

## Ethno-Territorial Conflict and National Integration: The Case of Herders and Farmers in Nigeria

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### Abstract

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Despite ongoing efforts by the Nigerian state to promote national unity, inter-group conflicts remain a major obstacle to integration and stability. Among these, the herders–farmers conflict stands out as a persistent ethno-territorial struggle that threatens national cohesion, security, and development. This study critically examines the relationship between the herders–farmers conflict and the challenges of national integration in Nigeria. It investigates the extent to which the fragmented nature of the Nigerian state structure contributes to the conflict, assesses its impact on national unity, and evaluates whether governmental responses adequately address the integrative needs of a multi-ethnic society. Adopting a qualitative research design, the study utilises documentary observation and applies a one-shot case study approach, underpinned by Social Identity Theory. The findings reveal that ethnic, religious, political, and occupational cleavages significantly shape conflict dynamics, reinforcing in-group allegiances and deepening inter-group hostility. The state's responses—often reactive and securitised—tend to overlook the broader implications for nation-building and social integration. The study concludes that entrenched identity politics and mutual distrust between herders and farmers exacerbate disunity and weaken the prospects for peaceful coexistence. It recommends the promotion of cross-cutting civic values and inter-group tolerance through educational, religious, and traditional institutions as a pathway to fostering national integration in Nigeria's deeply plural society.

**Keywords:** *Ethno-Territorial Conflict, Farmers, Herdsmen Conflict, National Integration, Nigeria*

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## **Background to the Study**

The Nigerian state has been entangled in cycles of violent conflict since the pre-independence era. Historical episodes such as the Aba Women Riot of 1929 and the Kano Riot of 1953 exemplify Nigeria's long-standing exposure to inter-group tension. Post-independence, these tensions escalated, culminating in the Nigerian Civil War of 1967. These conflicts have had devastating effects on national development, resulting in the loss of human capital, destruction of infrastructure, and impediments to social cohesion (Awotokun, Nwozor, & Olanrewaju, 2020). Following the Civil War, various state-led initiatives such as the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC), establishment of unity schools, and state creation were introduced to promote national integration (Alapiki, 2005). Despite these efforts, violent conflicts have increased both in frequency and complexity, suggesting that national integration remains an elusive goal (Eme-Uche & Okonkwo, 2020). Ethnic and regional cleavages continue to dominate Nigerian politics. Political parties and alliances have historically aligned along ethnic and regional lines (Etekpe, 2007), reinforcing divisions and exacerbating inter-group mistrust. These developments necessitate a focused examination of the relationship between herders-farmers conflict and national integration.

## **Statement of the Problem**

Achieving national integration in Nigeria has remained a persistent challenge due to the recurrent and deep-rooted nature of internal conflicts. The country's diverse ethno-religious and socio-economic composition, while a potential source of strength, has often been a catalyst for disunity. One of the most protracted and complex of these conflicts is the herders–farmers conflict, which has escalated in recent years, resulting in widespread violence, loss of lives, destruction of property, and mass displacement. This conflict not only disrupts agricultural productivity and rural livelihoods but also fuels mutual distrust among ethnic and regional groups, thereby undermining national integration. Nigeria's historical trajectory reveals that such internal divisions can evolve into threats to the very fabric of the state, as was the case with the Nigerian Civil War, the militancy in the Niger Delta, and the ongoing Boko Haram insurgency. These crises highlight how unresolved grievances and systemic imbalances can provoke large-scale unrest. The herders–farmers conflict, similarly, reflects a broader struggle over land, identity, and political representation, which is exacerbated by weak governance structures, environmental degradation, population pressure, and ineffective conflict resolution mechanisms.

Despite various governmental and non-governmental interventions, the conflict has persisted, raising critical questions about the nature of the Nigerian state and its capacity to manage diversity, protect human security, and foster national unity. There is an urgent need to understand the structural and institutional dynamics that sustain the conflict and to examine how such violence impacts the pursuit of national integration.

This study, therefore, seeks to explore the following research questions:

1. Does the fragmented structure of the Nigerian state contribute to the herders–farmers conflict?
2. How does the herders–farmers conflict impact national integration?

Addressing these questions is imperative for diagnosing the root causes of the conflict and for developing evidence-based, sustainable policy responses. Such understanding will contribute to the broader discourse on peacebuilding, inclusive governance, and the consolidation of national unity in Nigeria's multi-ethnic society.

### Methods of Study

This qualitative study adopts a one-shot case study design. Data was collected through documentary observation from secondary sources including journal articles, books, monographs, and newspaper reports. Data was presented descriptively using charts, tables, and textual analyses. Where applicable, percentages were employed to interpret findings.

### Review of Literature

Understanding the key concepts underpinning this study is crucial for contextualising the dynamics of the herders–farmers conflict and its implications for national integration. The following terms—*conflict*, *herders–farmers conflict*, and *state response*—are defined within the scope of existing scholarly literature and the Nigerian experience.

Conflict.

**Ethno-territorial Conflict:** Refers to a form of conflict in which ethnic identity and territorial claims intersect, often resulting in violent disputes over land, resources, autonomy, or political control. These conflicts typically occur when an ethnic group seeks exclusive rights to, or control over, a specific geographic area that it considers ancestral, sacred, or essential to its survival, while competing claims from other groups or state authorities challenge this assertion. According to Toft (2003), ethno-territorial conflicts arise “when ethnic groups mobilise to secure or resist control over territory they view as historically or culturally theirs.” These conflicts are distinguished by the ethnic character of the actors involved and the territorial dimension of the dispute, which together intensify group identity and perceptions of threat or exclusion.

In the African context, including Nigeria, such conflicts often emerge from colonial-era boundary legacies, unequal access to land and resources, environmental pressures, and state failure to manage diversity equitably (Blench, 2004). The herders–farmers crisis in Nigeria is a typical example, where ethnic Fulani herders and predominantly agrarian communities compete over land use, often framed through ethnic and territorial lenses.

Conflict, in the context of this study, refers to the perceived or actual incompatibility of interests, goals, or values between individuals or groups. It often manifests in overt confrontations, ranging from verbal disputes to violent clashes that lead to the loss of lives, displacement of people, and destruction of property. Burton (1990) argues that conflict is an inevitable outcome of unmet human needs, such as security, identity, and recognition. In plural societies like Nigeria, conflict frequently arises from competition over scarce resources, identity politics, and structural inequalities (Otite, 1999). The manifestation of conflict in violent terms places enormous strain on national resources and undermines governance and development.

### **Herders–Farmers Conflict**

The herders–farmers conflict is a specific form of resource-based conflict primarily involving nomadic or semi-nomadic pastoralists (mostly Fulani) and sedentary crop farmers. This conflict is largely driven by contestations over land and water resources, which have become increasingly scarce due to environmental degradation, population growth, and climate change (Blench, 2004; Okoli & Atelhe, 2014). The conflict often takes the form of violent confrontations that result in fatalities, mass displacement, and destruction of farmlands and livestock. According to Abbass (2012), the herders–farmers conflict is not merely a clash over resources but has evolved into an ethno-religious and political crisis that threatens Nigeria's internal cohesion. Furthermore, the growing sophistication of attacks—often involving firearms and coordinated raids—has transformed what were once seasonal disputes into protracted and deadly confrontations (International Crisis Group, 2017).

### **State Response**

State response refers to the array of policies, institutional frameworks, security measures, and peacebuilding efforts employed by the Nigerian government to manage, mitigate, or resolve the herders–farmers conflict. These include legislative reforms (e.g., anti-grazing laws), establishment of grazing reserves or cattle ranches, deployment of security forces, and engagement with traditional and community leaders. However, scholars such as Kwaja and Ademola-Adelehin (2018) argue that state responses have often been reactive, fragmented, and lacking in strategic coherence. In some instances, state interventions have exacerbated tensions due to perceived biases or the failure to address underlying structural issues such as land tenure, climate adaptation, and social inclusion. The limited effectiveness of state response mechanisms calls for a re-evaluation of conflict resolution approaches and the development of more inclusive, preventive strategies (Mustapha, 2019).

Existing literature attributes the herders-farmers conflict to multiple factors: resource scarcity, climate change, land disputes, religion, poverty, insecurity, and ethnic rivalry (BNRCC, 2011; Abbas, 2014; Mustapha, 2019). These confrontations are rooted in competing claims over access to land and water (Abubakar, 2012; Aliyu, 2015; Olusola, 2018). Additional causes include low education levels among herders and regional insecurity in Northern Nigeria (Olokor, 2017; Ojo, 2019). Though primarily occupational, the conflict has acquired ethnic and religious dimensions, often involving Fulani herdsman and indigenous farming communities in the Middle Belt (Abbas, 2014). The conflict's impact is severe. Nigeria's Global Terrorism Index (2015) ranks herdsman among the world's deadliest groups. Over 1,400 lives have been lost in more than 150 incidents (Morgen, 2016). Displacement, destruction of livelihoods, and diminished national unity have been widely reported (Aliyu, Ikedinma, & Akinwande, 2018). Government responses—grazing reserves, ranching, security deployment—have been inconsistent and often ignore the conflict's broader implications for national integration (Kwaja & Ademola-Adelehin, 2018). Most studies focus on causes and effects, with little attention to the conflict's interface with national integration. This study addresses that gap.

### **Theoretical Framework: Social Identity Theory**

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) posits that individuals derive a sense of identity and value from group membership. This leads to in-group favoritism and out-group discrimination. When group distinctions are emphasized, even minimal differences can result in entrenched conflict, as individuals seek to uphold group status rather than mutual benefit. In the Nigerian context, deep-rooted ethnic and religious identities supersede national identity, fueling persistent inter-group conflict. The herders-farmers conflict exemplifies this, as both groups exhibit strong internal solidarity and external suspicion. The theory elucidates how conflict persists despite shared national interest, reinforcing ethnic identity at the expense of national integration.

### **Nigeria's Fragmented Nationhood and Group Identities**

Nigeria is an amalgamation of over 250 ethnic groups with distinct languages and religious affiliations (Diamond, 1982; Fisher, 2015; Obi, 2001). The country is politically structured into six geopolitical zones, 36 states, and 774 local government areas. These divisions foster diverse group identities and frequent inter-group tensions. Social identities in Nigeria are shaped by ethnicity, religion, occupation, and regional affiliation. These identities often foster mutual suspicion and hostility, leading to recurring inter-group conflict. Gender-based disputes, professional rivalries, and political factionalism all contribute to Nigeria's unstable social fabric (Birchall, 2019; Olajide, Asuzu, & Obembe, 2015).

The most visible and violent conflicts are inter-ethnic and inter-religious in nature, rooted in longstanding rivalries. For instance, conflicts between the Yoruba and Edo people, as well as historical rivalries among Hausa states, exemplify Nigeria's deep-seated identity divisions (Edewor, Aluko, & Folarin, 2014). Events like the Ife/Modakeke crisis, the Nigerian Civil War, and the Boko Haram insurgency further highlight the destructive potential of unchecked identity politics. The herders-farmers conflict thus emerges not merely as an economic dispute but as a symptom of Nigeria's fragile national identity. Interventions must therefore transcend immediate triggers and address underlying identity-based divisions if genuine national integration is to be achieved.

### **Elements of Social Identity in the Herders–Farmers Conflict**

The literature on the causes of the herders–farmers conflict can be broadly categorised into two main strands. The first attributes the conflict to competition over natural resources, particularly land and water, while the second highlights identity-related factors such as religion, ethnicity, and linguistic differences. The role of social identity is particularly evident in the latter discourse. Religion, ethnicity, language, and occupation are all forms of social identity through which individuals and groups construct in-group and out-group affiliations, often fostering a sense of attachment to one's group and hostility towards others.

While it is relatively straightforward to frame the conflict in terms of identity, doing so becomes more complex when one considers the underlying struggle for resources. Nonetheless, it is clear that although the competition for land and water is a major trigger, social identity dynamics often escalate the conflict into violent confrontation. The increasing



violence between herders and farmers is not solely the result of immediate disputes over resources. Rather, it is rooted in long-standing tensions shaped by historical and cultural differences, including linguistic and ethnic divides (Oladotun & Oladotun, 2019). While the resource struggle lays the groundwork for conflict, identity factors—such as religion and ethnicity—often provide the emotional and psychological fuel that intensifies it. In this context, social identity acts as a catalyst, transforming disputes into violent confrontations and reinforcing divisions that hinder national integration.

Conflict theories such as frustration–aggression, class conflict, and relative deprivation underscore the role of deep-seated biases, perceived injustice, and group-based sentiments in driving violence. These theories suggest that while resource scarcity may ignite conflict, it is the underlying psychological and identity-based grievances that sustain and exacerbate it. In Nigeria, the hostility between herders and farmers extends beyond occupational differences. It is reinforced by ethnic, religious, and regional identities. While farmers are drawn from a wide range of ethno-linguistic, regional, and religious backgrounds, the majority of herders are Fulani, predominantly from the northern part of the country. Although some scholars argue that Fulani herders are not inherently religious, others have linked them to Islamic affiliations (Adamu & Ben, 2017; Clark, 2018). This has led to claims—albeit contested—that religious expansionism may partly motivate the conflict (Adamu & Ben, 2017; Clark, 2018). These concerns have given rise to conspiracy theories, including the perception that herder attacks are part of a broader Fulani agenda to displace indigenous populations and seize their ancestral lands (International Crisis Group, 2017).

The ethnic configuration of the conflict further illustrates its identity-driven dimension. While most herders are Fulani, farmers belong to various indigenous ethnic groups in the Middle Belt and southern Nigeria. Evidence indicates that the Fulani are indigenous to states such as Gombe, Sokoto, Katsina, Bauchi, Kebbi, Yobe, and Benue (Ikenwa, 2019). These states themselves are ethnically diverse. For instance, Gombe is home to ethnic groups such as the Hausa, Tangale, Terawa, Waja, Kumo, Fulani, Kanuri, Bolewa, Jukun, Pero/Shonge, Tula, Cham, Lunguda, Dadiya, and Banbuka (Odinta, 2019). Sokoto and Katsina have Hausa and Fulani as their predominant ethnic groups, while Bauchi includes the Tangale, Waji, Fulani, and Hausa (Britannica, 2015). Kebbi comprises the Hausa, Fulani, Dakarki, and Kamberi, and Yobe includes the Bade, Shuwa, Karekare, Kanuri, Hausa, and Fulani (Adeyemi, 2011).

However, the conflict is not confined to these states. Morgen (2016) reports that herders–farmers clashes have spread across at least 17 states, with the highest fatalities recorded in Benue, Kaduna, Adamawa, and Zamfara. Although the geographical spread of the conflict can be attributed to the transhumant movement of pastoralists, the intensity of violence in specific states underscores the role of social identity. The data presented in the table below provides further evidence supporting this argument.

**Table 1: Fatality Report of Selected States**

State	Number of Incidents	Number of Fatalities
Adamawa	5	57
Anambra	1	3
Abuja	1	1
Benue	12	1042
Delta	3	4
Edo	1	1
Enugu	3	51
Imo	1	7
Kaduna	8	118
Kastina	1	8
Kwara	1	5
Nasarawa	2	20
Ogun	1	3
Ondo	1	1
Plateau	1	22
Taraba	4	21
Zamfara	1	50
Total	47	1425

**Source:** (Morgen, 2016)

It is evident from Morgen's report that out of a total of 1,425 casualties recorded, 1,042 fatalities (across 12 incidents) occurred in Benue State, while Katsina State accounted for 8 fatalities from a single incident. The states with the second, third, and fourth highest number of casualties were Kaduna (118 casualties from 8 incidents), Adamawa (57 casualties from 5 incidents), and Zamfara (50 casualties from 1 incident), respectively. These three states are located in the North-East and North-West geopolitical zones.

This data challenges the dominant narrative that the herders–farmers conflict is primarily driven by climate change-induced drought, which allegedly intensifies transhumance and fuels the southward migration of herders. Instead, the high casualty figures in states with complex ethno-religious compositions—particularly Benue and Kaduna—highlight the strong link between social identity and the escalation of the conflict. Notably, Benue and Kaduna, both northern states with significant ethno-religious diversity, accounted for nearly 43.6% of the reported incidents and 81.4% of total casualties. In contrast, over 15 other states collectively accounted for 56.4% of incidents but only 18.6% of casualties. While acknowledging the gradual spread of the conflict to the southern regions, the distribution of incidents and casualties suggests that social diversity is a key factor influencing the intensity and lethality of the conflict. This observation is corroborated by the International Crisis Group (2017), which identified the states with the highest number of casualties.

**Figure 1:** Map of Nigeria Showing States with Highest Casualties



**Source:** (International Crisis Group, 2017)

The figure above, based on findings by the International Crisis Group (2017), highlights states such as Kaduna, Plateau, Nasarawa, Benue, and Taraba as experiencing the highest number of casualties from herders–farmers clashes. This reinforces the findings of Morgen (2016), who had earlier identified Benue and Kaduna as the epicentres of the conflict. The connection between social identity and the escalation of violence becomes clearer when these identity-diverse states are examined more closely, as illustrated in the figure below.

**Fig. 2:** Map Showing Insecurity and Conflict Incident in Nigeria



**Source:** (International Crisis Group, 2017)



### **From Identity to Violence: Ethnic and Religious Fault Lines**

From the figure above, the International Crisis Group (ICG) identified Kaduna and Plateau States as reporting the highest incidences of ethnic and religious identity conflicts. Notably, these states also ranked among those with the highest numbers of casualties in herders–farmers clashes. Interestingly, while Benue State recorded the highest number of casualties and incidents in Morgen's report, it was not listed among those with the most frequent identity-based conflicts by ICG. However, existing data show that Benue is home to a diverse ethnic population. This reinforces the argument that ethnic and religious identities are significant factors fuelling the herders–farmers conflict.

### **Implications of the Herders–Farmers Conflict on National Integration**

As established in the preceding analysis, the herders–farmers conflict is closely tied to the heterogeneous nature of the Nigerian state. Diversity, while a potential asset, has created fertile ground for violent mobilisation. The conflict has widened existing ethnic and religious cleavages, undermining national integration efforts. This is evident in the mutual suspicion and tensions that have manifested through threats and retaliatory attacks by communities against Fulani herders.

The International Crisis Group (2017) illustrates this dynamic with the following examples:

*“Following an April 2016 attack on Nimbo, in Enugu State in the South-East, the separatist Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) ordered 'Fulani herdsmen to leave Biafra land or ... face our wrath.' In May 2016, Ekiti State Governor Ayodele Fayose warned of possible attacks on Fulani herders if their alleged predatory behaviour towards locals continued. Likewise, the president of the Christian Association of Nigeria, Reverend Olasupo Ayokunle, warned: 'If the government fails to stop the provocation by the Fulani (herdsmen), they should be prepared for war. No ethnic group has a monopoly of violence and no ethnic group should be a monster to others.'”*

These statements reflect how ethnic and religious leaders have responded to the conflict in ways that exacerbate tensions, rather than mitigate them. Even though prominent Fulani leaders such as the Sultan of Sokoto, Mohammed Sa'ad Abubakar III, have condemned violence and urged prosecution of criminal elements among herders, many Nigerians remain unconvinced, citing the nation's long-standing inter-faith suspicions and weak enforcement mechanisms.

### **Deficient State Response**

The Nigerian government—both at the federal and state levels—has implemented a range of interventions aimed at resolving the herders–farmers conflict. These include the creation of grazing reserves, the establishment of the National Commission for Nomadic Education, the deployment of security forces, state-level anti-open grazing legislation, the Great Green Wall Initiative, and the Federal Government's Comprehensive Livestock Development Plan (Kwaja & Ademola-Adelehin, 2018; Akerjiir, 2018; Mustapha, 2019).

Despite these efforts, the conflict has persisted, often escalating. The limited success of these interventions can be attributed to several factors: inadequate funding, corruption, allegations of human rights violations by security agencies, and the perception of ethnic and political bias in government actions (Kwaja & Ademola-Adelehin, 2018). In some instances, funds earmarked for establishing ranches or supporting nomadic education have been misappropriated. Furthermore, some state governments are perceived as acting prejudicially against Fulani herders.

This concern is illustrated in the following quote:

*“Policies are carried out by emotional sentiments rooted in ethnicity... Politics in Nigeria is characterized by ethnic cleavages. The political elite prey upon the masses and use them as satellites to achieve their socio-political and economic objectives. This is done through orientation, indoctrination or violence, using the masses and already-conceived stereotypes against their political opponents. Right from the formation of political parties to campaign processes and voting patterns, all tend towards ethnicity. As a result, politics in Nigeria is associated with violence and lack of accommodation” (Kalejaiye & Alliyu, 2013)*

The implication here is that government responses often mirror the deep-seated psychological and cultural divisions within the Nigerian state. The reluctance of many state governments to embrace cattle ranching initiatives is frequently driven by fears of ethnic and religious domination by the Fulani (Nzomiwu, 2018; *Punch*, 2018). In response, Fulani herders may adopt a defensive posture, further straining relations with host communities and complicating efforts toward national cohesion.

## **Conclusion**

The herders–farmers conflict in Nigeria exemplifies a deeply entrenched ethno-territorial struggle that reflects broader challenges of national integration. At its core, the conflict is driven by identity-based divisions—particularly ethnic and religious affiliations—which shape perceptions, fuel grievances, and legitimise group mobilisation. These identity cleavages, when linked to territorial claims and resource competition, have led to cycles of violence, mutual distrust, and social fragmentation across affected regions.

The study reveals that the Nigerian state has struggled to manage this conflict constructively. Government responses have often been reactive, security-centred, and perceived as partial, thereby exacerbating tensions rather than resolving them. Crucially, these responses have failed to address the symbolic and emotional dimensions of group identity and belonging, which lie at the heart of the conflict. As long as group identity is perceived as being under threat, efforts toward national integration will continue to be undermined by localised ethno-territorial disputes.

Achieving national unity in such a plural society requires more than peace enforcement—it necessitates the deliberate construction of shared values and inclusive citizenship.

## Recommendations

Base on the findings and conclusion of the study, the following recommendations are necessary,

1. **Promote Civic National Identity:**  
The government should invest in policies and campaigns that promote a shared Nigerian identity that transcends ethnic, religious, and regional affiliations.
2. **Implement Value Re-orientation Programmes:**  
A comprehensive value re-orientation strategy should be introduced through families, religious institutions, schools, and the media to foster tolerance, coexistence, and national cohesion.
3. **Strengthen Conflict Early Warning and Mediation Mechanisms:**  
Establish community-based peace committees and local conflict resolution platforms that can de-escalate tensions before they become violent.
4. **Reform Land Use and Grazing Policies:**  
Develop clear, equitable land-use policies that protect both the rights of farmers and the needs of pastoralists, including the regulation of grazing routes and access to resources.
5. **Enhance Security Neutrality and Justice Delivery:**  
Security agencies must be trained to act impartially in ethno-territorial conflicts, and justice must be timely and accessible to all parties involved to deter impunity.
6. **Encourage Inclusive Political Dialogue:**  
Create spaces for multi-stakeholder dialogue that includes ethnic leaders, herder and farmer representatives, civil society, and policymakers to build trust and long-term peace frameworks.
7. **Address Root Economic Causes:**  
Tackle the underlying drivers of conflict—such as unemployment, poverty, and environmental degradation—through targeted rural development and economic inclusion programmes.

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