, 2018). Open grazing and associated anti-opening law overtime had accentuated land based resource conflict with negative implications for national security (Eneyo et al., 2023). Meanwhile, conflict generally is driven by struggle for achievement of incompatible goals either at the group or individual level is undoubtedly an inevitable part of human existence.

Though not without possible twists and bends, the co-existence of itinerant cattle breeders and farmers is probably as old as the history of modern Nigeria. However, the precipitation and changing violent character of the conflict within the past two to three decades has become an issue of international concern. What is in the plantain stem that has suddenly twisted the machete such that hitherto good neighbours had turned at each other's throats? Pondering on this question reverberate in one's mind the understanding provided by the "push factor" of migration theory (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2014) and eco-violence theory. This is such that that both herders and farmers are pushed into an intensified struggle for survival in the dilemma of environmental scarcity (Homer-Dixon, 2000).

The herders-farmers conflict is precipitated by contestations over grazing rights by the herders/ pastoralists; and defense of livelihood structures by the farmers. However, poor management of the conflict due to complicated interests has drastically changed its dynamics far more beyond a herder-farmer conflict or an ethnic conflict. This study is therefore an attempt to explain the intricate relationship between open grazing and national security in Nigeria. The argument of this paper is that open grazing and its precipitating factors have conflagrated into violent herders-farmers violent conflict with attendant negative implications for national security.

Statement of the Problem

Open grazing and farmers-herders conflicts and its diverse threats had for sometimes dominated most national and academic discourse. Poorly managed open grazing matters had resulted in several attacks between herders and farmers in many states of Nigeria such as Adamawa, Ekiti, Kogi, Kaduna, Taraba, Plateau, Katsina, Niger, Zamfara (Asogwa, 2017; Ugbem-Onah & Tahav, 2017; Bello & Abdullahi, 2021; Onyewuchi & Arinze-Umobi, 2021). However, the case of Benue State appears to be the most worrisome. In any case, there are two issues with the rising spates of violent conflicts in Nigeria. Firstly, most violent conflicts are mostly land resource based conflict. Secondly majority of them had happened in democratic regimes particularly the 4th republic

Land resources such as land and fresh water are major livelihood support structures. They therefore sit at the heart of the survival of the people. According to Homer-Nixon (1994; 1999), the struggle and fierce contestation over right of access and utilization of scare or limited resources had been the major generators of the violent conflict. This is the case of the violent conflict between herders and farmers in Nigeria. This study advances the argument that the outcomes and concomitant effect of these violent conflicts has been monumental. The losses includes: loss of lives and properties, displacement of the population occasioning other social

costs such as poverty, trauma, emotional and psychological suffering of the victims. It is the changing dynamics of the violent herders-farmers conflicts particularly in the context of Benue State and its implications on national security that is the concern of the present study.

According to Human Right Watch (HRW, 2013), the death toll from herders – farmers’ violent conflict between 2010 and 2013 was about 3000. In the particular case of Benue State, there were 4194 deaths, 2, 957 persons injured, 195, 576 houses and 30 churches destroyed between 2014 and 2016 (Genyi, 2017). National figures from Nigeria Security Watch (NSW, 2020) and also corroborated by Nigeria Security Tracker (NST, 2020) reported 6274 incidences and 3087 cases of death within 2014-2019. It is noteworthy that most of the reported cases took places in Benue State. The unprecedented nature of herders–farmers violent conflict in the case of Benue state is aggravated by religious and cultural mix where majority(95%) are Christians while minority(5%) are Muslims and with over 75% of the entire populations as rural farmers (NPC, 2021; Genyi, 2017).

There had been earlier studies on open grazing, and herders-farmer conflict and land resource conflict in Nigeria. For instance, Zakari and Garba (2006) studies focused on farmers-nomad conflict in the Benue valley particularly Adamawa State. Onyewuchi and Arinze-Umobi (2021) critiqued the Benue State open grazing prohibition law as a legal response to conflict caused by open grazing in Nigeria and found that the law aggravated instead of ameliorating the conflict. Nomor and Ikyoyer (2022) only studied the impact of herders-farmers’ conflict on productivity of yam in Logo Local Government Area of Benue State; and concluded that the crisis resulted in low productivity which has also contributed to national food insecurity. Izerbizua and Izerbizus (2021) focused their attention on the effect of herders-farmers’ conflict on sustainable development. None of these scholarly works focused on open grazing, its associated issues such as the anti-open grazing law, the changing dynamics of the herders-farmers conflict and their implications on national security in Nigeria.

It is against the above backdrop that this paper examines the impact of open grazing, its associated issues of the anti-open grazing law, the changing dynamics of the herders-farmers conflict in Benue State and their implications on national security in Nigeria. Meanwhile the questions which guided this study were: why has open grazing resulted in herders-farmers conflict in Benue State, Nigeria?; what is the nature and dynamics of herders-farmers’ conflict in Benue State?; and what are the implications of herders – farmers’ conflict for national security?

CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

The Concept of Opening Grazing

This has been the age-long practice by which animals are allowed to roam the field and bushes in search for food (pasture and water) under the guidance of herdsmen. Abbas defined open grazing as “the act of pasturing livestock to feed on growing grasses, shrubs, herbage, farm crops etc. in the open field without any form of restriction” (cited in Ugbem–Onah & Tahar, 2017, p.88). Open grazing has both negative and positive impacts. The positive impacts include promotion of carbon sequestration and water filtration; enhancement of soil density and nutrition, stimulation of the growth of plant varieties through the droppings of the animals. By these, the soil quality of cultivable land is enhanced thereby improving crop yield and overall agricultural productivity. The negative impacts of open grazing on local biodiversity include: destruction of natural vegetation, soil and stream bank damage, increased soil erosion through increase in run off as

well as contamination of fresh water bodies with animal excretes (Ugbem-Onah & Tahar, 2017; Fani-Kayode, 2021).

In any case, the prevailing socio-economic realities such as the impact of climate change, growing environmental scarcity, burgeoning population and pressure on marginal arable land (Aluaigbu, 2021) has not only made open grazing unfashionable, but also a threat to farmers livelihood structure. This informed the introduction RUGA – the Open Grazing Area Policy (2019) by the Federal Government as a mechanism to control violent conflict over grazing right. RUGA was built on the hitherto Grazing Reserve Law 1965 and the Cattle Colony Policy of 2018 (Okoli & Onaga, 2022). The intendments of these policies were to have exclusive grazing and cattle rearing areas with complimentary facilities such as pasture, water, health facilities, veterinary, school, market, dairy farms and associated industries in all part of the country.

In reaction to RUGA, grazing reserve, grazing right of way and open grazing, many States including Benue promulgated the Open Grazing Prohibition and Ranches Establishment Law, 2017, N0.21, Vol. 42. The bill was assented by Governor on the 22nd day of May, 2017. The Law prohibits open rearing and grazing of livestock but rather called for the establishment of ranches, livestock administration, regulation and control as provided for in Section 35 of the Law. The objectives of the law amongst others are:

- Prevention of the destruction of crop farms by open grazing;
- Prevent clashes between nomadic livestock herders and crop farmers;
- Protection of the environment from degradation and pollution caused by open rearing of livestock (Benue State Government, 2017).

The law also established a Task Force to give teeth to the enforcement of the provisions of the law.

Herders-Farmers' Conflict

The concept of herders – farmers' conflict as the intervening variable of this study deserves some clarification. Moritz (2003) explained the concept of herders – farmer's conflicts in clear terms as a low-level or small scale conflict over access to or control of land resources such as water, cultivatable land, grazing land, campsites and where the disputing parties identify themselves or are identified by others as farmers and herders. Tonah (2006) added that the tensions in herders – farmer's conflict are mostly linked to long standing issues of insecurity which are accentuated by natural resource scarcity and exacerbated by the scramble for access or control of marginal land resources. It is the scramble and constant contestation for access and control that aggravates the conflict situation.

The haphazard description of the phenomenon as herders-farmers' or farmers-herders conflict need some clarifications. The description of the phenomenon had ordinarily been left to the personal choice of the describer. This is chaotic. Taxonomically, the phrasal arrangement of the concept is a reflection of the direction of the attack. In this light, it is herders-farmers' conflict where and when the herders are the attackers and farmers are the attacked. It is also properly described as farmers-herders conflict where and when the farmers are the attackers and herders are the attacked. This been cleared, it is the escalation of what is ordinarily a low -level and small -scale conflicts, it changing character and threat to national security that is the concern of the present undertaking.

National Security

Barigbon (2023) largely saw security as wellbeing and freedom from all forms of threat, which is obviously the foundation for survival and progress of mankind. Security or lack of it is driver of development or under development. Security *writ large* encompasses economic security, social security, human security and national security. The concern of this paper is on national security. The Grand Strategy for National Security of Nigeria cited in Bassey and Dokubo (2011) succinctly defined national security as “the aggregation of the security interest of all individuals, communities, ethnic groups, political entities and institutions that inhabit the territory of Nigeria” (p. 92).

National security characterizes the spirit and form of modern state, without which her integrity will be largely undermined (Azazi, 2011). Accordingly, Chapter II Section (14) (26) of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (CFRN) (as amended 2023) provides that “the security and welfare of the people shall be the primary purpose of government” (FGN, 2023). This constitutional provision on security equally underscores the national security objectives of Nigeria. The national security objectives of Nigeria provides amongst other for the: (i) enhancement of economic prosperity; (ii) promotion of peace, law, and order within Nigeria; (iii) safety and preservation of lives and property (Azazi cited in Bassey & Dokubo, 2011). National security therefore denotes absence of threat to acquired value (cultural, social and religion/economic) or the absence of the fear that the value may be attacked. It includes: protection from danger, intimidation, apprehension, feeling of safety, peace and guarantee of the good life, and prosperity of the citizenry, social and national cohesion. It also includes the extractive capacity of the state (nation-state) for defense against external aggression and internal insurrection.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework adopted for this paper is the environmental scarcity and social conflict theory by T.F Homer – Dixon (Homer-Dixon, 1999). The environmental scarcity and social conflict theory also described as climate – conflict analysis, eco-violence theory (Aluaigba, 2021; Munguno, 2021; IGG, 2017) is built on the Marxian Political Economy (MPE) theory, also described as the theory of economic determinism. The environmental scarcity and social conflict theory is premised on the proviso that were resources are scarce, competition for access is eminent and conflict is inevitable. Homer – Dixon (1999) noted that:

“decreased quantity and quality of renewable resources, population growth, and resource access act singularly or in various combinations to increase the scarcity for certain population groups, or crop plant, water, forests, fish. This can reduce economic productivity, both for the local groups experiencing the scarcity and for the larger regional and national economies. The affected people may migrate or be expelled to new lands. Migrating group often trigger ethnic conflict when they move to new areas, while decrease in wealth can cause deprivation conflict” (p. 30).

Impliedly, humans (overpopulation) had impacted on both the quality and quantity of renewable resources beyond their natural regeneration capacity. This has resulted in environmental resource

scarcity. The fall out such situation of environmental resource scarcity is the scramble and struggle of mean resources. This has precipitated social conflict among individual and groups. On the other hand, there is increasing environmental scarcity, caused by climate change. The contestation for access and maximal utilization of meagre land resources by competitive interest groups in the absence of effective state intervention also leads to a frustration- aggression situation that triggers violent group conflict.

This theory is very relevant to this study. It has been observed that in Northern Nigeria, climate change has led to the increase of temperature and decreasing rainfall with increased changes of droughts and reduction in total precipitation. The aftermath is the dearth of vegetable cover and continuous desertification such that in 2007, 350, 000 Sq. Km hitherto vegetal area had suffered desert encroachment (Davamole et al. cited in Manguno, 2021). This implies reduction in size of cultivable land and reduction in vegetal cover for pasturing (Mekong River Commission on Climate Change and Adaptation Initiative, 2012, National Aeronautic and Space Centre, 2018).

The argument of this paper therefore is that open grazing in the face of environmental scarcity is a precipitating factor of herder – farmer conflict in Benue State. The violent conflict is also a threat to national security. There is a land resource scarcity which has pushed- migration of herders from the core North into the Benue valley where the impact of climate change and population pressure has also altered seasonal farming and shifting cultivation. This is such that the prevalent practice of crop rotation on marginal farm lands does not give room for fallowing. Open grazing now implies that the crops of farmers have become pastures for cattles. It also implies that both cattle and farmers contest for access to and use of the same source of drinking water.

It is now obvious, that the livelihood of both herders and farmers are dependent on availability and access to arable land and water either for pasture (open grazing) or crop cultivation. Environmental stress and conflict relations as stressors of resources scarcity leads to “resource capture” by powerful and advantaged group as well as “ecological marginalization” for poorer, weaker and disadvantaged group whose claim to resources are challenged by a powerful group (Homer – Dixon, (1994). This is many times amplified by politico-ethnic and religious sentiments which conflagrates into a conflict situation or heightens the existing violent conflict into a threat to national security.

METHODOLOGY AND STUDY LOCALE

This is a qualitative study and the correlational research design was adopted. Data for the study was collected from secondary sources namely books, journal, newspapers, magazine articles and other periodicals were analyzed qualitatively with the use of thematic and content analysis. By content analysis, textual materials were systematically analyzed for the purpose of making replicable and valid inferences.

Benue state which is the study locale is one of the 36 States of the Nigerian Federation. It is situated within latitude 6.5⁰ and 8.5⁰ North and longitudes 7.47⁰ North and 10⁰ East and occupies a landmass of 32,955 square kilometer with headquarter at Makurdi. The state has a projected population of 6,141,300 with over 75% of the people as rural farmers. The state is therefore rich in agricultural produce .Benue is a Christian dominant State, with presence of few Muslim settlers. The dominant ethnic groups are Tiv, Idoma, Jukun, Etolu, Abakpa, Hausa,

Akweya. The Tiv is however, the predominant ethnic group, occupying 14 L.G.As; followed by Idoma and Igede ethnic group (NPC, 2021; Aluaigba, 2021).

Data Presentation and Analysis

Why has open grazing resulted in herders-farmers violent conflict in Benue State?

Open grazing leads to destruction of economic crops and contamination of natural water sources. This has in itself and overtime caused conflict amongst the farmers and herders. However, the Benue State Government (2017) promulgated the Open Grazing Prohibition and Ranches Establishment Law which was promulgated into law on the 22nd day of May 2017. The passage of the open grazing law also attracted a mixed reaction about its constitutionality and legality. Its implementation equally received fierce opposition, particularly by the Fulani herders association. The opposition to the enforcement of anti- open grazing law accentuated an unprecedented spate of herders–farmers violent conflict in Benue State. The scores of death recorded and the number of clashes that occurred post passage and enforcement of the Act was unprecedented. The Table 1 below show the death and destruction of property post promulgation and attempts at enforcement of the law in Benue State in 2018 alone.

Table 1: Casualties of herders-farmer conflict post passage of the Anti-Open Grazing Act in Benue State

S/N.	Date of Clash	Location(S)	Reported Number Of Casualties
1.	January 1,2018	Tom-atar, Umenger and Tse-AkorinGuma LGA	73 Persons Killed and thousands displaced
2.	January 2, 2018	Gaambe-Tive, Ayilamo and Turan in logo LGA	50 persons killed
3.	January 6, 2018	Tse-Akombo, Tse-vii and Tse-Agule, Logo LGA	Village Head &15 persons killed
4.	January 13, 2018	Violent clash in makurdi LGA	1 person killed
5.	January16, 2018	Guma, Logo &Okpokwu LGAs	6 persons killed, many persons injured
6.	January 29, 2018	Attack on NNPC workers at Tse-Torkula, Guma LGA	1 person killed, many persons injured
7.	February 5,2018	Gov. Ortom Farmhouse , in Gbajimba , Guma LGA	2 persons killed
8.	February 12, 2018	Tse-kyoon, Nyiev Clan, Guma LGA	2 Civil Defense Officers killed
9.	March 5, 2018	Omutu village in Okopokwu	15 persons killed
10.	March 13, 2018	Guma LGA	5 persons killed
11.	March 22, 2018	Omenger village in Guma LGA	2 persons killed and many persons injured
12.	March 24,2018	Markurdi LGA	5persons killed
13.	April 4, 2018	Mbasenga, Mbagwen, Gwer-West LGA	10 persons killed
14.	April 5, 2018	Agagbe,Gwer-West LGA	30 persons killed
15.	April 7,2018	Okoklo, Aguta LGA	2 (father and son) killed
16.	April 9, 2018	Gbajimba, Guma LGA	1 soldier killed
17.	April 12, 2018	Tsaav, Tse-Akaanya and Tse-Hiityo villages in Gbeji, Ukum LGA	56 persons killed, many persons injured
18.	April 14,2018	Anyibe village in Logo LGA	11 persons killed including 4 policemen
19.	April 17,2018	Chembe,Ukemberagya-Tswarev Council Ward,	Village head killed

20.	April 20, 2018	Gaambe-Tiev, Logo LGA Tse-Abi, Tse-Ginde, Tse-peviv, Tse-Ikyo, Agenke and Gbenke communities in Guma LGA	31 persons killed, 82 house razed
21.	April 24, 2018	Ukpo, Mbalom village in Gwer East LGA	19 persons killed including 2 Catholic Priests
22.	April 25, 2018	Tse-Umenge, Mbakpese and Tse-Ali, Guma LGA	39 persons killed, 160 house razed
23.	May 10, 2018	Turan village in Logo LGA	2 persons killed and many persons injured

Source: Agbuaigba (2021)

The table above captured particular cases of violent herders-farmers conflict in Benue State within five months (January to May) of attempts at implementation of Benue State Open Grazing Prohibition and Ranches Establishment Law. The short period recorded 363 deaths in 18 days of violent attacks. The table reported cases of death of security personnel as fallouts of violent clashes between the Task force for the enforcement of the law and livestock militia guards/herders. The attack on security personnel is one pointer to the changing dynamics of the herders-farmers conflict. Table 2 below showed the spate of deaths associated with herders-farmers conflict from 2015 to 2023.

Table 2: Death occasioned by Herders attacks in Benue state, 2015-2023

Year	Incidences	Deaths
2015	121	1,177
2016	17	809
2017	17	125
2018	46	440
2019	76	174
2020	NA	88
2021	NA	2131
2022	NA	906
2023	NA	104 (Jan.- March,)
TOTAL		5,654

Source: Compiled by the Researcher from: BSEMA (2021); Daily Trust, 14th March, 2023; Aluaigba (2021) NST(2020); NSW (2020).

For the avoidance of doubt, the table reported in table 2 above was carefully sorted, processed and harmonized into a coherent piece from the various cited sources above. The differentials in the figures presented notwithstanding, a careful combined analysis of all the tables and figures put the death cases from herders -farmers' conflict in Benue state from 2015 to 2023 (January-March) at 5,654. The table above showed the year 2015 recorded the highest incidences and death rate with 121 incidences and 1177 deaths. This was followed by 2016 with 17 incidences and 809 deaths. In 2018, there were 46 incidences of herders-farmers conflict which resulted in the death of 440 persons. 2019 recorded 76 incidences and 174 deaths. The number of incidences in 2020, 2021, 2022 and 2023 were not ascertained. However, the deaths cases were: 88, 2131, 906, and 104 deaths in 2020, 2021, 2022 and 2023 respectively.

The religious factor in the 2015 election between a Muslim candidate of the newly emerged All Progressive Congress (APC) and the Christian candidate of Peoples' Democratic

Party in the 2015 Presidential election accounted largely for the dynamics and high spate of incidences and deaths recorded in 2015. Particularly in 2019 and 2023 the spate also dropped. The record showed that 2019 had 76 incidences yet with 176 deaths. In 2023 there were 104 deaths. Two factors accounted for the differential in these two election years. Firstly, there was a supposed ceasefire for curry sympathy for re-election for Buhari's presidency in 2019. Secondly, both frontline presidential candidates of the two dominant parties in the general election were of the northern Muslim/Fulani extraction of Nigeria. In 2023 religious politics also played a role.

The deaths recorded above were human beings, not cows, not houses, not properties nor farm produce. This is catastrophic and inhuman. Data of the Benue State Emergency Management Agency (BSEMA) (2022) and corroborated by NST (2023) as shown above indicated from the time of the passage of the bill in 2017 to 2023, pastoralist violent attacks on farmers heightened with over 3,864 deaths recorded but with a total of 5,654 from 2015 to March, 2023.

What is the nature and dynamics of herders-farmers conflict in Benue state?

The enactment and enforcement of the Benue State Open grazing Prohibition and Enforcement Act, 2019, changed the nature, character and dynamics of the herders-farmers conflict in Benue State. For the of Myelti Allah KautalHore otherwise known as Myelti Allah Cattle Breeders Association of Nigeria (MACBAN), the passage of the anti-open grazing law was discriminatory against ethnic Fulani herdsmen. This understanding or imprisoned interpretation of the law intensified and further accentuated the violent character of the herders-farmer conflict in Benue State. This understanding clothed the conflict with an ethno-religious character. This provide some justification the later description of the herders – farmer conflict in Benue State as “fulani – herdsmen killings”, “Fulani – herdsmen attacks”, “fulani herdsmen invasions”. This in some measures exacerbated the crisis. This was such that Christian communities in Nigeria particularly Christian Association of Nigeria and the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria had to throw their weight behind the Christian farmers of Benue, calling for self-defense by all means possible. This was further heightened by the perceived Islamization agenda/sentiments of the Fulani herdsmen.

What is the implication of herders-farmers' conflict in Benue State on National Security?

The rate and ferocity of violent attacks as shown in table 1 and 2 are exponential. For the herders to engage in duels leading to the of death security personnel speaks to the deployment of sophisticated small arms and light weapons (SALW) such as AK 47 and AK 49 in changing dynamics of the conflict. For the MACBAN, the assault rifles are used for self-defense against cattle rustlers. Where both parties to the conflict resort to wielding sophisticated weapons in a religious and ethnic divisive Nigeria, corporate survival the flailing Nigerian State remains at risk.

The Islamization toga given to herders- farmers' conflict was accentuated by the stance of Buhari and Mansur Dan – Ali earlier highlighted. Trans-border movement of animals across the Sahara desert also provide vista for trans-border arms smuggling from the trouble zones of Libya, Niger, Chad, etc. into Nigeria. Availability of arms is a factor in the escalation of conflict. This had intensified the conflict.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Poor Management of the Anti-Open Grazing Accentuated Violent Conflict in Benue State

It has been observed that attempts at combating the impact of climate change on agricultural production and for improved agricultural productivity had distorted shifting cultivation and fallowing systems. Also, the desiccation and allocation of large farms to mechanized farming and estate owners in the North, particularly the North West had also pushed off historical grazing routes. Similarly available land for open grazing in Nigeria's middle belt has drastically reduced by 38%, while land dedicated to farming has trebled. However demands for protein (meat) had been rising in the face of short supply (Reuter, 2018). The scarcity of grazing pastures in the Northern part of the country has caused a pushed migration of herders into the lower Benue valley where the reasonable volume of rainfall had allowed for some green vegetation. This movement is pushed by grazing resources scarcity and in response to meat production. What this implies is that anything called open grazing is nothing but grazing on cultivated farmers crops. It is this grazing on cultivated farmers crops and reactions by the famers that has resulted in herders – farmers' violent conflict.

In protection of farmers and farming as a livelihood support structure (in fact the major occupation) of the Benue people, the Benue State Government in 2017 passed the Open Grazing Prohibition and Ranches Establishment Act. This was greeted with fierce opposition of MACBAN on the ground that the law was obnoxious, repugnant to natural justice, and discriminatory. The fierce opposition to the enforcement of anti-open grazing law accentuated an unprecedented spate of herders–farmers violent conflict in Benue State. The scores of deaths recorded in the clashes post passage and enforcement of the Act was unprecedented.

There is empirical evidence to support the claim that poor management of grazing rights accentuated violent herders-farmers' conflict in Benue. The remark of the Nigerian Minister of Defence under Mahammadu Buhari 2017-2023 was one of such evidence. Mansur Dan-Ali was unequivocal in attributing the spate of killing in Benue State to anti-open grazing law. He particularly noted that “the blockade of grazing route was the remote cause and anti-open grazing law was the immediate cause of the herders – farmers' violent conflict in Benue State and other parts of the country where such form of violence was experienced” (cited in Ameh, 2018, p. 28).

For him Nigerians must learn to live together and harmoniously irrespective of ethnic, religious, cultural and occupational differences. President Buhari's disposition in 2018 was also interpreted as a tacit approval of the carnage caused by the herders over open grazing rights. He remarked, thus, powerful individuals have for many years been encroaching on grazing routes and cattle ranches, an attitude which resulted in the current conflict claiming several lives across the country (Buhari, cited in Oluwole, 2021). What more could give credence to the claim of tacit government support to the activities of the herders than the stance of the ruling class of the Nigerian state as exemplified by the remarks highlighted above?

The above also takes us to the point that the design of grazing reserves by the federal government was itself problematic. The call for compulsory grazing reserve in the view of Christian farmers is interpreted as tacit approval by the federal government. This is hinged on the point that the plan is sectional, self-serving, and repugnant and against law of natural justice. The design expects each state to acquire 100,000 hectares of land (many of which will be private and communal land) for grazing reserve to another private citizen's business of cattle rearing. This in our opinion is against the doctrine of eminent domain and therefore contravenes section

51(1h) of the land use Act (FGN, 2004). Taking over land for grazing reserves and ranching does not in any way satisfy overriding public interest. It rather amounts to empowerment by dispossession. It further accentuated the sentiment of fulanization policy of the Buhari's administration. It is repugnant, obnoxious and exploitative against the farmers. This finding is supported by the environmental scarcity and social conflict theory (Homer-Dixon, 1999) adopted as the theoretical framework for this study.

The Religiosization of Land Resource Conflict in Benue State

The data presented and analyzed showed there is a religiosization of a resource conflict in Benue State. There is a religious colouration given by parties in the conflict. This is done to enlist ethnic and religious supports. Apparently, solemn and conscious examination of the events exposed place of radicalization of Islam or Islamic fundamentalism in the herders-farmers violent conflict in Benue State. Islam -the religion of the Fulani carries with it jihad as a means of radical evangelization and conquest. The religious dynamics and colouration in Benue State precipitated it towards a jihad for the total Islamization of Northern Nigeria. The political authority of the Nigerian state in the poor management of the violent conflict associated with open grazing and the anti-open grazing seems to accentuate Islamization and Fulani political domination agenda of the Buhari's civilian administration.

Meanwhile, a careful examination showed that the enforcement of anti-open grazing law contributed to increasing cases of cattle rustling in Benue State. Criminal elements began to hide under the law to rustle cattle. Thus the herders treated cattle rustling as criminal attacks on their livelihood. This also occasioned retaliatory violent attacks on farmers as suspected cattle rustlers.

The Herders- farmers' Conflict and Threat to National Security

The nature, character and dynamics of herders–farmers' violent conflict arising from open grazing and anti-open grazing particularly the contestation and violent conflict generated by it is a threat to national security. Undoubtedly, the act of cattle breeding is a private business in Nigeria. For the Nigerian state to designate private and communal land as grazing reserves and grazing route is objectionable. Such are moves driven by the logic of primitive accumulation. It takes the form of state-led dispossession of the Christian farmers for the enrichment of the Muslim-Hausa/Fulani herders and cattle owners. This dispossession if not abated is recipe for more deadly national crisis of herders -farmers conflict .There are strong indications from the data presented that the herders enjoy patronage from the government as they engage in private business. As such the grazing reserve policy of the federal government has dire consequences on the polity. Similarly poor management of open grazing and its associated crisis is a threat to national security. This is because federal government has managed open grazing matter in manners that appear it was subsidizing cattle rearing for herders and cattle owners. It reacts to the issues as though the cow belongs to the government. It really does not.

In the violent conflict around open grazing and anti-open grazing law in Benue State, there has been the absence of the Nigerian State protection of the farmers they hence resort to self-help through local militias. The local militia instituted by the farmers for self-help and protection also faced the confrontation of the coercive instrument of Nigerian state. As such the Nigeria State was interpreted be to supporting and protecting Fulani herders against the Christian farmers. This demonstrated the failure of the Nigerian state in the performance of its primary

constitutional responsibility of security and welfare of the citizens and encouragement of national integration as enshrined in chapter 2 of the 1999 CFRN (as amended 2023).

The case of Benue State showed that the Nigerian state is in the control of the Hausa – Fulani. This opportunity had been used and continues to be to silence the ethnic minority of Benue State and other ethnic minorities in Nigeria. This is why the Nigerian military and security agencies have always been on the side of defending the marauding terrorist Fulani herders (Genyi, 2021). One point to substantiate this is the levity with which the federal government treated its marching order to the Inspector General of Police (IGP) to settle the crisis in Benue state. Following the January 1st, 2018 (new year day) massacre in Benue state, the then President Muhammadu Buhari ordered the Inspector General of Police (IGP) to relocate to Benue state. He was to operate from Benue State until the herders-farmers violent conflict was completely nip in the bud. However, the IGP spent only one night in Benue, returned the next day to Abuja while the killing continued unabated (BSEMA, 2023). This was done without a blink of the eye from the President. This speaks volume of the disposition of the Federal Government in comprehensively dealing with the conflict.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the impact of open grazing and its associated problems on Nigeria's national security. It particularly interrogated how attempts at containing the negative impact of climate change and open grazing on the livelihood structures of farmers accentuated the herders-farmers' violent conflict in Benue State. It is clear that herders-farmers' conflict was hitherto an entirely land-resource conflict. Apparently, the poor management of open grazing matters had phenomenally changed the nature and character of the conflict, hence, given it a religious coloration. This latter configuration had accentuated the adverse threat to the stability of a fragile and flailing Nigerian State. This position was articulated within the framework of the environmental scarcity and social conflict theory otherwise called eco-violence theory. The data presented and analyzed showed that poor management of the anti-open grazing accentuated the politicization, ethnicization and religio-sization of the land resource conflict in Benue State. These factors informed the nature, character and dynamics of herders-farmers' violent conflict in Benue State, it became a serious threat to national security.

Apparently, the hitherto harmonious social relations that once existed between the farmers and herders had been distorted by the pressures of environmental scarcity. Thus, open grazing and anti-open grazing issues has been manipulated in advancement of some particularistic religious and ethnic interest. This was such that the Islamization, fulanization, internal domination and subjugation attempt of the Buhari's administration conflagrated politico-religious dynamics of the period to a point they threatened Nigeria's national cohesion and national security. Albeit, sudden ceasefire of the large-scale violence associated with open grazing and anti-open grazing in the Tinubu's administration gives the rationalization and argument of this paper some evidential value. It holds therefore that the public mistrust, distrust and negative perception of the Nigeria state under the Buhari's administration in handling the herders-farmers conflict could not have been unfounded. This again buttresses the point of the Nigerian state's failure in terms of enhancement of economic prosperity, promotion of peace, law and order, safety and preservation of lives and properties of all citizens without preference to sectional cleavages.

The open grazing provides a platform for accumulation by dispossession by both the federal government and herders. The open grazing system was particularly crafted to economically dis-empower a segment of the society and for the material and economic possession and empowerment of another. This is why the attendant open grazing legislation in Benue state when confronted with the federal government ineptitude in handing the open grazing menace created more problem than it intended to resolve.

Recommendations

In line with findings and conclusion, the paper makes the following recommendations:

- The National Assembly should make law for compulsory ranching for all cattle breeders and their owners;
- The North East and the North West Development Commissions with the support of the federal government should liaise with the governments of the northern states, MACBAN to develop grazing reserves in the zone (being the base of cattle breeding business);
- The federal government through the Nigeria Immigration Service (NIS) in collaboration with other security agencies should ensure stiffer border control to check the use of herders as agent for the smuggling of SALW into Nigeria through the northern borders;
- The federal government and governments of the northern states should strengthen the traditional institutions for effective conflict management in the region.

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