

Research Article

Cletus Famous Nwankwo*

Discursive construction of the farmer-pastoralist conflict in Nigeria

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Abstract: The farmer-pastoralist conflict (FPC) in Nigeria has aggravated in recent years. It generated intense debate between 2015 and 2018 because of the aggravation of the conflict and the increased fatalities associated with it. This paper analyses the media representation of the conflict. Data were newspapers' editorials and regular columnists' stories and supplemented by government and independent bodies' reports. Newspapers, as agents of popular culture, play a critical role in the propagation of various discourses of the conflict which seek interpellation and are also contested. This paper shows that the discourse is dichotomous and conflictive between ecological reasoning and ethnic-regional and religious imaginations.

Keywords: conflict, environmental security, farmers, media discourse, pastoralist, subjective beliefs

1 Introduction

The conflict between nomadic Fulani pastoralists and farming folks in rural Africa, especially the West Africa sub-region has been a recurring decimal in the last two decades. The conflict has intensified in recent years and has led to the destruction of property, deaths, and displacement of people in countries such as Ghana, Nigeria, Cote d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, among others. Hence, it has attracted renewed scholarly inquiry. This paper is about the discourse of the farmer-pastoralists conflict in Nigeria. It shows the discursive battle to produce the meaning of the conflict in environmental security light on the one hand and ethno-regional and religious imaginations, on the other hand, as reflected in the media discourse of the strife. A discursive analysis of the media representation of the FPC is critical because even though the role of media in the conflict has received attention recently, the media discourse of the conflict has received little attention.

Studies on the crisis had been approached commonly through political ecology, political economy and environmental security frameworks and a combination of these approaches. However, scholars are paying little attention to a discursive reading of the dispute. An engagement with a discourse analysis of the conflict can help us comprehend how the representation of the crises imbues subjects with identities, shows subject positions, subjectivity, and power relationships in a text (Nwankwo 2018). Nwankwo (2020) has called for a discursive treatment of the conflict in West Africa, which is sensitive to the demands for considering discourse as both language and social practice.

Still, there has been no serious analysis of the discourse of the conflict, especially regarding the media perspective. Thus, this paper examines how the FPC conflict is represented in the media. The purpose is not to discuss how the battle is supposed to be described as this can bring in some biases because, from a discursive perspective, there is no particular way of seeing (Doty 1993; Milliken 1999). We cannot privilege one way of describing the conflict. The paper is structured as follows: the next section reviews the literature after that, the research approach is detailed, and after that, methods are discussed. The remainder of the article is subsumed under two thematic sections. The last part gives the concluding remarks of the paper.

*Corresponding author: Cletus Famous Nwankwo, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Enugu Nigeria, E-mail: cletus.nwankwo@unn.edu.ng

2 Review of existing literature

Media studies on the conflict often focus on issues of framing, coverage, and reportage of the battle by newspapers. There is scarcely dedicating effort to analyze the discourse of the conflict in the print media. Gever and Essien (2019) analyzed newspapers' level of interest, the language of reporting, and readers' assessment of the reportage of the conflict. Odunlami (2017) explored the main themes and essential speakers in newspapers' narratives of the conflict. He contends that newspapers' reportage of the crisis incites stronger opinions from politicians, which portend the propensity for propaganda and politicization of the disputes. Olabode and Sunmonu (2018) analyzed the reportage and framing of FPC in the newspapers to determine the nature of covered issues, frequency of reportage, space allotted, placement, and frames. They argue that the present framing of the conflicts in the newspapers could exacerbate the standing ethnic tensions in the country.

Onyebuchi, Obayi, and Nwagu (2019) examined the newspapers' coverage of herdsmen attacks on host communities in Nigeria to find out the frequency of news coverage, its level of prominence depth of coverage and direction of herdsmen attacks on host communities. The study shows that the coverage is mostly unfavourable and argues that newspapers should support the de-escalation of the dispute via the use of soft words and objective coverage and reportage of the conflict bereft of political and ethno-religious sentiments. Even though previous studies have engaged in the analysis of media roles in the conflict, they just looked at what the papers are reporting about the conflict, not necessarily discourse—how meanings and identities are ascribed to subjects and objects in reportage of the conflict. An engagement with a discourse analysis of the conflict can help show representations of subjects and identities, subject-positions, subjectivity in the constitution of the battle in texts. Thus, the paper examines how the FPC is represented in the media. The purpose is not to show how the discourse is supposed to be constructed as this can bring in some bias because there is no particular way of seeing and we cannot privilege one way of representing the conflict.

3 The research approaches

The study is founded on discourse analysis as it aims to examine how the farmer-pastoralists conflict is discursively constructed in Nigeria newspapers. The meaning of discourse varies. A discourse is usually conceived as a linguistic system of procedures and methods for the construction of themes, objects, and speakers (Åhäll & Borg, 2013). The analyses in this paper are founded on the constructivist discourse analysis approach. Constructivist discourse analysis conceives discourse as a system of *signification* and *productivity* (Milliken 1999). As *significative constructions*, discourses construct social realities. Hence, the material world does not convey meaning; instead, people construct the meaning of things, using sign systems (primarily but not only linguistic). Two vital significative constructions are that of *relationships* and *binary oppositions*. Relationships signification considers discourse as relational, i.e., things are placed in a sign system in relation to one and another to distinguish them in the system (Doty 1993). Binary oppositions consider discourses as often constructing opposite identities such as ignorant/educated, terrorist/non-terrorist, poor/rich, which establish a relation of power such that one element in the binary is privileged (Milliken 1999).

Discourse as productivity indicates that discourses are not mere languages via which we speak (analyze, classify) about things but capable of revealing how we can become absorbed and act towards the world and of operationalizing a specific 'regime of truth' while excluding other possible modes, identity and action. Thus, discourses define subjects that can speak and act (e.g., intellectuals of statecraft) and the relationships between them regarding how they conduct themselves in issue-areas. Discourses also tell practices by these subjects towards the objects which the discourse defines, providing logical and proper interventions of different kinds and other modes of implementing a discursively constructed analysis. Overall, discourses function to define and to enable, and also to silence and to exclude, e.g., by assigning some identities to herders but not to farmers, endorsing specific actions as common sense, but making other modes as impracticable. These notions of discourse productivity direct our attention towards identifying hegemonic discourses and how they structure meanings as linked to implementing practices and how they make this sensible and legitimate. However, discourses are historically contingent, i.e., they are not hegemonic forever; they can be unstable, making them change at times needing re-articulation of their knowledge and identities to fix their regime of truth again. These notions of discourse are what are considered in the analysis of the discourse of the FPC in the newspapers.

The vigor for the analysis of the discourses of the conflict in newspapers comes with the idea that any story of the world uses implicit socio-structural visions and images (Nwankwo 2020). Such visions and images are often relayed to the public domain via mass media such as T.V., magazines, radio, and newspapers. The discourses contained in these mass media channels come in the realm of popular culture. The importance of studying popular culture materials such as video games, comic books, magazines, and newspapers is because they can generate commanding imaginations (Ide 2016). These imaginations in their various forms can be taken by people as truthful and authoritative, thus enhancing everyday (re-)construction of knowledge hegemony in society and, ultimately, political action. Thus, it follows that exploring media's construction and perpetuation of discourses of the farmers-herders conflict in Nigeria is pertinent because the discourses can have some effects on how the conflict is discussed, what meanings are constructed, and what actions are taken. Higazi (2016) indicates that how the FPC in Jos Plateau is discussed among Muslims and Christians, and farmers and herders and in rural and urban centers differ and significantly shaped governments and locals' engagement in the conflict. The mass media provide a context within which elite texts are reproduced and bridge the gap between elite imaginations and popular understandings of the conflict (McFarlane & Hay 2003).

4 Methodology

4.1 Data

The material data this article studies are the texts, statements, identities, and practices conveyed in the newspapers as a set of signifying practices constituting imaginations of the farmers-pastoralists conflict in Nigeria. The period covered is from January 2015 to November 2018. The online version of Nigerian newspapers was used for the study because it is easily accessible. Online and print versions of the newspaper do not differ in content, and readers do not understand the contents differently (d'Haenens, Jankowski & Heuvelman 2004). The online version is vital because more newspapers' readers now pass from print to online versions (Gherseti 2014). As income increases, there is a decline in online news consumption (Chyi & Yang 2009). Thus, it is believed that online versions will have significant readers because several people who could not afford prints can now read the same news online via, e.g., smartphones and Internet-enabled computers. There are more than 50 online newspapers in Nigeria (Nwankwo 2018), but only one-fifth of those are renowned and with no less than 60,000 national daily circulations. From the list of newspapers meeting this criterion, eight papers were randomly selected for the study. The papers selected are *Punch*, the *Sun*, *Daily Trust*, *Vanguard*, *This Day*, and *Daily Independent*. The study combed the websites of the selected newspaper using a Boolean query to gather published articles on the FPC.

The evaluation for appropriate keywords for the search of articles on the newspapers' website was done by looking at the frequently used words in the title of articles published by newspapers. The following words occurred more frequently, namely farmer, pastoralist, herdsmen, herders, pastoralist, conflict, crisis, clashes. Then, I looked at which words can generate search results containing more articles that concern the conflict. First, I tried each word individually and latter a combination of the word. The combination of the words generated results that contain articles relating to the conflict than individual words. So, I tried different word combinations to see, which gives better results. The keywords combinations that generated the best result are 'farmer/herder' and 'herdsmen/farmers.' Thus, the search was done using the combination of the two combinations: 'farmer/herder' AND/OR 'herdsmen/farmers' to generate search results that have either or both of two stated keyword combinations. Data sources were selected explanatorily by carefully following media discussions around farmers-herders conflict throughout the research period. Given that I might have missed some issues about the conflict while following the debates, I combed the chosen sources to discover extra content afterwards. The news articles analyzed are the editorials and the articles written by the newspapers' regular columnists. The selected newspapers' articles were augmented with data from alternative secondary and independent sources such as reports of the ECOWAS Experts and Ministers meetings on herders and farmers, Human Rights Watch report, U.N. Trust Fund for Human Security plan, International Crises Group reports.

4.2 Data Analysis

4.2.1 Textual analytical tools: predication, articulation, and interpellation

The textual analytical tools developed by politics and international relations scholars are useful to this study. The concepts of articulation, predication, and interpellation are used to analyze how the FPC is constructed as in the newspapers. Predication is the process and product of linguistically ascribing qualities to objects, subjects, actions, and social issues (Åhäll & Borg 2013). **Predication** entails linking some characters to objects, subjects, actions, and social issues via particular “predicates, adjectives and adverbs” that modify them (Doty 1993) to realize predicational strategies. For example, to say that pastoralists are ‘uncivilized and conflict-seeking’ institutes pastoralists as a subject with these qualities. Thus, predication shows identities within a discourse and allocates to them characters that institute political enabling making political agency and particular institutions become feasible, tolerable and even endorsed as sets of individuals or ideological stances (Mandelbaum 2012). **Articulation** involves the production of discursive objects and relationships from existing cultural resources and language assets that already appear reasonable in a specific society (Mandelbaum 2012). Milliken informs us that the discursive objects and relationships are constructed by mixing and remixing the cultural materials and linguistic attributes (Milliken 1999). Repetition of successful combinations is done to strengthen contextually specific construction of objects/subjects that we rely on to give meanings to social events. The repetition makes discourses come to look as if they are inherently correlated, and the meanings they create seem natural, to be an accurate, truthful depiction of reality. Meanings of the social world are formed in this way as the discourses produce “discursive spaces”, i.e., notions, analogies, concepts, categories, models, and images (Mandelbaum 2012).

Interpellation is how articulated discourses “...hail individuals so that they come to accept the representations as natural and accurate” (Milliken 1999: 239). Louis Althusser (1918-1990) used the concept to explain how we accept notions, cultural values as authentic and natural and internalize them and their effects on our lives. Interpellation conveys the idea that a particular way of speaking about something such as conceiving the FPC as ethnic cleansing is not held by an individual alone but rather an idea that has been offered to that person to accept. Accepting or rejecting such notions places one in a specific relationship with power. Thus, ideologies—our attitudes towards specific political or social issues should be thought of more as social processes. For Althusser, ideologies “speak to” people and give them a particular identity which they are persuaded to accept but not forcibly. Interpellation is possible without violently imposed on people because such identities are presented to us everywhere, we look in such a way that we are encouraged to accept them. We tend to buy them often because we believe the values that the identities, meanings, representations convey are our own or legitimate, and reflect the most obvious, logical way to portray the situation. Thus, to be fully interpellated is to be successfully bring swayed into internalizing specific notions, views, or discourse willingly.

All the articles were read with a focus on the textual mechanisms discussed above: *articulation, predication, and interpellation*. The study also looked at pre-existing narratives to know how the discourse institute and legitimize their reading of the conflict. The concept of intertextuality helps us to comprehend this process (Allen 2011). It is the idea that texts are positioned within and in opposition to other texts. Hence, they draw on past narratives and knowledge to legitimize the identities and representations that they construct and put forward. I compare the discourse in each article analyzed to the following articles selected from a newspaper to reveal the primary discourse of the newspaper. A comparison of the results from the newspapers was made to see where their discourses converge or diverge and cross-connections. This approach is called the constant comparative analysis. It is a useful technique for disputing or confirming the results of qualitative data analysis (Ezeibe et al 2017). The article will now consider how the discourses of the conflict are relayed in the newspapers.

4.2.2 The dominant discourse on the conflict: environmental security

In reading the discourse of the FPC in Nigeria media, one will quickly discover the general tendency to characterize the dispute in environmental security guise. Among the representations of the FPC, the construction of the battle in ecological readings is that which has the widest acceptable as such it has become interpellated but not without

antagonism. However, the representations seeking to challenge its hegemony have not done so successfully. Within the ecological representation of the FPC, the northern and southern regions of Nigeria are articulated in relational and binary signification. The media talk about environmental degradation and climate change in Nigeria north that catalyzes the migration of nomadic herders towards Southern Nigeria. In the discourse, Northern Nigeria is imagined as a place of ecological catastrophe that is unsuitable for the survival of the herders in relation to the southern region as a place of resource abundance where herders and their herds can thrive. Thus, as in the Homer-Dixon's (1999) Eco-violence sense, the ecological decay in northern Nigeria results in the seasonal migration of herders and their herds towards central and southern Nigeria bringing them in contact with sedentary farmers who claim that their crops and farmland are being destroyed and land appropriated. The significative practice is illustrated in the quotation from a regular columnist for *Daily Sun*.

The Fulani herdsmen are nomadic and habitually migratory. They move from North to South annually, with their cattle in search of grazing fields. The movement is seasonal. Now with climate change, the movement pattern has been markedly altered. Due to expansive desertification, drought and unchecked deforestation in Northern Nigeria, the herdsmen naturally seek greener pasture southward. As the resultant migration has intensified, so too has violent clashes over grazing lands between local farmers in the South and pastoral herdsmen, whom the former accused of wanton destruction of their crops and forceful appropriation of their lands.¹

This kind of reading of the FPC is also found in research articles (Lenshie et al 2020; Madu & Nwankwo 2020). It is common to find Northern Nigeria, and indeed the West African Savanna-Sahel region, which northern Nigeria is a part of, has become equivalent to ecological decay. Independent reports also conceive the conflict in this light. The Human Rights Watch (HRW) indicates that the amplified incidence of the conflict has been connected to extreme pressures on land resulting from extension of commercial farming and mining interests, and enlarged depletion of common resources, such as rangelands, forests and water sources, aggravated by climate change.² Similarly, reports consider the conflict as a result of the ecological problems which have led to herders' migration into the savannah and rain forests resulting in growing competition between herders and farmers over access to water and pasture due to the adverse effect of climate change.³

The reports also identified crop damage, water pollution, the prevalence of weapons, rural banditry and cattle rustling and weak government responses as factors of the crisis. The Boko Haram insurgency in the North East of Nigeria has been fingered as another factor for herders' southward migration and this reading is reflected in recent studies (Lenshie et al. 2020). There was indeed population growth in many areas of northern West Africa that increased farmlands, which combined with problems of soil exhaustion to plummet rangeland and transhumance routes leading to widespread migration of pastoralists southwards (Nwankwo 2020). These challenges were made worse by the 1970s' drought making nomadic herders come closer to farming communities of different ethnic and cultural experiences lacking connection to pastoralism (Bassett 1988). While ecological problems and climate change in northern Nigeria are critical factors that shape herders' migration and could trigger the conflict in some places, this reading of the conflict is antagonized by the ethnic-regional and religious discourses. The ethnic-regional and religious discourses can be taken to be more of subjective beliefs than reality, but as discourses, they can shape the farmer-herder relations.

4.2.3 Ethno-regional and religious narratives and counter-narratives

The ethnic-regional and religious imaginations of the conflict in Nigeria construct the dispute as ethnic cleansing and Islamization agenda. For instance, the head of Igbo Leaders of Thought Professor Ben Nwabueze said the conflict is a part of the plot to Islamise the Christians in Southern Nigeria.⁴ Also, Chief Mbazulike Amaechi the First Republic

² Human Rights Watch 2018. Farmer-Herder Conflicts on the Rise in Africa. Juliana Nnoko-Mewanu, Researcher, Women's Rights Division. 6 August, 2018. Accessed 12 July 2018. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/08/06/farmer-herder-conflicts-rise-africa>

³ ECOWAS "Experts Meeting on Herders-Farmers Conflict-Draft Report. The Regional Experts Meeting on Herders-Farmers Conflict" Held in Abuja, Federal Republic of Nigeria from 24th to 25 April, 2018. Accessed 19 September 2018. https://www.ecowas.int/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Report_Draft-Experts-revised-02.pdf

International Crises Group ICG. "Herders against Farmers: Nigeria's Expanding Deadly Conflict". Report 252 / Africa 19 September 2017. Accessed 18 May 2018. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/252-herders-against-farmers-nigerias-expanding-deadly-conflict>

⁴ Isiguzo, C., "Nwabueze: Islamisation Agenda is Real, Says Herdsmen Menace, Part of Plot. This Day 6 October 2016. Accessed 8 August

minister of aviation notes that “the objective of the so-called herdsmen as I pointed out is Islamization of the country; they want to establish colonies among the people of Southern Nigeria particularly the South West, South-South, South East and then the Middle Belt which are predominantly Christian areas”.⁵ However, these ethnic cleansing and jihadist imaginations are reinforced in the media reports when mass casualties resulting from the conflict such as in the case of the battle in Nimbo Uzo-Uwani area of Enugu State in which the Holy Catholic Church was razed and 46 people including a Catholic priest were killed on 23 April 2016.⁶ Another is the Agatu battle where over 300 people were murdered between February and March 2016 in Agatu Benue State. The fightings continued in 2017 across various parts of the Benue State. Another case is the Southern Kaduna in which it was reported that 808 people were murdered on Christmas Eve of 2016.⁷ The Plateau battle claimed the lives of over 200 persons in June 2018.

The proponents of the Islamization agenda narrative argue is that the Fulani wants to continue the Jihad of Othman Danfodio, which turned the Huasaland into an Islamic Caliphate in the early 19th century before the advent of colonial rule stalled it. Writers have indicated that the memories of Fulani engagement in the early 19th Century jihads, which caused wars and enslavement of people in areas on present-day Northern Nigeria and Cameroon have remained across generations (Moritz 2006). These memories have been carried on and have often been referred to in the narrative of the FPC in Nigeria. Thus, the ethnic-regional and religious discourse of the FPC in Nigeria could have footprints which build on the narrative of pre-colonial power relations among the nations that form the Nigerian state with the conflict itself serving as a discursive site to rearticulate that narrative. Thus, the FPC has been perceived as a gradual implementation of a Fulani total subjugation of Southern Nigeria through the introduction of Islam. The narrative derives from the common understanding of the ethno-religious-politics nexus of Nigeria among Southern Nigerians. The “Islamization force” narrative is, however, portraying the construction of the herdsmen as ignorant. For example, in his article titled ‘This thing called ‘killer herdsman,’ Mahmud Jega notes,

The notion promoted by politicians and the mass media that herdsmen are all out to eliminate Tivs, Southern Kaduna natives, Middle Belters or Christians is a political stretching of the fact because the herdsmen hardly know that there is a “North Central geopolitical zone,” much less aim to extinguish it. Despite their supposed ethnic affiliation to Shehu Dan Fodio, most of today’s herdsmen practice Islam only nominally and are pre-occupied with survival, not religion. Those who say that herdsmen have a “Jihadist” agenda are accusing the wrong party because the herdsmen themselves need the second coming of Dan Fodio to revive their religious practice.⁸

Nevertheless, the notion of herdsmen seeking jihad has become interpellated, at least among Southern and Middle-Belt regions. Tuathail and O’Loughlin (2009) argue that ‘ethnic cleansing’ is a violent geopolitical practice designed to separate and segregate ethnic groups. It is ethnoterritorial geopolitics, an assault on a prevailing spatial configuration, and the deploying of a system ordered around ethnic division and segregation. The practice of ethnic cleansing is a dark feature of the age of nationalism: territory and terror share linguistic origins, with territory definitionally a place from which people has been frightened (Tuathail & O’Loughlin 2009). Indeed, as indicated by a recent study, the Middle Belt region of Nigeria is a place where people have been terrified by the unceasing killings and displacement of villagers (Lenshie et al. 2020). In some cases, e.g., in Plateau State, it was reported that the herdsmen took over villages and have them renamed. *The Vanguard* reported that a document it obtained shows several attacks in Plateau State where the herdsmen invaded and occupied over 54 communities and had them renamed. Some of the occupied communities include “Dankum (renamed “Mahanga”), Rotchun (aka Rafin Acha), Fass (renamed “Tafawa”), Hywa (renamed” Lugere”), Davwak, Chwelnyp, Lyoho Dakar, and Angwan Dalyop which were all attacked Between September 7 and 10, 2001 with the original inhabitants displaced.⁹ These circumstances have reinforced the representation of the conflict as terrorism

2018. <https://www.thisdaylive.com/index.php/2016/10/06/nwabueze-islamisation-agenda-is-real-says-herdsmen-menace-part-of-plot/>

5 Akinsuyi, T. “Fulani Herdsmen Plotting Total Islamisation Of Nigeria – Amaechi”. Independent 8 May 2018. Accessed 8 August 2018. <https://independent.ng/fulani-herdsmen-plotting-total-islamisation-of-nigeria-amaechi/>

6 Igata, F. “Enugu: Blow-by-blow account of how herdsmen killed 46 natives”. Vanguard, 30 April 2016. Accessed 8 August 2018. <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2016/04/enugu-blow-blow-account-herdsmen-killed-46-natives/>

7 Shiklam, J. “808 Killed in Southern Kaduna Attacks, Says Catholic Church”. This Day, 30 December 2016. Accessed 9 August 2018. <https://www.thisdaylive.com/index.php/2016/12/30/808-killed-in-southern-kaduna-attacks-says-catholic-church/>

8 Jega, M., “This thing called ‘killer herdsman’.” Daily Trust, 15 January 2018. Accessed 8 May 2018. <https://www.dailytrust.com.ng/this-thing-called-killer-herdsman.html>

9 Nanlong, M. “Plateau shocker: Herdsmen rename communities grabbed from indigenes”. Vanguard 30 June 2018. Accessed 16 August 2018. <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2018/06/plateau-shocker-herdsmen-rename-communities-grabbed-indigenes/>

and ethnic cleansing in the Middle Belt region and voiced by influential actors from the region. For instance, a former minister of defence, Theophilus Damjuma also characterized the conflict as ethnic cleansing during a convocation ceremony at the Plateau State University in March 2018. The Middle Belt Forum in a declaration entitled ‘Nigeria: A Nation Under Siege’, contends that

There is no gainsaying the fact that Nigeria of today is passing through perilous times. More so, the Middle Belt region which is witnessing wilful pogrom by way of ethnic cleansing by Fulani herdsmen to enable them to wipe off all nationalities from their ancestral lands. For, if not ethnic cleansing, what do we make of it. “Our Middle Belt communities have become endangered species even in the full watch of their elected federal government. What we are bitterly experiencing under this dispensation is our ethnic cleansing aimed at disinheriting us of our ancestral lands.”¹⁰

This representation of the herders has meant that the herders are ascribed a terrorist identity and have become a reference point for the media, which regularly referred to that report in the articulation of the conflict. The herders are stigmatized as terrorists. So, there are places where an ordinary Fulani youth cannot go because of the ‘Fulani terrorists’ identity ascribed to them. There have been calls for the government to designate the herders as a terror group but to no avail. The demand became immense following the government’s designation of the Biafra independence movement, Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), as a terrorist group even though the group has remained peaceful in their campaign. The terrorist identity ascribed to the herders is often intertextually linked with the Global Terrorism Index of 2015 that classified herdsmen, militants, as the fourth deadliest terror group of 2014. While the jihadist Boko Haram chaotically killed both Muslims and Christians, it also sharpened religious sensitivities, making predominantly Christian southerners to begrudge the arrival of mostly Muslim herders, which some southern and Middle Belt Christian leaders depict as an Islamising force.¹¹

Nonetheless, this representation of the conflict subjugates the farmers’ engagement in the battle, such as cattle rustling or in cases where the herders are equally killed. A popular columnist with the newspaper Mahmud Jega puts it this way, ‘to the herdsmen themselves, every attack that they launch is a “reprisal” attack’ for the killing of a herdsman or rustling his cattle.¹² This line of discourse features prominently in the opinions and commentaries that appeared in *Daily Trust*, but it fails to achieve interpellation. Over the last decade, some of the region’s so-called indigenous groups – including the Jukun in Taraba state, the Eggon in Nasarawa state, Berom and Tarok in Plateau state all mainly farming communities – allegedly formed vigilante and militias groups to fend off pastoralists whose cattle grazed in their fields.¹³ 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. They all disparage derisory government protection and maintain the right to self-defence (Lenshie et al. 2020). Generally, politicians, ethnic, religious, and community leaders support the militias and defend their deeds and protect them from arrest and prosecution. Sometimes these groups have worked in conjunction with traditional authorities and government security forces, but with others have attacked pastoralists in reprisal for alleged damage to farms or to compel the “strangers” out of their sphere. Afterwards, some of these groups became dangerous organizations, e.g., the Ombatse among the Eggon waylaid police and other security operatives in May 2013, killing more than 100. Likewise, as battles over grazing resources have augmented, some pastoralists who originally obtained arms to fend off cattle rustlers have engaged ethnic militias to avenge perceived or genuine wrongs by farmers or to gain access to fresh pasture.¹⁴ The increasing accessibility of illegal weapons, flowing from conflict prone North East and Niger Delta, or smuggled in from other countries – has also facilitated the killings.

There are places where the herders are welcome and not seen as enemies such as in parts of South Western Nigeria where settled pastoralists are already in their second and third generation and are relating well with their host communities (Fabusoro 2009). Indeed, “there are a lot of good and peace-loving Fulani who cohabit peacefully with

¹⁰ Obi, P. “Middle Belt Forum Declares Herdsmen Killings Ethnic Cleansing.” *This Day*, 21 March 2018. Accessed 9 August 2018. <https://www.thisdaylive.com/index.php/2018/03/21/middle-belt-forum-declares-herdsmen-killings-ethnic-cleansing/>

¹¹ ICG. “Stopping Nigeria’s Spiralling Farmer-Herder Violence”. *Africa Report* No 262 26 July 2018. Accessed 13 September 2018. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/262-stopping-nigerias-spiralling-farmer-herder-violence>

¹² See note 8.

¹³ See note 11.

¹⁴ See note 11.

their local communities or neighbors.”¹⁵ However, the herders will need to get their perspectives of the conflict into the mainstream media. The herders need to voice the stigmatization they face across local communities. The ECOWAS report recognizes and condemns the “stigmatization of particular sections of the population [supposedly the pastoralists] and called for continuous advocacy, sensitization, and media engagement”.¹⁶ Their stigmatization leads to fierce enmity between the two conflicting groups because Fulani will see other tribes as their enemies.⁶⁵

The issue of identity differentiation and belonging is critical to the stigmatization the herders face. Discrimination by identity and the idea of belonging is replete in many countries of West Africa, where the pastoralists are considered aliens different from the indigenous peoples. In this perspective, it has been argued that the herders have been ‘victims’ of ethnically-based prejudice and bigotry such that they are seen as ‘aliens,’ ‘foreigners’ and ‘non-citizens’ (Bukari and Schareika 2015) and pastoralism as a danger to the modern idea of the state (Nwankwo 2018). However, there are significations of the pastoralists with antonymous predicates of ‘the civilized’ is also encountered in the media representation of the conflict, but this is done to resist the flow of the construction of the herders as “killers” and destructive folks who want to appropriate lands and not to paint them in bad light which the prevailing discourse does. In this regard, the herders are articulated as ignorant of their actions. As an example, it is argued that ‘...he [herdsman] has always been oblivious of the trappings of civilization around him; as he traverses the pasture-ways, the boundaries are as meaningless as he is unconscious of the reality of the misconception and misunderstanding about him’ (Ahmed-BK cited in Nwankwo 2018).

Also, a regular columnist for the *Daily Trust* Mahmud Jega reasoned that the herders could not be seeking territorial expansion because they lack the knowledge of the existence of Nigeria, neither do they know the existing boundaries. To quote Jega, “...How could they do so, when most of them are hardly aware that Nigeria exists? They have probably never seen a map of Nigeria. They do not know a local, national, or international boundary when they cross one. What they know of Geography is what they gleaned the hard way by marching up and down the country with the seasons”.¹⁷ The articulation of the conflict as herdsmen’s ignorance of modernization in society and misunderstanding of the herdsmen by farmers seems to be an attempt to produce ‘strong emotional identification which appeals to its designated audience’ (Fulani pastoralist and Fulani tribe in general) via the ‘invocation of passions and emotions’ (Mandelbaum 2012). to spur sympathy for the herdsmen. However, it has been argued that nomadic pastoralism and feudalism can no longer fit quite nicely into the current social and political systems. This view is well articulated by Sam Amadi, who argues that pastoralism is a form of feudalism with its resort to violence and conquest. A pastoral lifestyle is unsuitable in a period defined by property rights unhinged from the landlord and vassal relationship. The legal and constitutional order of the modern democratic state in Nigeria is incompatible with pastoral economics. The geography of existence has changed”.¹⁸ Indeed, many regular columnists support the idea that the geography of Nigeria has changed over the years and that nomadic pastoralism poses grave existential consequences to Nigeria. The remarks of a regular columnist and former editor with *Daily Trust*, Farooq Kperogi highlights this notion succinctly as he notes that the deteriorating relations between farmers and herdsmen in Nigeria has shown ‘the dire existential threat nomadic pastoralism poses to Nigeria’ arguing that failure to halt the conflict ‘could be the death of the country’.¹⁹ So, even if the Fulani pastoralists are uncivilized, their lifestyle is considered a threat to the modern conception of the state.

This constitution of the pastoralists as uncivilized and oblivious of modern values suggest that a ‘resistive signification’ is done to battle the complete interpellation of the construction of the herders as destructive killers whose aim is territorial expansion via exodus migration into Southern Nigeria. As Hyndman (2012) argues, the securitization of migration has been a defining feature of the current geopolitics of exclusionary and reactionary ‘homeland’ politics. Thus, the signification of ‘boundary’ in this discourse is that it is a signifier deployed to negate the constitution of a self and other between those who are members of territory and those who are not. The notion that herdsmen are ignorant

¹⁵ Gänslar, K. Fulani herders endure stigma and frustration in Nigeria. DW, 12 September 2018. Accessed 7 July 2018. <https://p.dw.com/p/34km7>

¹⁶ ECOWAS “Regional Meeting of the Ministers in Charge of Security and Agriculture/Livestock on Transhumance Abuja, 26 April, 2018-draft Report” Accessed 19 September 2018. <http://www.ecowas.int/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Ministers-Meeting-Report-Final.pdf>

¹⁷ See note 8.

¹⁸ Amadi, S. (2018). “Herdsmen Conflict: Neo-Feudalism and Its Problems.” This Day, 22 January. Accessed 9 August 2018. <https://www.thisdaylive.com/index.php/2018/01/22/herdsmen-conflict-neo-feudalism-and-its-problems/>

¹⁹ Kperogi, F. “Existential threats of nomadic pastoralism to Nigeria.” Daily Trust, 20 January 2018. Accessed 11 May 2018. <https://www.dailytrust.com.ng/existential-threats-ofnomadic-pastoralism-to-nigeria.html>

of boundaries was thus deployed to resist the narrative that the herders' migration is aimed at encroachment and appropriation of farmers' lands in Central and Southern Nigeria. The logic is perhaps that if herdsmen are ignorant of the existence of boundaries, they are therefore not to blame for transgressing into other people's land or 'territory'.

4.3 Government responses

The Nigerian Federal Government deployed counter-narratives to resist the interpellation of the terrorism and ethnic cleansing discourse, such as attributing the aggravation of the conflict to the anti-open grazing laws (AOGL) in the conflict-ridden states, e.g., Benue, Plateau. The ICG equally attributed the battle to the introduction in November 2017 of AOGL vehemently opposed by pastoralists Taraba and in Benue states, and the ensuing massive movement of herders and cattle, mostly into neighboring Nasarawa and, to a smaller extent, Adamawa, triggering clashes with farmers in those states.²⁰ The Federal Government's call for the repeal of the AOGL was fiercely resisted and support by the National Assembly. The Nigerian government also blamed the dispute on the proliferation of firearms after the demise of the former Libyan leader, Mumah Gadhafi, framing it around the 'border issue.' The government deployed these narratives to justify its inaction to use the armed forces to stop the killings. The government faced stern criticism for not acting to prevent the massacres, and the official representation of the conflict is antagonized fiercely because the government is taking the battle less seriously, particularly for not securing the borders which allow invaders to kill Nigerians. For instance, a popular columnist with *Sun*, Lewis Obi argues that '...they would have also noted that the Buhari government's unwillingness to arrest the perpetrators gave the clear impression that the authorities are backing and protecting the herdsmen from continuing the unjust and illegal killings of innocent rural farmers and other Nigerians'.²¹ This is suggestive of ungoverned spaces as elaborated by Lenshie et al. (2020). Some pundits have defended the government's approach, most of which write for the *Daily Trust*. For instance, A. A. Gadzama, a former Director-General of State Security Service, argues that the criticisms of the President "that he is insensitive to the plight of those being attacked because he is a Fulani and is sympathetic to his brother Fulani Herdsmen are also absurd and unwarranted."²²

The imagination of northern Nigeria as a place of ecological catastrophe unsuitable for the pastoralists' survival has shaped a specific policy response by the Nigerian Federal Government—that of the quest for the creation of cattle colonies. In January 2018, the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development Chief Audu Ogbeh announced the plan to establish a "cattle colony" in all states of the country. Mr Ogbeh argues that the cattle colony policy (CCP) is going to solve the ongoing conflict between farmers and herdsmen by allocating vast expanses of lands in each state for herders to graze their cattle so that they will not encroach on the fertile agricultural lands that belong to farming communities.²³ Even though the idea of creating exclusive grazing territories for herders is not new, it is always greeted with fierce antagonism from other ethnic groups in Central and Southern Nigeria in whatever appellation the idea comes. As illustrations, the former Governor of Plateau State Jonah Jang said, "we were colonized by the British in the past, we cannot be colonized by herdsmen again...".²⁴ Dr Okezie Ikpeazu, Governor of Abia State, argues that his state has limited land and that it would be unfair to his farmers to allocate land for "alien occupation". A Yoruba group, Odua Nationalist Coalition (ONAC) expressed displeasure of the CCP and warned that it would not allow the ceding of one inch of Yoruba territory for cattle colony. Following the government insistence on establishing cattle colonies, the media continuously represented the conflict as ethnic cleansing and terrorism, which spurred the government to rename the policy as the Rural Grazing Area (RUGA) plan.

²⁰ See note 11.

²¹ Obi, L. (3 May 2018). Herdsmen's endless blood lust (2). *Sun*, <https://www.sunnewsonline.com/herdsmens-endless-blood-lust-2/>

²² Gadzama, A.A. "Herdsmen attacks and implications for national security." *Daily Trust*, [online] 25 January 2018. Accessed 7 July 2018. <https://www.dailytrust.com.ng/herdsmen-attacks-andimplications-for-national-security.html>

²³ Orji, S. (2018). "Nigeria's 'cattle colony' problem: Why a controversial policy proposed by the Nigerian government will not resolve land disputes in Nigeria." *Al Jazeera*. 2018. Accessed 5 January 2019. <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/nigeria-cattle-colony-problem-180128104645450.html>

²⁴ Adinoyi, S., "Send Killer Fulani Herdsmen Out of Nigeria, Jang Urges F.G.". *This Day*, 6 February, (2018). Accessed 8 August 2018. <https://www.thisdaylive.com/index.php/2018/02/06/send-killer-fulani-herdsmen-out-of-nigeria-jang-urges-fg-2/>

Following the Agatu battle in Benue in March 2016 and several months of 2017 and the Plateau killings in 2018, which were characterized as ethnic cleansing, President Buhari ordered the deployment of troops to all the states where farmers and herders have had violent disputes. However, a narrative often emerged in the media that the soldiers were supporting the herders against the farmers. Thus, the press persistently represents the conflict as ethnic cleansing and terrorism. These signifiers would then spur the debate of the battle in the National Assembly. Part of the force that stimulated the government military response was the National Assembly's passage a vote of no confidence on the former Inspector-General of Police, asserting Mr Ibrahim Idris as unfit to hold any position both in Nigeria and elsewhere for failing to tackle the conflict and not honoring the invitation to explain the reasons for the mass killings in the country. Against the backdrop of this narrative, perhaps the government ensured that the military stayed neutral in responding to the conflict. Still, some pundits claim it is because if the government fails to deal with the crisis, it could impact the government's success at the 2019 election.

5 Conclusion

The FPC in Nigeria generated intense debate between 2015 and 2018 because of the aggravation of the conflict and the increased fatalities associated with it. This article has unpacked how the discourse of the crisis is replayed in Nigerian newspapers. The Nigerian newspapers, as agents of popular culture, play a critical role in the propagation of various imaginations of the conflict which seek interpellation and are also contested. In general, the press constitution of the battle often comes in an environmental security light, which places the battle in the reading that ecological decay and resource scarcity in Northern Nigeria is a push factor for migration of herders into Southern Nigeria. On the other hand, there are narratives articulating the conflict in ethno-regional and religious lines. So, the discourses of the conflict tend to be dichotomous and antagonistic between ecological sensibilities and ethno-regional and religious beliefs.

The representation of the conflict in ethno-regional and religious terms suggest that memories of Fulani engagement in the early 19th Century jihads, which caused wars and enslavement of people in areas on present-day Northern Nigeria and Cameroon are still very much alive. The memories have been carried on and have often been referred to in the narrative of the FPC in Nigeria. Thus, the discourse of the FPC in Nigeria suggests that they have footprints that build on the stories of pre-colonial power relations with the conflict itself serving as a discursive site to rearticulate that narrative. The paper has contributed to the literature by imbuing the existing studies on media reportage of the battle with the political and discursive perspective that attends to the regional variations in the understanding of the conflict in Nigeria. Previous studies focus on issues of media framing, coverage, and reportage of the battle (Gever and Essien 2019; Odunlami 2017; Olabode and Sunmonu 2018; Onyebuchi, Obayi and Nwagu 2019) but they scarcely analyze the discourse of the conflict and particularly the historical roots of the discourse.

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