

Socio-Political Dimensions of Identity and Conflict among Fulani Herdsmen in Nigeria

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Abstract

This study examines the socio-political and historical dimensions of the Fulani herdsmen phenomenon within Nigeria's multiethnic society. Using a qualitative review of existing literature and secondary sources, this paper traces the historical evolution of Fulani pastoralism, with particular reference to the legacies of the 18th- to 19th-century Fulani jihad and its influence on contemporary identity formation and social relations. The findings indicate that Fulani herdsmen constitute a distinct socio-cultural and occupational group whose pastoral mobility, limited integration into formal state institutions, and historical marginalisation have contributed significantly to recurring conflicts with agrarian communities and broader security challenges in Nigeria. The study further shows that these conflicts are shaped not only by ethnic differences but also by environmental pressures, weak governance, and inadequate policy responses. The paper contributes to the discussion by reframing the Fulani herdsmen issue as a socio-political and historical phenomenon, rather than merely an ethnic or security problem. It underscores the need for historically informed, inclusive, and context-sensitive policy interventions to support conflict resolution and national integration.

Keywords: Conflict; Ethnicity; Fulani Herders; Identity; Nigeria; Pastoralism; Socio-Political Dynamics

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INTRODUCTION

Nigeria, located in West Africa, is the most populous country on the continent and one of the most ethnically diverse societies in the world. With a population exceeding 220 million and comprising over 370 ethnic nationalities, as well as more than 500 indigenous languages, the country embodies a complex mosaic of identities, cultures, and social systems (International IDEA, 2000). While this diversity constitutes a significant cultural resource, it has also posed enduring challenges to national integration, political stability, and social cohesion.

The foundations of Nigeria's ethnic complexity are deeply rooted in its colonial formation. The amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates in 1914 by British colonial authorities brought together historically distinct polities, kingdoms, and empires into a single administrative entity (Okeke, 2014). This unification was driven primarily by administrative and economic convenience rather than social compatibility, leaving unresolved questions of identity, power, and belonging in the postcolonial state. Consequently, ethnic consciousness has remained a central organizing principle in Nigeria's socio-political life, shaping access to political authority, economic resources, and social recognition.

Ethnicity in Nigeria operates not merely as a cultural marker but as a socio-political instrument through which inclusion and exclusion are negotiated. As Otite (1990) argues, ethnic identity provides individuals and groups with a sense of belonging and meaning; yet, it also serves as a basis for competition, marginalisation, and conflict. In a context where ethnic boundaries overlap with religion, geography, and class, struggles over land, political representation, and economic opportunity are often refracted through ethnic lenses. Processes such as internal migration, uneven development, and demographic pressure have further intensified these dynamics, producing recurrent patterns of communal and intergroup conflict (Abaslim & Alugwe, 2021; Udoh et al., 2025).

Within this broader landscape, the Fulani occupy a distinctive and internally differentiated position. While the Hausa/Fulani are often treated as a single dominant group in Nigeria's ethnic taxonomy, the Fulani themselves comprise multiple subgroups with varying histories, livelihoods, and degrees of integration into sedentary social and political life. Of particular relevance are the Fulani herders, a predominantly pastoral and mobile subgroup whose economic survival depends on the seasonal movement of cattle in search of pasture and water. Historically concentrated in the Sahel and savannah zones, their migratory routes have expanded southwards in response to desertification, climate variability, population growth, and environmental degradation (Oyelami et al., 2023). This expansion has increasingly brought them into contact and conflict with sedentary farming communities across several Nigerian states, including Benue, Plateau, Taraba, Oyo, and Ekiti.

These encounters have generated recurrent and often violent conflicts over land use, crop destruction, cattle rustling, and access to water resources, resulting in loss of lives, displacement, and the destruction of livelihoods. As a result, Fulani herders have become central to national debates on security, identity, citizenship, and governance (Ogunwa & Abaslim, 2024). Scholarly interpretations of the phenomenon, however, remain fragmented. Some studies situate the Fulani herders within a historical narrative of Fulani expansionism and the legacy of the 19th-century jihadist movements led by Uthman Dan Fodio, which reshaped Northern Nigeria's political order (Onyekachi, 2017). Others emphasize ecological explanations, viewing herders as marginalised nomads responding to environmental stress, institutional neglect, and the absence of effective grazing and land-use policies. Still others approach the issue primarily through a security lens, focusing on violence, criminality, and state failure.

While these perspectives offer valuable insights, they tend to isolate single dimensions of the problem, history, ecology, or security, without sufficiently examining how identity formation, socio-political marginalisation, environmental change, and weak governance intersect over time to produce and sustain conflict. There is therefore a significant gap in the literature concerning an integrated analysis that situates Fulani herders simultaneously within Nigeria's historical evolution, ethnic politics, and contemporary governance structures.



This study addresses this gap by examining the socio-political dynamics of Fulani herders within Nigeria's multiethnic context. It explores how historical legacies, identity construction, migratory practices, and state policies interact to shape patterns of conflict and coexistence between herding and farming communities. The novelty of the study lies in its reframing of the Fulani herders not merely as actors in a resource-based or security crisis, but as a socio-political group whose identity, mobility, and marginalisation are historically produced and institutionally mediated.

The study makes both academic and policy contributions. Academically, it advances the literature on ethnicity and conflict in Africa by integrating historical, identity-based, ecological, and governance perspectives into a unified analytical framework, thereby moving beyond mono-causal explanations of the farmer-herder crisis. From a policy standpoint, the study highlights the limitations of militarised and ad hoc responses to the conflict and underscores the need for inclusive, historically informed, and institutionally grounded approaches to land governance, grazing management, and conflict resolution that can promote peaceful coexistence and national integration in Nigeria.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptual Clarification

a. Fulani

The term "Fulani," used by Hausa and most northern Nigerian tribes, refers to a group of people known initially as the Fulbe. The Fulbe, as they identify themselves, use Pullo to denote a single individual. The Fulani constitute one of the most widespread and historically influential ethnic groups in West Africa. According to the Society of Young Writers (n.d.), the Fulani are "a people group of several regions of Africa, whose distinctive physical features are similar to those of people in Egypt, northern Sudan, and Ethiopia. Their tall, lean bodies, light skin, wavy hair, and thin noses and lips contrast starkly with surrounding African groups."

Oppong (2002) identifies the Fulani as an ethnic group indigenous to the West African savannah, extending from the Atlantic coast to the Red Sea in a nearly continuous belt across the Sahel. Their presence spans several countries, including Nigeria, Niger, Senegal, Guinea, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, and Cameroon. Although found across the Sahel, Northern Nigeria remains one of the principal homelands of the Fulani population.

Eyekpimi (2016) categorizes the main Fulani subgroups in Nigeria as the Fulbe Adamawa, Fulbe Mbororo, Fulbe Sokoto, Fulbe Gombe, and Fulbe Borgu. The Fulani speak Fulfulde, a language shared by their dispersed communities across West and Central Africa. Many are traditionally nomadic, herding cattle, goats, and sheep across the dry grasslands and maintaining limited interaction with sedentary farming populations. This socio-economic pattern has made them the world's largest pastoral nomadic community.

b. Fulani Herdsman

The Fulani herdsman, also referred to as Fulani pastoralists, are nomadic or semi-nomadic herders whose primary livelihood revolves around livestock rearing (Iro, 1994). They practice both random transhumance, which involves unpredictable migration, and planned transhumance, which follows seasonal grazing cycles. Their mobility is primarily driven by ecological necessity, specifically, the search for water and pasture.

Iheanacho (2017) notes that due to desertification and climate variability, Fulani herders have increasingly migrated from the arid Sahel to the savannah and forest zones of West Africa. In Nigeria, cattle herding is dominated almost entirely by Fulani groups (Udoh et al., 2025). Globally, Fulani herders constitute approximately 7 to 8 million people, representing the largest pastoralist community in the world.

Iro (1994) further observes that the Fulani maintain a functional species composition within their herds, balancing milkers, beefers, breeders, and carriers, and typically sustain herd sizes of 80 to 100 animals. This pastoral system, although economically significant, has also been at the centre of recurring tensions over land use, resource competition, and identity politics in Nigeria's multi-ethnic landscape.

Empirical Review



The Fulani herders play a vital role in Nigeria's economy. They own an estimated 90 per cent of the nation's livestock, contributing significantly to the supply of meat and dairy products and accounting for roughly one-third of the nation's agricultural GDP (Eniola, 2007, as cited in Bello, 2013). Despite their economic importance, public and scholarly attention has focused mainly on their involvement in violent conflicts with farming communities, rather than on their historical evolution and socio-cultural dynamics.

Several studies have examined herder-farmer clashes, highlighting their economic and security implications. For instance, Innocent, Ogwu, and Onuigbo (2017) explored the economic costs of these conflicts, revealing that herder-farmer crises have resulted in population displacement, property destruction, and food insecurity. Their findings underscored the need for improved security intelligence and proactive peacebuilding. However, the study did not situate these conflicts within the broader historical or identity-based framework of the Fulani herders.

Similarly, Mohammed, Ismaila, and Bibi (2015) examined the socio-economic challenges confronting herders, emphasising how urbanisation, blocked grazing routes, and climate-induced desertification have intensified resource competition. They argued that the erosion of traditional grazing reserves and weak land management systems has exacerbated clashes. However, their work, like that of many others, neglected the historical and socio-cultural dimensions of the Fulani herders' identity.

Oluwasegun and Solagberu (2010), adopting an Empirical Phenomenological Psychological (EPP) approach, analysed the lived experiences of farmers and herders in conflict zones. Their findings revealed inadequate knowledge of stock routes and soil depletion as conflict triggers, alongside differing perceptions of survival and adaptation. The study recommended improved stock route management and institutionalised conflict mediation mechanisms. Nevertheless, it remained silent on the historical formation of the Fulani herding tradition.

Odoh and Chigozie (2012) linked the herder-farmer conflicts to climate change, employing the eco-violence theory to show how desertification and resource scarcity fuel competition and violence. They proposed climate adaptation strategies and enhanced ecological governance. However, their analysis, while rich in environmental insight, omitted the socio-historical context of Fulani identity formation.

In Ekiti State, Ogo-Oluwa (2017) assessed the impact of anti-grazing policies on conflict resolution. Using qualitative data, the study found that the enforcement of the 2016 Anti-Grazing Law and the establishment of a state marshal significantly reduced violent encounters. Although relevant to policy debates, this study also overlooks the deep-seated historical roots of Fulani pastoralism.

Musa, Shabu, and Igbawua (2014) studied herder-farmer relations in Benue State, identifying displacement, property destruction, and hostility as primary conflict outcomes. Their quantitative data underscored the mutual distrust between host communities and herders, recommending the establishment of grazing reserves and the adoption of modern ranching systems. However, like others, their research was not historically grounded.

Finally, Olatunji (2013) explored the internal migration of Fulani herders in Ekiti State, analysing its implications for security and governance. The study concluded that weak policy interventions have aggravated tensions between migrant groups and host communities. While it highlighted the mobility characteristic of Fulani herders, it did not interrogate the historical or identity-based factors underlying this mobility.

From the foregoing review, existing studies have predominantly examined Fulani herdsman through the lens of conflict, migration, and resource competition. Although these perspectives are crucial, they have largely neglected the historical and socio-political foundations of Fulani herding culture and identity. Few studies have explored how the historical trajectories of Fulani migration, religion, and pastoral economy have shaped their relationships with other ethnic groups and the Nigerian state.

This scholarly gap underscores the need for a more contextual and historical understanding of the Fulani herders phenomenon. This approach transcends immediate conflict dynamics to interrogate the deeper identity and structural issues at play. The present study addresses this gap



by exploring the socio-political dynamics and historical evolution of Fulani herders within Nigeria's multiethnic context.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; 1986) as its guiding framework. The theory posits that individuals derive part of their self-concept from the social groups to which they belong. Group identity influences perception, behaviour, and intergroup relations, often shaping inclusion, exclusion, and conflict.

Applied to this study, Social Identity Theory helps to conceptualise the Fulani herders as a distinct subgroup within the broader Fulani ethnic identity, one whose sense of belonging, cultural practices, and economic activities have historically differentiated them from both the settled Fulani populations and other Nigerian ethnic groups. Understanding their identity construction provides insight into the enduring tensions, stereotypes, and conflicts that define their interactions within Nigeria's multiethnic society

RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopts an *ex post facto* qualitative research design, which involves the systematic examination of social phenomena after they have occurred, without any manipulation of variables. As noted by Salkind (2010), this approach is particularly appropriate for social and historical inquiries where experimental control is neither feasible nor ethically permissible. Given that this research investigates the historical and socio-political dynamics of the Fulani herders within Nigeria's multiethnic context, the *ex post facto* design provides a suitable framework for analysing existing records, interpretations, and documented experiences.

The study relies exclusively on secondary sources of data drawn from peer-reviewed academic literature, historical records, government and institutional reports, policy documents, and publications by reputable international and civil society organisations. These sources were selected because they provide empirical, analytical, and historical information relevant to the Fulani herders, ethnic identity, migration, conflict, and governance in Nigeria. Priority was given to peer-reviewed journal articles and books, as well as reports produced by recognised institutions. Media sources were used primarily to contextualise recent developments and policy debates. Sources were included if they were directly relevant to the research focus, methodologically credible, and analytically substantive. Materials that were purely opinion-based, weakly evidenced, or unrelated to the research questions were excluded from the analysis.

The analytical procedure involved a qualitative content analysis of the selected materials. All texts were read carefully and repeatedly in order to identify recurring concepts, arguments, and patterns. These were then grouped into broader thematic categories relating to the historical formation of Fulani identity, patterns of pastoral migration and livelihood, the dynamics of farmer-herder conflict, state responses and governance frameworks, and the implications of these processes for national integration and security. Interpretation focused on identifying relationships among these themes and tracing how historical processes, identity construction, environmental pressures, and institutional responses interact over time to shape conflict and coexistence in Nigeria.

To enhance analytical rigour, the study triangulated evidence across different types of sources, including academic, historical, and policy-oriented materials. This helped to reduce the influence of single-source bias and to strengthen the credibility of the interpretations. Nonetheless, the study is limited by its reliance on secondary data and is therefore constrained by the quality, scope, and potential biases of existing literature and reports. The analysis does not claim to capture the lived experiences of actors directly but seeks instead to provide a synthesized socio-political and historically grounded interpretation of the Fulani herders phenomenon and its broader implications for peace, governance, and national integration in Nigeria.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of existing literature and historical evidence indicates that the Fulani herders phenomenon in Nigeria cannot be adequately explained through a single causal lens. Rather, it emerges from the interaction of historically constructed identities, ecological pressures, political marginalisation, and institutional failure. The discussion below critically interprets the findings in



relation to relevant theoretical frameworks, empirical studies, and Nigeria's broader socio-political context.

The historical evolution of Fulani pastoral identity reflects a complex interplay between integration and exclusion. While settled Fulani communities became embedded within the political and religious institutions of the Sokoto Caliphate, pastoral Fulani remained socially and spatially peripheral. This bifurcation illustrates what Iro (1994) describes as the "pastoral paradox," in which cultural autonomy simultaneously functions as a source of identity preservation and structural marginalisation. From a constructivist perspective on ethnicity, this identity is not fixed but historically produced through political, economic, and institutional processes. The persistence of a distinct pastoral identity, therefore, reflects not only cultural isolation but also the cumulative effects of colonial and postcolonial governance systems that failed to integrate mobile populations into formal citizenship and development frameworks.

Environmental change has transformed pastoral mobility from a strategic adaptive livelihood into a site of conflict. Political ecology theory helps explain this shift by highlighting how environmental stress interacts with social inequality and weak institutions to generate conflict rather than cooperation. The southward movement of herders is not simply a response to climate change, but a politically mediated process shaped by the absence of functional grazing reserves, inadequate land-use planning, and ineffective dispute resolution mechanisms. Empirical studies by Odoh and Chigozie (2012) and Musa et al. (2014) support this interpretation, showing that conflict intensifies not only where resource scarcity is highest, but also where institutional regulation is weakest. This suggests that the farmer-herder crisis is less an ecological inevitability than a governance failure.

The politicisation and securitisation of Fulani mobility further deepen the conflict. As mobility becomes framed as invasion and herders are racialised and criminalised in public discourse, the conflict shifts from a resource-based dispute to an identity-based struggle. Social identity theory helps explain how such categorisation reinforces in-group and out-group boundaries, making compromise more difficult and violence more likely. The Fulani herders thus become symbolically associated with insecurity, while farmers are framed as victims of state neglect, producing mutually reinforcing narratives of grievance (Roberts et al., 2023). The instrumentalisation of these narratives by political elites further entrenches division and undermines conflict resolution.

The findings also highlight the central role of weak and fragmented governance. The lack of a coherent national livestock and land-use policy has resulted in a patchwork of inconsistent, reactive, and politically motivated state-level responses. Anti-open grazing laws, for instance, may reduce local tensions in the short term but also risk deepening exclusion if not accompanied by viable alternatives for pastoral livelihoods. The crisis, therefore, reflects a broader pattern of state incapacity in managing diversity, mobility, and rural development. In this sense, the Fulani herders conflict is not an anomaly, but a manifestation of Nigeria's broader challenges in nation-building, citizenship, and inclusive governance (Simbine et al., 2021).

These dynamics have profound implications for national integration. The persistence of farmer-herder conflict highlights the fragility of Nigeria's social contract and the limitations of an identity framework that prioritises sedentary, territorially fixed populations over mobile groups. Sustainable peace requires not only security interventions but also institutional reforms that recognise pastoralism as a legitimate livelihood, integrate herders into formal governance systems, and create inclusive mechanisms for negotiating access to land and resources. Without such reforms, coercive responses risk reproducing the very exclusions that sustain the conflict.

In sum, the Fulani herders crisis is best understood not as a cultural or security problem alone but as a historically produced and politically sustained condition rooted in identity construction, ecological stress, and governance failure.

Recommendations

Drawing from the findings of this study, several recommendations are proposed to promote a balanced understanding of the Fulani herders phenomenon and to foster sustainable coexistence within Nigeria's multiethnic context. First, there is an urgent need for scholarly documentation and



cultural preservation. Historians, anthropologists, and social scientists should undertake the task of developing a comprehensive body of literature on the Fulani herders, encompassing their history, socio-economic systems, and cultural values. Establishing a National Research Consortium on Nomadic Studies under the Nigerian Institute of Social and Economic Research (NISER) or the Nigerian Defense Academy (NDA) would facilitate the coordination of systematic research efforts. Such an initiative should culminate in the creation of a national database and the publication of annual reports to guide policy formulation and correct entrenched public misconceptions. The tertiary institutions, research councils, and the Federal Ministry of Education are best positioned to drive this initiative.

Additionally, there is a need for policy reform and stronger institutional frameworks to support pastoral management. The government should prioritize the establishment of regulated grazing reserves, ranching systems, and transhumance corridors that are inclusive and evidence-based. To this end, the Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, in collaboration with state governments, should pilot ranching and grazing zones across different geopolitical regions. This process must be supported by clear land tenure laws to ensure fair access and minimize disputes. If properly implemented, these reforms would reduce resource competition and improve the regulation of pastoral activities. The Federal and State Governments, the National Assembly, and the Land Use and Reform Commission should be actively involved in this reform agenda.

Furthermore, climate adaptation and environmental management must form a central part of the response to herder-farmer tensions. Since desertification and ecological degradation continue to drive herders' southward migration, the Nigerian government should invest in sustainable land-use practices, reforestation, and water management programs that mitigate environmental pressures. The establishment of a National Pastoral Resilience Program (NPRP), focusing on reforestation, anti-desertification drives, and sustainable water management across northern grazing belts, would help minimize environmental stress and reduce migration pressures. The Federal Ministry of Environment, the National Agency for the Great Green Wall, and local governments should coordinate these interventions.

Equally important is promoting educational and social inclusion among Fulani herder communities. Expanding and modernizing the Nomadic Education Program (NEP) to incorporate mobile classrooms, digital literacy, and vocational training aligned with modern livestock management practices would enhance literacy levels, improve livelihoods, and foster civic engagement among nomadic populations. The National Commission for Nomadic Education (NCNE), in collaboration with the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) and relevant non-governmental organizations, should lead the implementation of these reforms.

To prevent and manage communal tensions, conflict mediation and peacebuilding mechanisms must be institutionalized at the local level. Multi-stakeholder peacebuilding councils, comprising traditional rulers, local authorities, religious leaders, and civil society organizations, should be established to monitor early warning signals and mediate disputes between herders and farmers before they escalate into violence. The institutionalization of Community Peace and Mediation Councils (CPMCs) would help promote early conflict resolution, community reconciliation, and long-term peacebuilding. The involvement of local government councils, the National Orientation Agency, and faith-based organizations would be vital to the success of this effort.

Ultimately, Nigeria's multicultural diversity necessitates a sustained national dialogue and a reframing of national identity. Policymakers, scholars, and community leaders should work together to reframe the national discourse on Fulani herders from one of conflict and criminality to one of coexistence, citizenship, and mutual respect. A National Conference on Identity, Integration, and Internal Security should be organized under the auspices of the Presidency and the Federal Ministry of Information and National Orientation, in partnership with the National Council of Traditional Rulers. Such a platform would promote intercultural understanding, reduce ethnic profiling, and strengthen Nigeria's unity in diversity.



CONCLUSION

This study has shown that the Fulani herders phenomenon in Nigeria cannot be adequately understood as a purely ethnic, ecological, or security issue. Rather, it is a historically produced and politically mediated condition rooted in the interaction of identity formation, mobility, environmental change, and weak governance. By situating the Fulani herders within Nigeria's longer historical trajectory and contemporary socio-political structures, the study reframes the crisis as a problem of institutional exclusion and uneven citizenship, rather than one of inherent cultural incompatibility.

Theoretically, the study contributes to the literature on ethnicity and conflict by demonstrating that identity is not a fixed cultural attribute but a socially constructed and historically contingent process shaped by political institutions, economic systems, and environmental pressures. It also advances political ecology and governance-based explanations of conflict by showing that resource scarcity becomes violent primarily where institutional regulation and conflict management mechanisms are weak. In doing so, the study challenges mono-causal explanations that attribute the crisis solely to climate change, ethnicity, or criminality, and instead highlights the importance of examining how these factors intersect within specific historical and political contexts.

From a policy perspective, the findings underscore the limitations of coercive and militarised responses to farmer-herder conflicts. Security-based interventions, while sometimes necessary, do not address the underlying drivers of conflict, including insecure land tenure, the absence of viable grazing and ranching frameworks, and the marginalisation of pastoral populations from development planning and political representation. Effective policy responses, therefore, require integrated approaches that combine land-use reform, environmental adaptation strategies, institutionalised conflict resolution mechanisms, and inclusive governance frameworks that recognise pastoralism as a legitimate livelihood and herders as full stakeholders in Nigeria's socio-political order.

The study also highlights the need for improved documentation, data collection, and public understanding of nomadic populations in Nigeria. The absence of reliable data on pastoral movements, livelihoods, and social organisation contributes to policy misalignment and reinforces stereotypes that hinder constructive engagement. Addressing this knowledge gap is essential for designing evidence-based interventions and for fostering social trust between mobile and sedentary communities.

Future research should build on this study by incorporating primary data through interviews, ethnographic fieldwork, and community-level surveys among herders, farmers, and local authorities in conflict-affected regions. Comparative studies across different Nigerian states or across West African countries would further illuminate how varying institutional arrangements shape conflict outcomes. Longitudinal research could also help trace how changing environmental and political conditions transform pastoral livelihoods over time. Such research would deepen understanding of the dynamic nature of identity, mobility, and conflict and support the development of more sustainable and context-sensitive policy solutions.

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