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Grammar of Geopolitics: Geopolitical Imaginations of Farmer-herder Conflicts in Nigeria

Jeopolitik Dilbilgisi: Nijerya'da Çiftçi-Çoban Çatışmalarının Jeopolitik İnançları

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ABSTRACT

The farmer-herder conflicts (FHCs) in Nigeria have aggravated in recent years, and so too has its scholarly inquiry. However, there is yet a critical geopolitics analysis of the conflicts despite their geopolitical manifestations. This paper explores the geopolitical imagination of the conflicts based on the "Grammar of Geopolitics approach" of Gearóid Tuathail. Data used were newspapers' stories and supplemented by government and independent bodies' reports. The article shows that the conflicts are represented with ecological and socio-political storylines with local, regional, and global inclinations. They are imagined as evolving from local disagreements to entangle regional political crises and shaped by global environmental shocks (especially climate change) on local communities. The geopolitical storyline of the Nigerian government portrays the conflict as entrenched in lands and amplified by regional crises. The administration's proposed socio-spatial arrangement (cattle colony) to segregate nomadic herders from arable farmers to avert violence has failed to gain traction in Nigeria's various areas. The policy itself contradicts the ancient system of nomadic pastoralists, who flourish in smooth space and would not thrive in a constrained striated space. Thus, apart from addressing the environmental and ecological problems associated with the conflicts, the issue of regional geopolitical dynamics within Nigeria and the West Africa region has to be considered. Removal of regional barriers to access and inclusion of the pastoralists in resource use via a trans-regional framework recognizing local needs and disparities is vital. The paper indicates that the grammar of the geopolitics model can handle the media discourse of the FHCs in Nigeria well and helps to organize the narratives (if corroborated with extant scholarly literature as in the case of climate change-FHCs nexus) in such a way that avoids falling into inherently subjective trappings of the media storylines. Thus, the model is best suited for its purpose—to analyze geopolitical imaginations emanating from media sources.

Keywords: Farmer-herder conflict, farmer-pastoralist conflict, geopolitical imagination, critical geopolitics, Nigeria

ÖZ

Nijerya'daki çiftçi-çoban çatışmaları (Farmer-Herder Conflicts/ FHC'ler) son yıllarda giderek şiddetlenmiş ve bu konudaki akademik araştırmalar da giderek artmıştır. Ancak, jeopolitik yansımalarına rağmen, çatışmaların bir eleştirel jeopolitik analizi henüz yapılmamıştır. Bu makale, Gearóid Tuathail'in "Jeopolitik Yaklaşımın Grameri" temel alınarak çatışmaların jeopolitik dünyasını araştırmaktadır. Makalede kullanılan veriler gazete haberlerine dayanmakta olup, hükümet ve bağımsız kuruluşların raporlarıyla desteklenmiştir. Makale, çatışmaların yerel, bölgesel ve küresel eğiliminin ekolojik ve sosyo-politik çizgilerle temsil edildiğini göstermektedir. Toplum üzerinde etkili olan tüm bu sorunların yerel anlaşmazlıklar, bölgesel siyasi krizler ve küresel çevre krizleri (özellikle iklim değişikliği) gibi değişkenlerin iç içe geçmesinden kaynaklandığı düşünülmektedir. Nijerya hükümetinin şiddeti önlemek amacıyla göçebe çobanları tarla çiftçilerinden ayırmak için önerdiği sosyo-mekansal düzenleme (sığır kolonisi), Nijerya'nın çeşitli bölgelerinde ilgi çekmeyi başaramadı. Bunun nedeni politikaların, göçebe çoban yaşantısının sınırlı bir mekâna bağlı olmayan kültürü ile çelişiyor olmasıdır. Bu nedenle, çatışmalarla ilişkili çevresel ve ekolojik sorunların ele alınmasının yanı sıra, Nijerya ve Batı Afrika bölgesindeki bölgesel jeopolitik dinamikler konusu da dikkate alınmalıdır. Yerel ihtiyaçları ve eşitsizlikleri tanıyan bölgeler arası bir çerçeve aracılığıyla göçebe çobanların kaynak kullanımına erişimi ve dahil edilmesinin önündeki bölgesel engellerin kaldırılması hayati önem taşımaktadır. Makalede ele alınan model, Nijerya'daki FHC'lerin medyaya yansımaları iyi yönetebildiğini ve (FHC - iklim değişikliği bağlantısı durumunda olduğu gibi mevcut akademik literatürle desteklendiğinde) medyanın doğası gereği öznel yargılara girilmesini önleyecek şekilde organize edilmesine yardımcı olduğunu belirtmektedir. Bu nedenle model, medya kaynaklarından yayılan jeopolitik görüşleri analiz etme amacına en uygun modeldir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Çiftçi-çoban çatışması, çiftçi-göçebe çiftçi çatışması, jeopolitik görüş, kritik jeopolitik, Nijerya

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INTRODUCTION

Using the Grammar of Geopolitics paradigm, this essay examines the geopolitical imaginations of Nigerian farmer-herder conflicts (FHCs). The conflict between nomadic pastoralists and farmers in Nigeria is not new, but it has progressed in recent years. Property has been destroyed, people have died, and people have been displaced as a result of the violence. Hence, it has attracted renewed scholarly inquiry. While previous studies often highlight the factors of resource scarcity (e.g., Herrero 2006; Tonah 2006; Cabot 2017; Brottem 2016) and exclusionary politics (e.g., Turner 2004; Benjaminsen and Ba 2009, 2019; Walwa 2020), as pertinent to an elucidation of the crises, emerging tradition has focused on the analysis of discourse (Eke 2020; Chilwa and Chilwa 2020; Chukwuma 2020; Igwebuike 2020; Nartey and Ladegaard 2021). Thus, the analysis of the discourse of the conflict is taking center stage in Nigeria. This paper contributes to this emerging literature by analyzing the discourse of the conflict via a critical geopolitics perspective which previous studies have not explored. The aim is to understand the geopolitical imaginations of the conflict in Nigeria.

Critical geopolitics emphasizes that discourse, space, and power are inseparable. They are tightly bonded in such a way that discourses produce signifying practices, concepts, and narratives that are embodied in geographical imaginations (geospatial identities and geographical knowledge) that bear on strategies of power, e.g., military actions, foreign policy, or people and resource control (Sharp 1993; Dodds and Sidaway 1994; Dalby 2010; Ide 2016). It has been suggested that studying the geopolitical imaginations of the FHCs could assist critical geopolitics (Nwankwo 2018b, 2020). Güney and Gökcan (2010) define geopolitical imagination as a created vision of the world that reflects the image of a place, society, country, or region's involvement in global politics. Shared norms and portrayals of power relations and conflicts within a certain geographical location are used to create it (Latham 2001). Through critical analysis of how and why geopolitical imaginings are produced, we can better appreciate the underlying power relations and sources of various tensions and conflicts (Megoran 2004), as well as their geopolitical code, which is a series of tactical visions made about others based on national identity, place attachment and national myths (Güney and Gökcan 2010). Geopolitical imaginations offer the rationale for geopolitical actions or practices in foreign and domestic affairs (Mamadouh and Dijkink 2006). Since the FHC is a domestic affair that entangles regional and global issues, the representation of the

FHC will have some kind of geopolitical imagination. The imagination can mirror present discourses and hence are contingent and vary across places and regions.

I deployed the *Grammar of Geopolitics* approach of Gearóid Tuathail (Tuathail 2002) to explore how the conflict is imagined geopolitically. The article shows that the FHC is represented with ecological and socio-political storylines with local, regional, and global inclinations. It is imagined as evolving from local disagreements to entangle regional political crises and shaped by global environmental shocks (especially climate change) on local communities. The conflict, according to the Buhari administration's geopolitical narrative, is rooted in a desire for land and exacerbated by regional conflicts. The administration's socio-spatial plan to separate nomadic cattle grazers from arable farmers to avoid confrontations has failed to gain traction across Nigeria's regions. Apart from the environmental difficulties allegedly associated with the FHCs, the topic of regional geopolitical dynamics within Nigeria and the West African region is also important. Removal of regional barriers to access and inclusion of the pastoralists in resource use via a trans-regional framework recognizing local needs and disparities is vital. The paper indicates that the "grammar of geopolitics" approach can handle the media discourse of the FHCs in Nigeria well and helps to organize the discourses (if corroborated with extant scholarly literature as in the case of climate change-FHCs connection) in a manner that circumvents characteristically subjective trappings of the media stories. Thus, the model is best suitable for its purpose—to unpack geopolitical imaginations emanating from media sources.

In this study of geopolitical representations in Nigeria, I used newspapers' stories as sources of data as newspapers are the primary source of information about the conflict in Nigeria. The discourses contained in the mass media channels come from the realm of popular culture. The role of popular culture is of growing significance in critical geopolitics research. The study of popular culture and how it puts people within broader political narratives have been taken on by popular geopolitics (Dittmer and Dodds 2008), presenting a link between the individual and the mass (Pinkerton and Dodds, 2009). The mass media offer a setting in which elite geopolitical texts are repeated, as well as bridging the gap between elite geopolitical imaginations and popular conflict perceptions (McFarlane and Hay 2003). Through dialog, framing, or rhetorical methods, the media can attract and maintain public attention to specific issues, as well as modify or provide credence to the discourse around a dispute (Igwebuike 2020; Nartey and Ladegaard 2021).

The importance of studying popular culture materials, such as video games, comic books, magazines, and newspapers, rests on the fact that they can generate geopolitical imaginations that can be used to establish and legitimize geopolitical schemes such as foreign policies (Ide 2016). These imaginations in their various forms can be taken by people as truthful and authoritative, thus enhancing every day (re-) construction of knowledge hegemony in society, and ultimately political action (Robison 2004). This reflects the idea that “any story of the world uses implicit geopolitical visions and images” (Mamadouh and Dijkink 2006: 360). The public is frequently exposed to such geopolitical visions and imagery through mass media such as newspapers and magazines. As a result, reading newspaper stories can reveal how statecraft intellectuals and policymakers make sense of crises, “how they construct stories to explain these crises, how they develop strategies for dealing with these crises as political challenges, and how they conceptualize solutions to these crises” (Tuathail 2002: 603). Thus, it follows that exploring media’s construction and perpetuation of geopolitical discourses of the farmer-herder conflict in Nigeria is pertinent because the discourses can have some effects on how those issues are discussed, what meanings are constructed.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Sources

I analyzed stories from daily national newspapers that have been considered impartial by several studies (e.g., Adesoji and Hahn 2011; Ademilokun and Taiwo 2013; Igwebuiké 2020). The papers reflect the geopolitical fault lines in Nigeria, namely the *Daily Trust* and *Leadership* from northern Nigeria, plus *The Punch* and *The Guardian* from Southern Nigeria. The last two papers are among the few papers that have been argued as not having any affiliation, or sympathetic to any political parties in the country and are privately owned (Adesoji and Hahn 2011; Ademilokun and Taiwo 2013). The *Leadership* newspaper is a pro-government paper supported by the founder—a northern Christian politician who vied for the presidential seat under the ruling All Peoples Congress (APC) (Igwebuiké 2020). The *Daily Trust* is located in northern Nigeria but has national circulation. The Media Trust founded it, and it seeks to publish reliable news to gain public trust, but it seems to pursue the northern agenda (Igwebuiké 2020). The reports examined were published between January 2014 and February 2021 in the newspapers. The study took place from April 2018 to February 2021. During this time, the FHC became more intense and received a lot of media attention. It falls in the final year of President Goodluck

Jonathan’s administration, as well as President Buhari’s first term, and two years into his second term. This is vital because it captures President Goodluck Jonathan, who is not a Fulani or herdsman, and the tenure of President Buhari, who is both a Fulani Muslim and a herdsman.

The general search term for extracting articles from the newspapers is herdsman and conflict, and that returned a corpus of articles, which were manually cleaned and prepared for the analysis. The search produced a total of 127,673 news items. Still, those containing the keyword were 5387 articles: After the clean-up, a total number of 1166 articles were remaining: *The Punch* (327), *The Guardian* (254), *the Daily Trust* (287), and *the Leadership* (298). Cleaning-up entailed the removal of articles that were recurring and not discussing the conflict. Data from secondary and independent sources were supplemented in the news pieces. I also looked at the argument among Members of Parliament over the violence, as well as the viewpoints of the Nigerian federal and state governments. Archival, textual, and discourse analysis are the primary research methodologies used in this study. The archival study is beneficial for acquiring textual material and entails looking for old documents. Hence, it helps gather the organized copy records of, say, FHCs in the newspapers. Critical geopoliticians often use this approach to collect the textual materials associated with geo-graphing and thus used to appreciate the geo-graphing and geopolitics relationships (An 2020).

METHODOLOGY

1- Textual analysis

Textual analysis is known as an operative way to analyze textual data. It involves reading gradually and meticulously through the text material line by line or sentence at a time and trying to reflect on what meaning it embodies and why (Hannam 2001: 193). I deployed textual analysis to analyze the discourse of the FHC in the newspapers. In textual analysis, the intention is to unearth the meaning of texts by probing the signs it contains and their functions. Subject-positioning and metaphor analysis is the textual analytical techniques I used to make sense of the meanings of texts since they are well suited to the geopolitical analytical method I will use—Grammar of Geopolitics. The way topics are arranged or situated in a text is referred to as subject-positioning. It is an association “between subjects and between subjects and objects” and the agency attributed to subjects within discursive practices (Doty 1993: 306). The primary forms of associations that position subjects are *similarity*, *opposition*,

complementarity, and identity (Doty 1993). Thus, the analysis of subject-positioning entails uncovering how subjects and objects are situated and connected to deconstruct reality.

On the basic level, metaphor is a semantic tool linking two or more different ideas by stressing their similarities (An 2020). However, metaphors are vital in creating complex or abstract concrete concepts in simplified ways (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). For example, the depiction of immigration as “pollution” polluting a place with immigrants’ inflow simplifies a complex societal issue metaphorically (Cisneros 2008). Similarly, the construction of the FHC as ethnic cleansing is the simplification of a complex issue of resistance and counter-resistance. Hence, metaphors do not just compare two words; they make us comprehend and sense the relational analogy of one thing to another (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). As a result, metaphors shape our thinking, and our conceptual framework is largely metaphorical. As a result, our everyday thoughts, experiences, and behaviors are heavily influenced by metaphor (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 297). Thus, they influence our understanding of economic, social, and political processes by shaping how we view a specific social reality (Igwebuike 2020). Metaphors also function in an ideological sense; they stress that social, ideological, and societal considerations provide the basis for the preference of conceptual metaphor (Charteris-Black 2004). The analysis of the articles was carried out by using three interrelated stages of analysis: identification, interpretation, and explanation about their social and political contexts in Nigeria.

2- Discourse approach

The interpretive–explanatory approach has often been the approach to analyzing discourse in critical geopolitics of foreign policymaking and discussion. Tuathail (2002: 605) argued that such analysis tends to play down essential facets of the policy process like current debates over the categorization of disputes and the “development of geopolitical storylines, internal tensions and incoherencies in geopolitical scripts, and how the foreign policy process defines “problems” and “solutions.” Discourse meaning can vary, but it is generally seen as a common way of seeing, talking, thinking about events and things around us and afar. It is the relations of elements and moments in a discursive system via articulatory practice. Tuathail (2002: 605) described discourse as “a collection of capabilities that allow us to organize and provide sense to the world and our actions and practices within it” while defining “discourse analysis” of practical geopolitical thinking. Recognizing that this definition is “exceedingly broad,” Tuathail (2002) contended that one way of

appreciating varieties of approaches that pass as “discourse analysis” is to organize them into macro, meso, and micro-level perspectives. Macro-level discourse analysis, like Foucault’s writings, is concerned with “genealogies of knowledge, the creation of institutionalized disciplines of knowledge, and the functioning of powerful discourses of subjectification and social positioning as regimes of truth and power technologies” (Hoy 1986 cited in Tuathail 2002: 606).

At the meso-level is associated with the “argumentative turn” in public policy and planning and focuses on the everyday production and reproduction of discourse in public policy and social debate; it focuses on the construction of “common sense” conceptions and sensible “storylines” that engender and enable everyday policy practices. Micro-level discourse analysis is mainly related to Linguistics and Psychology. It is typified by outstandingly intensive analysis of dialog and sense-making structures without looking at questions of power and identity. Tuathail argued that the meso-level argumentative approach (MLAA) is valuable for studying practical geopolitical reasoning because it uses the rhetorical tradition to understand public policymaking. The MLAA is based on the idea that discourse emerges from open discussion using a collective assemblage of explanatory properties called a “language.” There is categorization and particularization of discourses at all levels of thinking and storyline making. Within societal settings of debate and deliberation, there exist critiques and reasons. Intellectuals of statecraft are skilled storytellers who develop arguments that resonate with popular common sense in order to persuade people and facilitate policy decision-making and action. As a result, geopolitical discourse encompasses far more than geostrategic discourse. It comprises all the “languages of statecraft” is drawn upon and used by [intellectuals of statecraft] to constitute and represent world affairs—its constituent locations, defining dramas, and leading protagonists—and their role and strategies in these dramas.” (Tuathail 2002: 607).

THE GRAMMAR OF GEOPOLITICS FRAMEWORK

The Grammar of Geopolitics approach (**Figure 2**) of Tuathail (2002) is a veritable framework to analyze how a geopolitical issue is imagined what he called practical geopolitical reasoning. While this was a case of global power (US) responding to war in another state (Bosnia War), the framework can be used to comprehend the geopolitical imaginations surrounding the FHCs in Nigeria because it has some vital geopolitical questions, which help provide a reading of the geopolitical visions of the conflicts. While Tuathail (2002) focused on the practical geopolitical

reasoning of political leaders, I draw on both leaders’ and ordinary writers’ storylines in newspapers to analyze the geopolitical imaginations of the FHCs. Critical geopolitics has been chastised for concentrating too much on statecraft and elites. It is stated that geopolitical reasoning exists not just in the conceptions of statecraft and elites, but also in the writings and thoughts of non-elites (Müller 2008). As a result, I also investigated the stories of writers who do not have political roles, such as opinion pieces in newspapers. The Grammar of Geopolitics Framework (GGF) of Tuathail is a four-part framework (Table 1) that “privileges the role of the mass media in producing and conditioning” how ... conflicts explode and are depicted, as a small set of repetitive and infrequently remarkable imaginings, and as a continually updated assemblage of narratives (p. 608–9). These narratives receive differing attention levels “because of their influence within the microworld of intellectuals of statecraft” (p. 608).

The approach relies on dramaturgical metaphor and geopolitics as dramatic phenomena in a global theater. It may be claimed that the FHC is not a worldwide problem. Still, it has an international dimension because nomadic Fulani pastoralists cross borders in West and Central Africa to spend time in Nigeria, Ghana, Cameroon, or any other country in these regions. Thus, the conflict, while it may occur in a country and a locality, the herders involved may have come from a different country. Hence, the conflict has become an international issue. Besides, as Tuathail himself argued, the Bosnia War was a form of

localized geopolitics; hence, we can also use dramaturgical metaphors to consider the politics of the FHCs as the conflicts are shaped by politics and encompass immense drama and tragedy.

Tuathail drew upon “dramaturgical metaphor” and considered “international geopolitics as theatrical drama on a world stage” (p. 608). In this sense, writers of stories about the FHCs act in particular ways that suit specific social agents before the global audience. Tuathail argued that although metaphors have obvious constraints, they are useful in knowing how intellectuals of statecraft think about the everyday dramas they face. Thus, Tuathail builds upon Burke’s (1945) “grammar of motives” approach to dramaturgical analysis, where “any complete statement about motives will offer some answer to five questions: what was done (act), when or where it was done (scene), who did it (agent), how he did it (agency), and why (purpose)” (p. xvii). Tuathail modified these questions “to approach the ‘grammar’ of geopolitical reasoning as a dramaturgical” event (p. 609). I have contextualized these questions and are contained in Table 1.

Geopolitical imagination of the FHC conflict

WHERE? Location specification: *Is the FHC a local, regional, or global affair?*

Tuathail (2002) reasoned that stipulating location is essential to geopolitical reasoning even though it often seems not

Table 1: The Grammar of Geopolitics framework to FHC in Nigeria.

Analytical questions	Explanation	Remark
WHERE? Location specification	Indicating the location of events is vital to geopolitical reasoning. Geopolitical reasoning is always a form of scalar labeling and reasoning where the local is linked to the regional and the global.	The FHC is often defined and overwritten by the local and regional context. Still, the global context is also recognized in framing the conflict as a product of the global climate change crises and global terror links.
WHAT? Situation descriptions	Situation descriptions relate to how intellectuals of statecraft categorize the FHC and create scenarios and analogies to make it meaningful.	Internal ethnic aggressions, invasion by foreign foes, farmer-herder resource struggle: herders’ cattle destruction of farmers’ crops; the rustling of herders
WHO? Actor typifications	Who are the actors in the FHC? Who are the aggressors and the victims?	Farmers as victims and herders as aggressors versus farmers as aggressors and herders as victims; ethnic militias versus Fulani pastoralists; Fulani pastoralists versus other ethnic groups
WHY? Attributions and imputations of causality (blame strategies)	Who/what is causing the trouble or to blame?	Blame climate change, drought, desertification, Boko Haram, trespassing herders, selfish farmers, ethnic and religious chauvinism, silence, and inefficient national government.
SO WHAT? Strategic calculation	What is at stake? Policy and strategic response for national, regional and states’ political actors.	For the national government securing the pastoralists’ access to land (e.g., the cattle colony policy) is key to solving the conflict. Regional differences in state governments: the war is not a major issue in the northern region, but it is a major threat in the southern and central regions. The strategic calculation of the federal government and northern region: cattle colony. The strategic calculation for the Central and Southern states’ government: ban open grazing, eviction of pastoralist from the regions.

outstanding and apparent. Geopolitical reasoning is a kind of thinking in terms of scale. The local level is connected to the regional and global scale, with the local often over-defined and overshadowed by the global perspective. According to Tauthail (2002), the term “geopolitical” implies that it is typically used to describe something on a worldwide scale. Geopolitics, however, also takes place at the regional and municipal levels. In Nigeria, the FHC includes locational specification options ranging from largely local to regional and less global. In Nigeria, there is a contradicting scalar classification of the conflict in terms of whether it is a local or regional issue. While the conflict is considered a global phenomenon, the local and regional circumstances predominate.

Local: The conflict is generally imagined as a local affair between nomadic herders who are mainly Fulani and local farming communities across Nigeria. Many state persons from the Central and Southern region of Nigeria tend to disagree that

the violence is perpetrated by foreign herders, be it those having links with Boko Haram or Gadafi. Many state governors and legislators in Southern and Central Nigeria attempted to avoid labeling the war as a regional or global issue. They believe that it is a local matter. According to Punch Newspaper (1 May 2018), “the perpetrators of these atrocious crimes are in Nigeria,” alluding to the high amount of death and property devastation caused by the fighting. As shown in **Figure 1**, FHCs were more common in Nigeria’s Central area. The map is taken from Nwankwo and Madu (2020), which combined the number of incidences of and fatality from the FHCs in 2018 to produce vulnerability levels of all the states in Nigeria. **Figure 1** shows that the hot spot of the conflict is in Benue State. A very high level of incidence and fatality from the FHCs are concentrated in Mid-Central toward East-Central Nigeria in states like Plateau, Kaduna, Taraba, Adamawa, and Nasarawa. A high level of conflict is witnessed in West-Central, stretching into the North West region in states like Kogi, Niger, Kebbi, and Zamfara. The

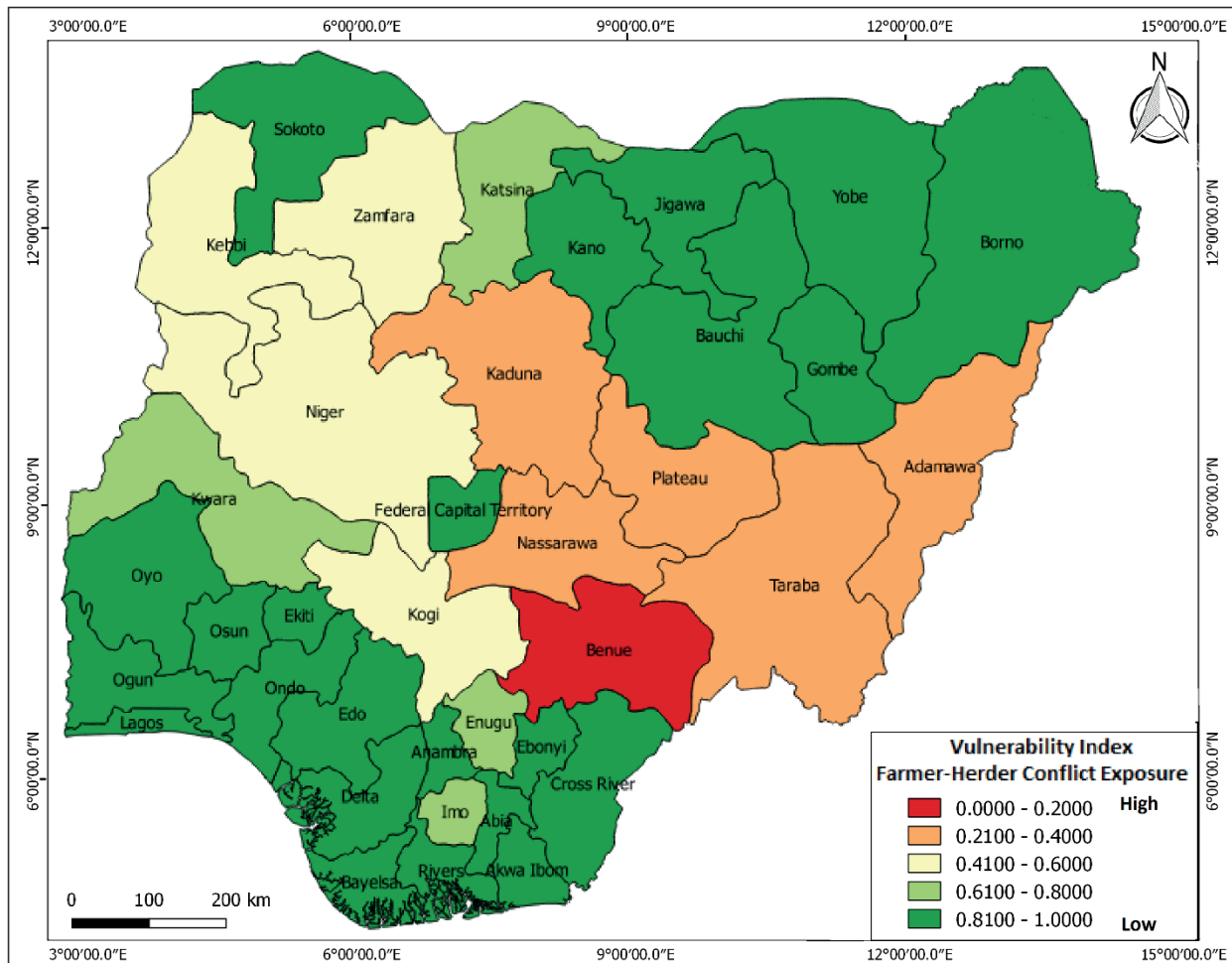


Figure 1: FHCs vulnerability in Nigeria.
Source: Madu and Nwankwo (2020).

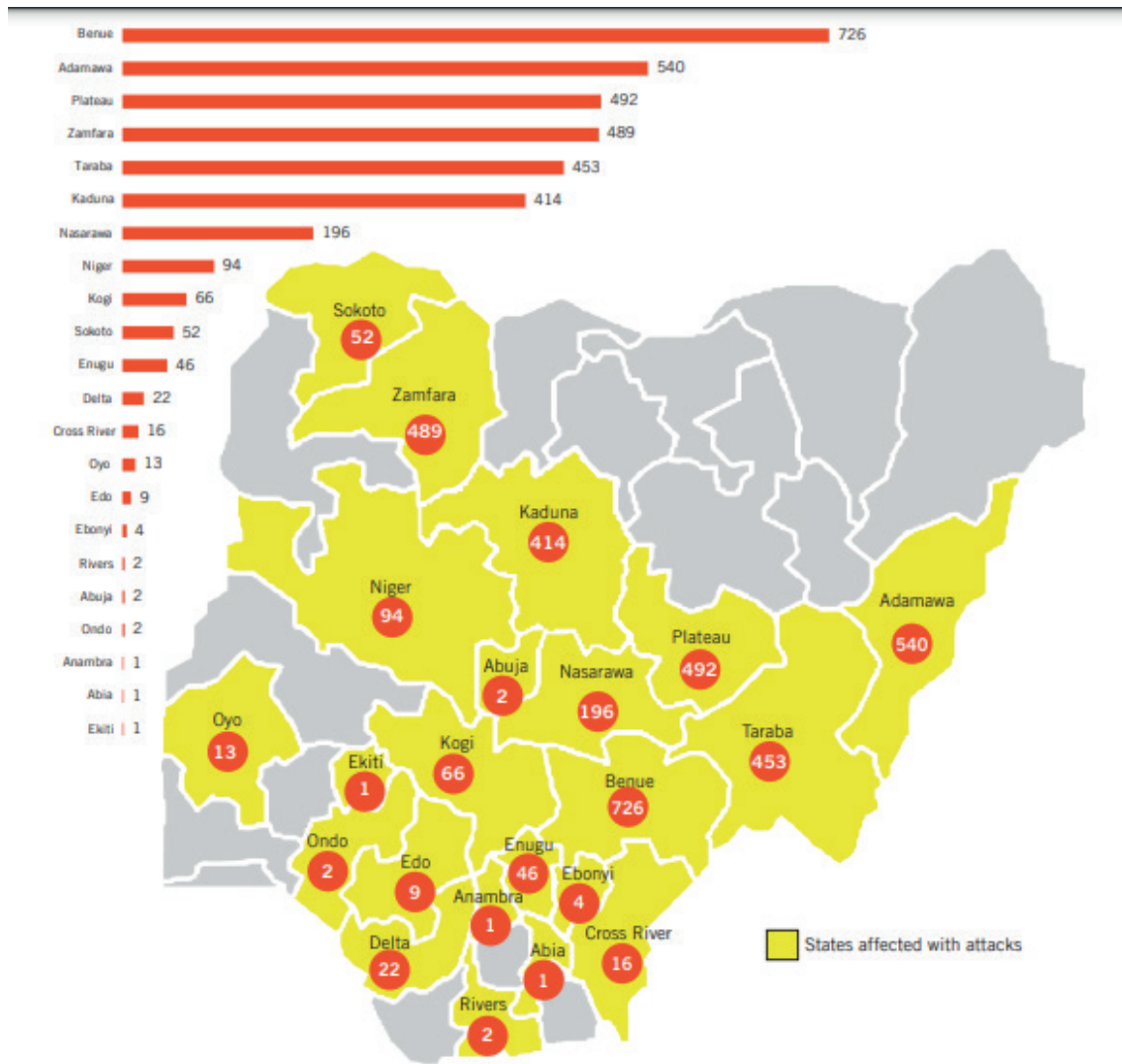


Figure 2: FHCs’ casualties from January 2016- October 2018.
Source: Amnesty International Nigeria (2018).

North East and Southern Nigeria have the lowest level of incidence and fatality from the conflict. **Figure 2** FHCs’ casualties from January 2016 to October 2018, and **Figure 3** shows 2017 casualties. Both maps corroborate the information in **Figure 1**.

Thus, the conflict clustered around the North-Central geopolitical zone of Nigeria. This is a region of high ethnic and religious heterogeneity (Nwankwo 2019a, 2019b) where communal, ethnic, and religious strife abounds and becomes entwined in the FHCs’ local discourse. In this regard, Higazi (2016) contends that conflict narratives in Jos, Central Nigeria, are frequently differentiated, with a conflict between farmers and herders, Muslims and Christians, indigenous communities, and nomadic Fulani, primarily Muslims. Akov’s (2017) study in

Central shows how an ethnic group will emphasize their identity and discriminate and exclude others in access to resources. Given that the Fulani herders are historically known to be based in core-Muslim dominated states of Nigeria, their contestations of access to land in the Central region where multiple minority ethnic groups dwell is often interpreted as an attempt at land grab from indigenous populations of that area. This geographical correlation between construction identity and the occurrence of the conflict has been drawn upon to advance ethnic and religious discourses of the FHCs and inserted into national political discourse bordering on power dynamics between the regions of the country. The occurrence of the conflict in Southern regions is also used to reinforce such narratives. Thus, the spatial construction of ethnic and religious identities produces a specific interpretation of the FHCs as ethnic or religious chauvinism and aggression.



Figure 3: States with high incidence of FHC casualties.
Source: International Crisis Group (2017).

Regional: The conflict is framed as a part of the general insecurity problem in West Africa and Central Africa especially following the demise of the ex-Libyan leader Mumur Gaddafi. This is particularly revealed in the word of President Buhari when he was responding to the query of the Archbishop of Canterbury, His Grace Justin Welby, on the killings in Nigeria, when the cleric visited him in London, the United Kingdom, in April 2018. Buhari indicated that “These gunmen were trained and armed by Muammar Gaddafi of Libya. When he was killed, the gunmen escaped with their arms. We encountered some of them fighting with Boko Haram” (*Guardian Newspaper 13 April 2018*). Buhari’s imagination of the conflict seems to suggest that local nomads do not perpetuate the violence but those who migrant from neighboring countries and have ties with the insurgent group, Boko Haram. In “November 2017, President Buhari informed the Nigerian community in Abidjan, Cote D’Ivoire that Gaddafi’s fighters were responsible for the escalation of Boko Haram insurgency” (*Guardian Newspaper 13 April 2018*). So, if the perpetrators of the violence have ties to Boko Haram, and Boko Haram is a regional terror organization operating in West Africa with ties to ISIS, the FHC can be portrayed as a regional issue. Even though the perpetrators of violence are foreigners, the federal government refuses to yield to moral pressure to intervene militarily.

Global: The conflict is framed as a global concern in light of terrorism and the global climate change problem. The

International Institute for Economic and Peace classified the conflict as the fourth-deadliest form of terrorism globally. So, this became the reference point for many state persons that paint the conflict in a global sense. Since the conflict became linked to the broader violence occurring in Central and West Africa due to the proliferation of arms flowing from Libya and other conflict zones, as well as the Boko Haram campaign, a global picture of the conflict emerged. However, the global sense of the conflict has not gained traction except its linkage to the global climate change problem. Since climate change is a global issue, and the FHC is seen to be caused by impacts of climate change, the conflict is assumed as a global affair in this context. The change in climate the world is experiencing today is primarily caused by the historical trajectory of emissions by advanced and industrialized countries. Thus, the FHC as a product of global climate change is argued to be included in the negotiation of the various United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) agreements (see Text 1, 2).

[1] The best way to attempt to solve this emerging threat is to see it not as an isolated incident but to situate it within a wider framework of climate change. Who says the Climate Fund to be given to the developing world for climate adaptation cannot be deployed for the rehabilitation of the communities affected by the herdsmen-farmers violence? (*Punch Newspaper 3 March 2016*).

[2] ...Nigeria has a strong case with which we can swing the UNFCCC to a new table of negotiations just like the Small Island States did to effect a new term in the climate lexicon: “Loss and damage.” (*Punch Newspaper 15 February 2018*).

WHAT? Situation descriptions

Situation descriptions relate to how intellectuals of statecraft categorize the FHC and create scenarios and analogies to make it meaningful. The significant ways in which the conflict has been described farmer-herder resource struggle, internal ethnic aggressions, invasion by foreign foes. The situation descriptions are discussed under the following headings:

Struggle for scarce resources

The struggle over resources (especially land and water) is a primary feature of the conflict. The ecological problems in northern Nigeria are seen to be a significant factor driving nomadic pastoralists' migration from north to southern Nigeria, and this has led to competitive land struggles between pastoralists and farming communities. This situation is argued to produce the “violent clashes over grazing lands between local farmers in the South and pastoral herders, whom the former accused of wanton destruction of their crops” (*Punch 15/2/2018*). The herders are nomadic and typically migrant, moving north to south in grazing grounds on a seasonal basis. Climate change and northern ecological concerns (desertification, drought, and unmanaged deforestation) have significantly disrupted this trend. As a result, pastoralists are naturally seeking greener pastures southward, increasing competition for land utilization. The competitive struggle for resources can degenerate into various sorts of violent events such as:

- Deaths and destruction of farms and rustling of cattle (e.g.,

[3] In Nimbo, Enugu State, close to **50 persons were reported killed** during clashes between the farmers and cattle rearers (*Guardian 17 May 2016*).

[4] The conflict results in the **killing**, raping, and **destruction of farmland** (*Punch, 10 January 2018*).

[5] Farmers in the zone have accused him of forcefully **invading their farms with cattle**. No farmer in Ayete can harvest any crop again, but Wakili does all the harvests. He technically displaced all the farmers from

their farms by **sending his cattle to eat all crops**. If you go to farms, you will not see any cassava in their farmland. Their **cattle have eaten up the cassava**. (*The Guardian Newspaper 4 February 2021*).

[6] In 2013, in Nasarawa State, the conflict resulted in the **death** of about 125 **Fulani herdsmen**, and about 6,000 **heads of cattle rustled**. In the same year, “about 18 **herdsmen were killed** while about 2,000 **cows were stolen**” in Benue State (*Daily Trust, 5 July 2014*).

[7] To the herdsmen themselves, every attack that they launch is a “reprisal” attack for the **killing of a herdsman or rustling his cattle** (*Daily Trust, 15 January 2018*).

- Displacement (e.g., the International Committee of the Red Cross indicates “more than 130,000 people from Benue, Taraba, Nasarawa, and Kaduna states have been **displaced**” in 2017 because of the fights between farmers and herders (*Punch 27 January 2018*).

Internal ethnic aggressions

The conflict has also been attributed to reciprocal ethnic enmity, as pastoralists and farmers are typical of different ethnic backgrounds, particularly in Central and Southern Nigeria. This can be controversial, with northern state officials accusing southerners of ethnic hostility toward Fulani pastoralists. Southerners, on the other hand, accuse the northerners of advancing the ethnic domination agenda. Many of these claims are highly subjective and should not be relied on entirely. The Fulani pastoralists see themselves as facing a kind of “xenophobia” and “ethnic carnage” (e.g., *Daily Trust 5 July 2014*), while farming communities also see the conflict as facing “ethnic cleansing.” State persons like Theophilus Danjuma (“There is an attempt at ethnic cleansing in the state and, of course, some rural states in Nigeria. We must resist it. We must stop it. Every one of us must rise” [*Punch 25 March 2018*]) and Ayodele Fayose described the killings resulting from the conflict as “ethnic cleansing” [*Punch 10 January 2018*]). While the pastoralists also claim ethnic cleansing against local folks, the majority of the media stories accuse the herders of perpetrating “ethnic cleansing.” However, Fulani leaders and state persons argue that such depiction of the conflict is a myth to paint the Fulani black (*Daily Trust 24 February 2018*).

My interpretation of this claim and counterclaim of “ethnic cleansing” is that it simplifies a complex situation with the

metaphor “ethnic cleansing.” The FHC is a complex phenomenon and cannot be reduced to an ethnic dimension only. What I make of these claims is that there seems to be resistance and counter-resistance between the farming communities and nomadic pastoralists groups. Routledge (1996) argued that in a terrain of hegemonic forces, there is bound to be resistance as hegemony and resistance as intricately connected and is discursively produced. This can be seen because the newspapers’ stories sometimes represent the pastoralists’ engagement in the crises as reprisal attacks suggesting it is a kind of resistance struggle.

[8] To the herdsmen themselves, every attack that they launch is a **reprisal attack** for the killing of a herdsman or rustling his cattle (*Daily Trust 15 January 2018*).

For example, herdsmen attacked the Agatu community in Benue State in 2016 in retaliation for the murders of some herders and rustling of their cows in 2013. (*Guardian* 17 May 2016). As a result, the conflict may become recurrent, particularly in the Central region, where some indigenous groups—including the Jukun in Taraba state, the Eggon in Nasarawa state, and the Berom and Tarok in Plateau state, all of which are primarily farming communities—allegedly established vigilante and militia groups to fend off pastoralists whose cattle grazed in their fields. (ICP 2017). So, the herders also claim that they are targeted for annihilation by ethnic militias, but all the ethnic groups, whether Fulani, Tiv, Berom, Bachama, or any other, publicly admits it has an organized militia (Nwankwo 2021). They all disparage derisory government protection and maintain the right to self-defense.

Invasion by foreign nomadic foes

Another imagination is that violent attacks on local farming communities are perpetrated by foreign or alien nomadic pastoralists who are not citizens of Nigeria. This explanation is significantly voiced by state persons and leaders from the north but rejected by their Southern counterparts. The most prominent leader in northern Nigeria, the Sultan of Sokoto, who is also President General of the Nigeria Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs [NSCIA], said herders moving about with guns and causing violence are not Nigerians. He said, “These are foreigners coming into Nigeria to cause a breach of the peace ... They are terrorists and should be treated as such by Nigerian security agencies.” (*Daily Trust 18 September 2016*). President Buhari echoed this sentiment when he stated that individuals causing violence in relation to the FHC are foreigners trained by the late Gadaffi (*Guardian 13 April 2018*). Members of Parliament,

particularly those from the southern and central regions, as well as the opposition People’s Democratic Party (PDP), are skeptical of this argument (*Guardian 13 April 2018*). They see it as a local conflict, and the perpetrators of violence in the conflict are Nigerians, not foreign invaders. If they were to be invaders, then strong force should be used to flush them out.

WHO? Actor typifications

The actor typification used in the discourse is that of an aggressor and victim strategy. The storylines are dichotomous between farmers as victims and herders as aggressors on the one hand and farmers as aggressors and herders as victims in another hand. The narrative also constructs ethnic militias as aggressors versus Fulani pastoralists as victims on the one hand and Fulani pastoralists as aggressors and other ethnic groups’ victims. The predicates and practices linked with the subjects are conspicuous in the news headlines of the newspapers, most often rendered in apocalyptic tones. The headlines in *Punch* often associate these predicates and practices to the “herdsmen killer,” “killings,” “attacks,” “destroy,” “kill.” *Daily Trust* inclines to portray the herdsmen as victims. It is like the farmers are “portrayed as preys being hunted, ambushed, and trapped by hunters (herdsmen)” (Igbebuike 2020).

[9] ... slaughtering of farmers on their farms by the herdsmen festered. Then, kidnapping, arson, and rape of **innocent farmers** became rife in the entire Ibarapa land, with Igangan being the epicenter ... Prominent farmers and many residents of the zone were **murdered by the suspected herdsmen**. (*The Guardian Newspaper 4 February 2021*).

[10] Benue buries another 26 **victims of herdsmen attack** (Leadership Newspaper 2018 16 March 2018).

Most state persons from Central Nigeria and the north tend to view the farmers as the victims. For instance, the Taraba State Governor, Darius Ishaku, was quoted as saying,

[11] “...any blackmail and propaganda employed by cattle breeders to turn themselves into victims will fail, saying the **herdsmen are the killers and not victims**” (*The Punch Newspaper*, 15 January 2018).

Contrarily, earlier state persons and leaders from the north see the herders as the victims, not aggressors (see Text 12, quoted from Governor Bala Mohammed of Bauchi State). Later, they

argue that only a few herders are perpetrating violence and should be singled out and handled. For instance, Governor Bala Mohammed of Bauchi State, where most of the population is Fulani, argued that there is a need “to avoid wholesale branding of any ethnic group as it is inconceivable that any one group can be made up of only criminals. By extension, the Governor made it abundantly clear that it will be inappropriate to label anyone tribe based on the crimes of a few members of the ethnic group.” (*Daily Trust Newspaper 14 February 2021*).

[12] Because the Fulani man is practicing the tradition of pastoralism, he has been exposed to the vagaries of the forest, **cattle rustlers** who carry guns, **kill him, and take away his commonwealth**, which are the **cows**. (*The Guardian Newspaper 11 February 2021*).

WHY? Attributions and imputations of causality (blame strategies)

Attributions and imputations of causality or blame strategies have to do with who/what is causing the trouble or to blame? Who or what to blame has a temporal fixation in the period of this study from blaming environmental monsters such as climate change, drought, desertification, trespassing herders, selfish and intolerant farmers, ethnic and religious chauvinism, to silence and inefficient national government? All of these show that conflict is a complex phenomenon that cannot be pigeonholed. The Attributions and imputations of causality are:

- Ecological crises (climate change, drought, desertification)
- Resistance to anti-grazing bill
- Ethnic and religious chauvinism
- Silence and inefficient national government

Climate change is seen as a factor that amplifies the conflict. It is a push factor for headers' migration from north to south because it dramatically impacts the existence of the herders if they dwell in the north. The ways the newspapers' storylines depict this climate connection to the FHC are in Text 13–17 below.

[13] “**Climate change** responsible for herdsmen violence” (*Punch Newspaper 27 January 2017*).

[14] **Climate change has contributed to the massive migration of herdsmen** to the middle belt and southeast regions. Nigeria can't escape or ignore the impact of the **climate change cause-and-effect connection to the**

herdsmen crisis without risking a worse situation (*Leadership Newspaper 17 January 2018*).

[15] ... we have a whole ethnic segment [Fulani herders] whose lifestyle, culture, and heritage are endangered as a result of **climate change** (*Punch Newspaper 15 February 2018*).

[16] It's confounding that the government's response has ignored **climate change as the source of conflict** exacerbating the herdsmen grazing crisis (*Leadership Newspaper 17 January 2018*).

[17] **Climate change** cannot be ignored if the crisis is to be resolved as “tackling **climate change**, [is a] panacea for herdsmen-farmers clashes” (*Leadership Newspaper 29 April 2018*).

The works that analyzed the nexus between climate change and conflict in the Sahel linked the conflict and insecurity climate change and environmental degradation (e.g., Cabot 2017; Herrero 2006). Cabot claims that catastrophic drought periods have destroyed the Sahel, causing relentless desertification and irregular rainfall patterns (Cabot 2017). These disasters and changes have resulted in a significant loss in sustainable forage ground and water supplies in the Sahel to support the Fulani herds and livelihoods (Cabot 2017). Due to these climate-related issues of desertification and erratic rainfall patterns, many herders from Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have been compelled to go South into Cote D'Ivoire, Ghana, and Nigeria in the last decades (Cabot 2017). Climate change has been pointed to as a significant factor leading to the shrinking of Lake Chad which many herders depended on for many hundreds of years. Thus, the FHC is further compounded by “the shrinking of Lake Chad from 25,000 km² to 2500 km² in less than three decades. The result, according to the United Nations, is the displacement of about 10.5 million people who among them are pastoralists (*Punch Newspaper 15 February 2018*). The shrinking of Lake Chad is argued as part of the factors that have forced herders out of their domain in that part of northern Nigeria, plus recently the Boko Haram activities in the region leading to incessant clashes between herdsmen and host communities.” (*Punch Newspaper 27 January 2017*).

Climate change, according to the media, is a crucial element contributing to the conflict's roots. This line of thought is reinforced by both official and non-government discourse. In addressing the House of Representatives Committee on Climate

Change on the Federal Government's efforts in Abuja, Minister of Knowledge and Culture, Lai Mohammed, stated, "There is insufficient information regarding climate change." People just know that there is a change in the weather. Climate change is more fundamental than that. It affects our economy, security, and other ways of life. The conflicts between herders and farmers are as a result of climate change. (*Guardian Newspaper 15 December 2015*). Also, the Minister of Science and Technology, Dr. Ogbonnaya Onu, "attributed frequent clashes between farmers and herders to climate change. The minister cited herders/farmers' clashes as a fallout of climate change resulting from depleting arable land" (*Punch Newspaper 11 September 2018*).

Other writers have rejected the notion that climate change causes farmer-herder conflict. Such thinkers argue that the securitization of the African environment emerged not from a scholarly inquiry but imperialist and colonial ways of imagining the African environment (Verhoeven 2014). Also, it is a discourse that is deployed to justify changes in global powers' defense rationale toward attention to counterinsurgency-related stability operations like policy and aid delivery and taming so-called "ungoverned spaces" (Hartmann 2014: 774). Hartmann argues the environmental security discourse may become an ideological function in the new enclosures that are bringing "about the dispossession of small African farmers" and herders because Africa has been widely recognized as the "regions of the world most targeted by large land transfers" (p. 777). A study by Madu and Nwankwo (2020) explored the relationship between climate change vulnerabilities and the farmer-herder conflict in Nigeria found no significant positive relationship between the conflict and climate change. They argue that climate change does not automatically lead to conflict. The mechanism for developing the climate change-conflict nexus must be implemented in socio-political settings. As a result of this discussion, it is clear that there is no solid proof that climate change causes conflict, and hence the media narrative of farmer-herder conflict as a result of climate change should be viewed with care.

The aggravation of the conflict was attributed to anti-open grazing laws in some states, such as Ekiti and Benue. The herders' livelihoods seem to be threatened by these policies, and as a rejoinder to that was fierce resistance. The federal government stated that the aggravation of the conflict was because of the anti-open grazing laws (AOGL) in the conflict-ridden states, e.g., Benue, Plateau. The ICG equally ascribed the conflict to the introduction in November 2017 of AOGL vehemently opposed by pastoralists in Taraba and Benue states,

and the ensuing massive movement of herders and cattle, mainly into neighboring Nasarawa and, to a lesser degree, Adamawa, generating battles with farmers in those states (ICG 2018). The federal government's called for the reversal of the AOGL in those states but was not heeded by those states, and the National Assembly supported this.

The conflict has also been seen as a product of mutual ethnic and religious hatred between Fulani pastoralists and natives in Central and Southern Nigeria. However, most times, these claims seem subjective. The herders are accused of attempting to ethnically clean, flush debris, dirt farmers. As a result, there are insinuations (often unproven) that pastoralists desire an expansionist objective. However, pastoralists believe that locals intend to ethnically cleanse them from their areas. In the instance of the fighting in Southern Kaduna (see Text 18 and 19), for example, there is an allegation that it resembles ethnic cleansing, although the herders have refuted the accusation. As a result, the FHC's escalation over land usage and resources is spreading along religious and ethnic lines. The federal government has been accused of the conflict's escalation forfeiting to act promptly to stop the bloodshed. The government faced harsh blame for taking the battle less seriously and not acting quickly to stop the violence, and for allegedly supporting the herders, and, particularly for not securing the borders, which allow invaders to kill Nigerians (see Text 20 for some news headlines).

[18] When it comes to horrific killings, Southern Kaduna is on top of the pile. The situation there mimics ethnic cleansing (*Guardian 6 April 2018*).

Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association of Nigeria, Kaduna State Chapter rebuffed the allegation that the Fulani were executing ethnic cleansing and blamed the natives for the present tragedy.

[19] The Fulani, who are traditional pastoralists, was ambushed and killed along with their cattle. This development, the cattle breeders alleged, engendered what they called an act of self-defense and reprisals against the native militias for their actions (*Guardian Newspaper 7 August 2020*).

[20] Buhari's silence on Southern Kaduna genocide worrisome—CAN (*Punch Newspaper 1 January 2017*). "Buhari treating herders with kid gloves" (*Punch 4 January 2018*). Buhari lacks the political will to halt killings by herders—Rep (*Punch Newspaper 17 January*

2018). The ominous silence of Fulani herdsmen (*Guardian Newspaper 27 December 2018*).

From these other discourses, it is shown that climate change alone cannot explain the conflict. Other socio-political issues are also vital. Thus, the Nigerian farmer-herder conflict problem has to be contextualized in a set of similar problems that are frequently repeated throughout West Africa. The struggles for land have killed dozens of people in Mali, Ghana, Burkina Faso, and other countries in the Sahel in similar conflict dynamics. Some studies have linked the conflict to access to and control over resources such as land and water, plus the corruption and marginalization of the pastoralists in Mali (Benjaminsen and Ba 2009, 2019). In Ghana, Bukari and Schareika show that herders lack land security and, in a bid, access leads to violent conflict with other land users, especially farmers. The corruption and marginalization of herders in Mali, along with the anti-elite and anti-government jihadist discourse of the country's jihadist movement, has led pastoralists to embrace the jihadist movement in order to voice their dissatisfaction at being sidelined by the corrupt government (Benjaminsen and Ba 2019).

SO WHAT? Strategic calculation

The strategic calculation has to do with the question of what is at stake? The policy and strategic response for national, regional, and states political actors. For the national government, the conflict was not a threat to sovereignty; the threat to sovereignty (e.g., Boko Haram and Biafra agitation) is a more significant issue requiring military force. There are regional variances at the state government level. For the core northern governors, the conflict is not a significant problem. Still, the Central and Southern governors consider the conflict a significant threat. Strategic calculation of the federal government and northern region seem to align: they seek to secure Fulani pastoralists' access to grazing filed via the "cattle colony" policy. The strategic calculation for the Central and Southern states' governments is to ban open grazing and eviction of Fulani pastoralists from the regions. Besides this discrepancy in the policy options to tackle the conflict, there is a general argument for tackling climate change which drives the shift in the migratory pattern of the herders. So, the strategic calculations are:

- Reduce the impact of climate change
- Secure pastoralists access to land across the county
- Ban open grazing and evict the pastoralists from places they cause troubles

There is a view that there is a need to situate the FHC conflict solution within the framework of global climate change adaptation agenda to harness the opportunities available from the UNFCCC to fund the restoration of the Lake Chad environment and provide water technologies to the pastoralists to enable them to adapt to the changing climate (*Punch Newspaper 15 February 2018*). It is argued that Nigeria should have sharpened its "climate diplomatic skills" to leverage its opportunity presented by the regional advantage, such as becoming a member of "the Climate Vulnerable Forum [CVF]—a 43-nation group of most vulnerable countries that negotiate as a bloc at the UNFCCC." (*Punch Newspaper 15 February 2018*). The CVF is a global alliance of countries that have been disproportionately affected by the effects of global warming and strives to address the detrimental effects of global warming on a domestic and international scale due to increased socioeconomic and environmental vulnerabilities (*Punch Newspaper 15 February 2018*).

Federal government strategic reasoning suggests securing pastoralists' access to the land. However, securing the pastoralists' access to lands across the country seems baffling because the government argued that the pastoralists perpetrating violence are foreign herders. In January 2018, the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development Chief Audu Ogbeh announced the plan to establish "cattle colonies" in all country states. Mr. Ogbeh contends that the cattle colony policy (CCP) will resolve the conflict between farmers and herders by allotting areas of lands in each state for herders to graze their cattle to not trespass on the fertile agricultural lands that belong to farming communities (Nwankwo et al. 2020). Although the suggestion of establishing exclusive grazing lands for pastoralists is not new, it is constantly resisted by other ethnic groups in Central and Southern Nigeria (Nwankwo 2018a).

Nevertheless, it seems to be baffling to many regarding what the federal government reasoned as the conflict factors and the strategic policy. If the herders are foreigners who are perpetrating violence against Nigerian citizens, does it make sense to grant the invaders access to land for killing Nigerians? If they are aliens, does it make sense to give them lands at the expense of citizens? This may seem sensible under the development paradigm that seeks to limit or altogether remove social exclusion. It may consider the need to remove regional obstacles to resource access and inclusion in the West and maybe Central African areas. For this to be practical and effective, a trans-regional structure will be required. As shown in portions of Nigeria, rather than providing access to herders, certain

governments in Central Nigeria (Plateau, Benue) and all states in the South East and South West regions have prohibited open grazing. In Plateau, Benue did not put an end to the conflict but instead instigated a violent resistance from 2017 to 2018, and the conflict is still ongoing with moderate intensity. The restriction on open grazing in the South East and South West has been accompanied by threats of eviction of pastoralists.

Storylines, geopolitical script, and the policy process as problem-solving

Storylines

According to Tuathail, storylines develop from categorization and particularization that produce knowledge specific to the policy problem by combining the different elements of the issue with a sensibly articulate and resounding narrative. Their function is that they suggest unison in the confusing variety (and competing) discursive constituent of saying the FHC as a policy problem. In this process, the less popular stories are sidelined politically and culturally. From the Goodluck Ebele Jonathan (GEJ) administration (i.e., 2011–2015) to early 2021, the development of storylines around the FHC was diverse. The FHC is surrounded by various storylines, ranging from the struggle for scarce land and water, or the “struggle for scarce resources,” to the “migrants versus natives’ conflict,” and fights over access to and control over resources, as well as ethnic and religious disputes between Fulani herders and local host communities. While newspaper reports indicated that the conflict was the worst since the return to democratic rule in 1999 (when the conflict became more pronounced outside northern Nigeria), the use of an ethno-religious description around the conflict took time.

During the GEJ’s administration to the first year of PMB’s first tenure, the conflict was primarily described as competition for scarce resources, mainly arable lands (because of climate change-induced hazards such as drought, soil exhaustion, deforestation, and desertification) and the fight over access to and control over land resources for farming or grazing. The competitive struggles can lead to the “destruction of farmlands by herds and rustling of pastoralists’ herds” resulting in a mutual violent altercation between farmers and herders. There is an exception to this, however, in the case of the conflict in Nassarawa State where many herders, including their cattle, were murdered in 2014. In this case, the Fulani leaders both in government and in socio-cultural organizations described the conflict as an ethnic war against the Fulani herders, the herders themselves described

as “ethnic cleansing.” A similar description was made about the ethno-religious conflict in Jos Plateau that intersected with the FHC (see, Higazi 2016).

From 2016 (i.e., when the FHC became increasingly intensified in Central Nigeria with some occurrences in South East and South West) to the end of the PMB’s first tenure (2019), the conflict’s storylines developed from a mixture of “struggle for resources” “destruction of farmlands by herds and rustling of pastoralists’ herds” which can lead to attacks and reprisal attacks between farmers and herders and ethno-religious tensions and conflict. From 2020 to the present, the storylines have been dominated by ethno-religious narratives energetically propagated by the opposition PDP since 2018. The PMB administration and its party, the APC, sought to promote their point of view, which saw the conflict as a struggle for resources, exacerbated by the abundance of armaments across West and Central Africa since Gadaffi’s demise, rather than an “ethnic or religious issue.”

Geopolitical script

Tuathail contrasted between geopolitical storylines and geopolitical script whereby the latter denotes a way of performing. In contrast, the former is a set of arguments, but the latter often contain the latter. Thus, the geopolitical script is the ways and style in which state persons perform geopolitics in public and their political schemes of coping that they build in to traverse through specific policy problems and crises. It is a series of performance rules or public relations briefing books (that may encompass various storylines, voices, and opinions) to be adhered to by state players in specific speech settings, plus in responding to specific policy problems. The geopolitical script is sufficiently flexible to allow for creative improvisation and reworking in interactions with correspondents or diplomatic consultations. Categorization schemes can be made flexible, adjusted, or inflexible depending on the situation and political requirement. The analogies and descriptions that result from this are either accepted or rejected in the ongoing effort to maintain policy unity and “public face.” The challenge for the Buhari administration was to conceive both a compromise between the two promising storylines that defined the FHC to a Nigerian and global audience and a script that permitted his administration to be seen as a concern while not intervening militarily. What emerged was a no-nonsense geopolitical script staged in public by the President and his aid actors (special advisers). The drama acted as “the violence from the FHC was caused by the enactment of the AOGL in states and compounded by the arms proliferation following Gadaffi demise.” This script ignored some dominant

and vital storylines such as “struggle for scarce resources,” “struggle for access and control over resources,” and the “destruction of farmlands by herds and the rustling of pastoralists’ herds.” Thus, it was a performative endeavor to manage the differing policy implications of the emergent “ethnic cleansing,” Islamization, and “Fulanization” storylines just as one of the President’s aides, Femi Adesina, was quoted to have said that “Giving your ancestral land for ranching better than death” (*Vanguard Newspaper 4 July 2018*). So, in essence, stopping the supposed ethnic carnage is hinged on repealing the AOG.

Whether Gaddafi’s ex-fighters are liable for this violence typifying the FHC in Nigeria or not, there seems to be a practical perspective to be drawn from that. Since the Libyan crisis started, firearms have been flowing into West Africa via the Sahel. In the same way, there has been an opposite movement of migrants into Libya to get to Europe. This scenario could have contributed to the flow of firearms across West and Central Africa. In 2017, the UN’s Regional Centre for Peace and Disarmament in Africa indicated that Nigeria accounted “for about 70% of the illegal small arms in West Africa” imported into the region (PR Press Nigeria 2018). As a result, stronger border control and disarmament in conflict-prone areas may appear to be a rational strategy drawn from this viewpoint. As Tuathail emphasized, having a geopolitical script on how to respond to a policy challenge is certainly insufficient. The scripts must be performed convincingly in order to be sustained and legitimized. Getting backing for a CCP was continually going to be tough, particularly for an oratory-challenged President like Buhari, who seldom talk in public except when he is abroad.

Nonetheless, although the Buhari administration script was developed not to look supportive of either the herders or farmers, it came to be received by the Southern and Central Nigerian audience as biased against farming communities who have to sacrifice their lands to save their lives. Thus, it could not obtain widespread consensus, and the administration officials seemed not to be honestly concerned actors, at least in Central and Southern Nigeria. The Nigerian House of Representatives proclaimed the violence to be genocide, but the Senate disagreed. However, both chambers of the National Assembly voted no confidence in the Service Chiefs and requested the President to fire them. The script was unable to gain the backing of Donald Trump, the US President at the time, who appeared to be particularly concerned about the situation. President Trump was allegedly sympathetic to “Christian farmers targeted by the Fulani herdsmen” during an interview after meeting with President Buhari in April 2018 in the White House (see the BBC

and Forbes report on the interview). The UK Parliament (House of Lords) also debated the issue on 17 July 2018 with varying opinions ranging from questions of whether the conflict is or not “religiously motivated” to view that it is a “complex [phenomenon], including access to land, grazing routes, and water, exacerbated by population growth and insecurity” (UK Parliament House of Lords 2018).

The images of violence of the FHCs offered the Buhari administration a sincere dilemma as it prepared for the 2019 presidential election. Buhari could not be seen as insincere or indifferent to the carnage and the tainting of his “fight against insecurity” he promised in 2015. This meant that the script has to be altered a little bit. Thus, military intervention was necessary to halt or at least reduce the violence. President Buhari ordered limited military engagement to quell the violence in the middle belt region. The military were said to be biased in favor of the herders. However, the violence did decrease in the months preceding up to the election as a result of the region’s disarmament of illegally obtained firearms and ammunition. However, the violence will continue after the election.

The policy process as problem-solving

According to Tuathail, geopolitical discourse is a problem-resolving discourse with “governing” ambitions and negotiating with other representations, wanting to protect and endorse a specific normative order. This course of directing and governing can be partitioned into four for analysis’s sake: “problem definition, geopolitical strategy, geopolitical accommodation, and problem closure” (Tuathail 2002: 622). Problem definition entails how policy challenges are conceived and delineated; that is what is included in or omitted from the portrayal and description of the FHC as a policy problem. The second concept is a government’s deliberate articulation of a global strategy and policy position. Since the FHC has been acknowledged as a policy issue and problem, the administration’s reply would be to present a strategy to address the conflict. This is typically the result of earlier conventional operational measures for dealing with this or similar crises. The third concept is “geopolitical accommodation,” which refers to how policymakers strive to address the demands, anxieties, and wants of conflict parties. There is rarely accommodation and little or no communication with all the parties. The idea of “problem closure” identifies, makes, and campaigns for a supposed solution to the identified policy problem. However, this may not resolve the problem but might be a rejoinder which is hoped will solve the problem in the future or project the administration as concerned about the crisis.

The Buhari administration identified the FHC as a problem of the struggle for land for grazing by “foreign” herders from the Niger Republic, Mali that has become violent because of the free flow of arms across West Africa scattering of Gaddafi’s army. However, as shown earlier, these countries are also faced with similar problems of FHCs to which no practical and long-lasting solution has been found predominantly in Mali, Benin, Ghana, and Cameroon. It is, therefore, baffling that the government isolated Nigeria’s case without recourse to the regional picture of the conflict. The administration’s curative geopolitical plan was to establish a “cattle colony,” a one-liner word meaning allocating territories as grazing reserves for herders in order to prevent herder encroachment on farmlands. As previously said, this will frequently reflect previous customary operational measures for managing this or similar crises. Grazing reserves were formed in various sections of northern and some portions of South Western Nigeria during and shortly after the colonial period, but the current strategy aspires to build grazing colonies in all states of the federation. Cattle colony is a kind of socio-spatial strategy of segregating different natural resources users so that their contact is reduced or prevented to discourage conflict.

The geopolitical accommodation that was carried out was a series of meetings with state governors and communities’ leaders, and herders’ representatives urging local communities to “accommodate their herder brothers” and not to take laws into their hands. Finally, the problem closure characteristic of the geopolitical script was that the conflict would be resolved by punishing the supposed perpetrators of violence in the crises and creating a cattle colony to avert further violence. Although the administration anticipated some military action, direct military engagement was ruled out since reports of “ethnic cleansing” were deemed untrue. The Central and Southern regions rejected this “problem resolution,” implying that the bloodshed would continue. The insecurity and violence will spur the development of regional security outfits such as Amotekun (in January 2020) in the South West and the Eastern Security Network (ESN) (in December 2020) in the South East region. However, the ESN was formed by the IPOB—a group seeking the restoration of the ex-Biafra Republic. While the modus operandi of the Amotekun encompass all forms of criminality, including checkmating the activities of any criminal herdsman, the ESN specifically focuses more on flushing out nomadic herders from forests in the South East. Thus, the Amotekun and ESN are South West and South East respective rejoinders to an unacceptable “problem closure,” leading the governors of both regions to unanimously declare a ban on open grazing in early May 2021 after a meeting in Asaba Delta State.

CONCLUSION

The relations between nomadic herders and local rural communities in Nigeria have become tense and conflictive in many areas. This article has attempted to use the GGF to analyze the geopolitical imaginations of the conflict. The conflict is represented with ecological and socio-political storylines that have local, regional, and global inclinations. It is imagined as evolving from local disagreements to entangle regional political crises shaped by global environmental shocks (especially climate change) on local communities. The Buhari administration’s geopolitical script of the conflict is that the conflict is rooted in the struggle for lands that have been amplified by regional crises that augment the free flow of arms into Nigeria and used to perpetrate violence in the conflict. The administration’s geopolitical plan for dealing with the situation is to develop a socio-spatial arrangement that produces cattle colonies that divide nomadic cattle grazers from arable farmers in order to avert confrontations. I’m not sure if this method will work. The Fulani herders are typically nomadic, as are many other herding cultures, such as the Sami reindeer herders in the Nordic region. As a result, isolating them within a colony will impede their usual way of life—moving with the cattle according to the seasons. Also, given that this system of herding requires what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) calls smooth space means that confining the herders within a striated space, one that has territorial limits, can inhibit the herders and herds’ way of living, it is doubtful that the herders will stay in the colonies for an extended period. Previous attempts to establish the Fulani herders within grazing reserves in northern Nigeria failed. Notwithstanding this practical limitation of cattle colony, for reasons bordering on insecurity and allegation of land dispossession, the cattle colony idea has been unacceptable to some regions of Nigeria. This has resulted in the formation of regional security networks.

Thus, while environmental and ecological problems need to be given attention, we need to look beyond that and recognize pastoralists’ way of life plus political and social issues that underlie the conflicts. The issue of regional geopolitical dynamics within Nigeria has to be considered because it will have a significant bearing on the herders’ access to grazing fields in regions of Nigeria outside the north, given that the Southern governors have recently unanimously banned open grazing in the region. The power dynamics between Nigerian regions have to be considered, and how this is also reflected in other countries like Ghana, Mali is imperative. Hence, removing regional barriers to access and inclusion of the pastoralists in resource use not just in

Nigeria but across West and Central Africa should be pursued. A trans-regional framework will be needed for this to be operational and effective. Such a framework will need to recognize local needs and disparities. The contribution of this paper is that it is the first to employ a geopolitical framework to an empirical case of the FHCs in Africa and has helped appreciate how the global and regional entangles with the local manifestation of the conflict in Nigeria. Because it is ideally adapted to studying media discourses of geopolitical events, the use of the grammar of the geopolitics framework has not presented substantial obstacles in this situation. It may face difficulties if used for a more grounded analysis based on ethnographic research. Also, and relatedly, it is unable to reveal the everyday power relations that play out between herders and farmers on the ground as they may not necessarily be directly linked to the national political ramifications even if political agents try to establish a connection between disputes between herders and farmers to national political configurations. Overall, the grammar of the geopolitics model is best suited for its purpose—to analyze geopolitical imaginations emanating from media sources. My conclusion is that the model can handle the media discourse of the FHCs in Nigeria well and organize the narratives (if corroborated with extant scholarly literature as in the case of climate change-FHCs nexus) in such a way that avoids falling into inherently subjective trappings of the media storylines.

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