THE IMPACT OF FULANI HERDERS CRISIS AND THE INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES OF IMO STATE, NIGERIA

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A PROJECT SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE AWARD OF BACHELOR OF ARTS (B.A) HONOURS DEGREE IN INTERNATIONAL STUDIES AND DIPLOMACY

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CERTIFICATION

This is to certify that this project was carried out by **OGECHUKWU HAPPINESS EZE** with matriculation number **ART2100563** in the Department of History and International Studies, University of Benin, under my supervision.

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Date	**Date**

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to God Almighty for his infinite grace and mercy upon my life, his loving kindness, protection and grace throughout my course of study. I also dedicate this work to my lovely family.

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CHAPTER ONE

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Introduction

The Fulani herders-farmers conflict has become one of the most persistent and violent security challenges in Nigeria, with severe socio-economic and political ramifications. In recent years, the crisis has escalated from occasional disputes over grazing land to large-scale violence, especially in the Middle Belt and southern regions of Nigeria, including Imo State. Historically, Fulani herders practiced transhumant pastoralism, moving seasonally in search of pasture and water for their cattle. However, increasing desertification in the northern parts of Nigeria, coupled with population growth and urban expansion, has forced herders to migrate southward, bringing them into conflict with settled farming communities.[1]

Imo State, predominantly inhabited by Igbo-speaking communities who rely heavily on agriculture, has witnessed growing tensions due to the activities of Fulani herdsmen. The influx of herders has often led to the destruction of farmlands, loss of livelihoods, and violent clashes that have resulted in deaths and displacements. These crises have not only threatened food security and economic stability in the affected communities but have also heightened ethnic mistrust and security concerns among the indigenous populations. Communities in areas such as Orlu, Okigwe, and Owerri zones have particularly borne the brunt of these confrontations, which are sometimes

exacerbated by the perceived failure of the state and security apparatus to provide adequate protection[2]. The Fulani herders crisis in Imo State reflects broader national issues, such as the politicization of ethnicity, weak governance, and competition over natural resources. The inability of the government to enforce laws and manage grazing routes, coupled with the collapse of traditional conflict-resolution mechanisms, has intensified the breakdown of peaceful coexistence between herders and farmers. The indigenous communities now experience increased fear, social fragmentation, and migration, which further destabilizes the rural economy and communal cohesion[3]. Given the far-reaching implications of these conflicts, there is an urgent need to study the impact of the Fulani herders' crisis on indigenous communities in Imo State. Such an inquiry would offer insights into the socio-economic, cultural, and security consequences of the crisis and inform the development of sustainable conflict resolution and peacebuilding strategies.

Over time, the conflict has also assumed a criminal dimension, as loosely organized bandit groups exploit the chaos for kidnapping, cattle rustling, and extortion. These criminal actors often blend in with legitimate herders or farmers, making it difficult for security forces to distinguish between pastoralists exercising grazing rights and those involved in illicit activities[4]. In Imo State, reports of kidnappings along rural routes and violent raids on villages have risen sharply since 2018, prompting communities to erect makeshift barricades and form vigilante groups measures that, in turn, have led to heavy-handed security crackdowns and occasional human rights abuses[5].

The blurring of economic-driven herding practices with outright banditry complicates both the legal prosecution of offenders and the design of targeted peace-building interventions. The herders–farmers crisis undermines local development by disrupting market systems and depressing agricultural output. Market days central to rural livelihoods have been irregularly held in affected LGAs due to fear of attacks, forcing farmers to sell produce at a steep discount when they manage to reach town centers. The resulting loss of income constrains household spending on essentials such as healthcare, school fees, and farm inputs, thereby deepening cycles of poverty. Uncertainty over land tenure discourages long-term investments in soil enrichment and agroforestry, further entrenching low-yield farming and environmental degradation a feedback loop that exacerbates scarcity and conflict.

The human health dimension of the crisis is equally alarming. Displacement and the destruction of crops have led to spikes in acute malnutrition among children under five, with some internally displaced person (IDP) camps in Orlu reporting Global Acute Malnutrition rates above the emergency threshold of 15%. Compounding these nutritional concerns are outbreaks of waterborne diseases cholera and dysentery at communal wells seized by herders or contaminated by cattle waste. Mental health stressors stemming from loss of loved ones, property, and sense of security remain largely unaddressed, as rural health clinics lack both the capacity and funding to provide psychosocial support for trauma survivors[6]

The disintegration of inter-communal relationships has eroded longstanding norms of hospitality and mutual aid. Historically, seasonal herders and farming families would exchange gifts, labor, and knowledge practices that reinforced peaceful coexistence and adaptive resilience to environmental variability. Today, such reciprocity has dwindled; some farmers who once welcomed herders into their forests now view any Fulani presence as a potential threat, while herders increasingly distrust invitations to communal gatherings for fear of ambush. Reviving these cultural linkages through inter-ethnic dialogue, shared resource management committees, and community festivals may offer pathways toward rebuilding trust and mitigating violence.

Aim and Objectives

The aim of this study is to critically examine impacts of the Fulani herders crisis on indigenous farming communities in Imo State, Nigeria. The objectives includes:

1. To map the spatial and temporal patterns of Fulani herder incursions into Imo State communities, identifying hotspots of conflict and seasonal migration routes
2. Assess the environmental drivers including desertification, land-use changes, and water scarcity that underpin the southward movement of pastoralists and precipitate clashes with farmers.

3. Evaluate the socio-economic consequences of herder–farmer conflicts on indigenous households, focusing on livelihood losses, food security, displacement, and urban migration patterns.

4. Investigate the institutional and governance responses, examining the effectiveness of existing legal frameworks (e.g., National Grazing Reserve Act, 1965), state-level policies, and traditional dispute-resolution mechanisms in mitigating violence.

5. Analyze the public-health and human-security dimensions of the crisis, including rates of malnutrition, disease outbreaks in IDP settings, and psychosocial trauma among affected populations.

Scope of the Study

The scope of this study is confined to Imo State in southeastern Nigeria, with particular attention to the three principal senatorial zones (Orlu, Okigwe, and Owerri). from the period of 2015-2024. Within these zones, we will focus on a purposive selection of Local Government Areas (LGAs) that have experienced the highest frequency of herder–farmer clashes as identified in security reports and field data. By narrowing our research to these hot-spot communities, the study ensures depth of analysis while capturing the spatial variation in incidence and severity of conflict across the state.

Methodology

This research is basically historical, therefore the research method adopted for this work is based on data collection from primary and secondary sources. Oral interviews will also be conducted with individuals with first-hand knowledge of the impacts of the Fulani herders crisis on indigenous farming communities in Imo State, Nigeria.

Primary Sources

To achieve the collection of data, this research will adopt the primary sources which include interviews and opinion sampling.

Secondary Sources

Journals, reports, articles, newspapers, charters, treaties, textbooks, and other internet publications pertaining to the topic of the study will be the sources of secondary data for the research.

Literature Review

As this is not the first research on this issue or field of study, the goal of this research is to add its quota to the various scholarly papers that already exist.

R. Blench's *Natural Resource Conflicts in North-Central Nigeria*[8] provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how competition over land and water resources escalates into broader social and political conflicts. Drawing on detailed case studies from the Middle Belt, Blench situates the herder–farmer clashes within a context of shifting environmental conditions particularly soil degradation, deforestation, and

changes in rainfall patterns—that have progressively reduced the carrying capacity of traditional grazing lands. By mapping historical grazing routes and overlaying them with expanding agricultural frontiers, the book demonstrates how seasonal transhumance, once managed through informal agreements, has become a flashpoint for violent encounters as herders and farmers vie for ever-scarcer pastures. A central contribution of Blench's work is its emphasis on the role of institutional change or the lack thereof in mediating resource competition. He argues that the gradual erosion of customary land-management systems, inherited from pre-colonial chieftaincies, has left communities without effective mechanisms for negotiating access rights. Whereas local councils of elders once convened periodic "peace markets" to formalize grazing permissions, these fora have been undermined by population pressure and political centralization, resulting in overlapping and contradictory land-use claims. Blench illustrates how this institutional vacuum forces disputants to resort to self-help strategies often involving militia formation which then provokes a securitized state response and further entrenches hostilities. Through its richly detailed case studies, Blench highlights the feedback loops between environmental degradation and conflict intensity. For example, his analysis of the Benue River floodplain shows how episodic flooding once replenished soil fertility and provided grazing relief, but dam construction and upstream land-clearing have disrupted this cycle, concentrating both cattle and crops along narrowing strips of arable land. In these micro-regions, encounters between herders and farmers have become more frequent and more lethal, as livestock search for water holes quarried by agricultural expansion. Blench's

meticulous field data combining GIS mapping with oral histories offers a methodological exemplar for studies seeking to trace the environmental drivers of violence. Although Blench focuses on North-Central Nigeria, his findings are directly applicable to Imo State, where similar patterns of land-use change and institutional breakdown have occurred. The book's insights into the collapse of customary grazing institutions resonate with reports from Orlu and Okigwe zones, where village assemblies have struggled to enforce seasonal grazing corridors.

Homer-Dixon's scholarly work, *Environment, Scarcity, and Violence*[8] offers a rigorous theoretical basis for understanding how ecological degradation can cascade into social conflict. Central to his argument is the distinction among three forms of scarcity: renewable-resource scarcity, where natural assets such as fertile soil or water are consumed faster than they can regenerate; elite-maintained scarcity, where powerful actors restrict access to resources; and demand-induced scarcity, in which population growth outpaces per-capita resource availability. In the context of the Fulani herders crisis, desertification in northern Nigeria exemplifies renewable-resource scarcity, driving pastoralists southward in search of pasture, while contested land titles in Imo State illustrate elite-maintained scarcity as community leaders and speculators seek to exclude herders from valuable farmlands.

Building on this typology, Homer-Dixon identifies three causal pathways linking scarcity to violence: managed competition, where groups vie violently over dwindling resources; state weakening, as environmental stress undermines governmental capacity to

maintain order; and marginalization, wherein economic displacement radicalizes affected individuals. The Imo State crisis mirrors these dynamics: recurrent crop destruction by cattle sparks tit-for-tat reprisals ("managed competition"), overstretched local security forces struggle to protect both herders and farmers ("state weakening"), and displaced youth—bereft of farmland or grazing rights—sometimes gravitate toward vigilante or criminal networks ("marginalization"). Homer-Dixon further emphasizes the feedback loops between environmental decline and institutional erosion. As scarce resources heighten tensions, communal norms and traditional dispute-resolution bodies lose authority, which in turn accelerates conflict and ecological harm. This insight sheds light on why village councils and age-grade systems in Orlu and Okigwe have failed to contain grazing disputes: without formalized agreements or enforcement mechanisms, each breach deepens mistrust, making negotiated settlements increasingly elusive.[9]

P. A. Olayoku, in *Trends and Patterns of Cattle Grazing and Rural Violence in Nigeria*[10], presents an empirical analysis of the growing frequency, intensity, and geographical spread of cattle grazing-related violence in Nigeria, with particular attention to the underlying structural and spatial dimensions. Using data collected over an eight-year period, Olayoku maps the transformation of herder–farmer relations from occasional disputes to sustained rural violence, illustrating how population growth, weak conflict-resolution mechanisms, and ecological pressures contribute to the escalation of clashes. This work is particularly relevant to understanding the Fulani herder crisis in Imo State, where similar patterns of increasing violence, breakdown of traditional dispute resolution,

and migratory pressures are evident. One of Olayoku's major contributions is his identification of spatial shifts in the epicenters of grazing conflicts, moving from the northern and central regions toward the southern zones, including parts of the South-East like Imo State. He attributes this to environmental degradation in the North, leading to increased southward migration of Fulani pastoralists, who then encounter resistance from sedentary agrarian communities with little historical experience of cattle grazing. In Imo State, this influx has disrupted established land use, with indigenous communities often viewing the presence of herders as an existential threat to their farmlands, cultural identity, and local security. He emphasizes that the absence of a coherent national grazing policy and the failure of local authorities to respond swiftly to early warning signs have allowed isolated incidents to snowball into protracted conflicts. He argues that weak law enforcement, unclear land ownership systems, and a lack of grazing infrastructure such as dedicated routes and reserves have made violent confrontation more likely. In rural parts of Imo, these institutional failures are compounded by political interference, community vigilantism, and inadequate security responses, which have fostered a cycle of mutual suspicion and retaliatory attacks.

Okoli and Atelhe's article "Nomads against natives: A political ecology of herder/farmer conflicts in Nasarawa State, Nigeria"[11] applies a political-ecological lens to unpack how power dynamics, land tenure regimes, and broader political-economic structures shape resource conflicts. The authors argue that herder–farmer clashes cannot be understood solely as local disputes over pasture and crops; rather, they are

symptomatic of uneven access to land and water, which is mediated by state policies, customary authorities, and market forces. By tracing how elite actors—including political officeholders and large-scale agribusiness interests—manipulate land leases and grazing rights for rent-seeking, Okoli and Atelhe reveal that indigenous farmers and pastoralists are often pitted against one another as proxies in struggles over resource control.

The study combines participatory rural appraisal techniques with archival analysis of land-use records and interviews with key informants (chiefs, herder leaders, and local government officials). This mixed-methods approach enables the authors to chart shifting patterns of land allocation from communal grazing reserves to privatized farms and to document how the erosion of customary land-management institutions intensifies competition. Their findings indicate that when state actors fail to enforce equitable land-use policies, local communities resort to self-help measures, including the formation of ethnic militias and ad hoc vigilante groups, which escalate minor trespasses into cycles of retaliation. The political-ecology framework that Okoli and Atelhe develop has clear resonance for Imo State's herder–farmer crisis. In southeastern Nigeria, as in Nasarawa, the commodification of land and the weakening of traditional tenure systems have marginalized both smallholder farmers and itinerant pastoralists. Understanding the Imo conflict through this lens suggests that solutions should extend beyond demarcating grazing routes to addressing the underlying political-economic incentives that drive land grabbing and policy capture. Reinforcing transparent land-governance mechanisms, empowering community land trusts, and curbing elite manipulation of land leases could

therefore be critical steps toward mitigating violence and restoring more balanced farmer–herder relations in Imo State.

Tonah's work titled *"Managing Farmer-Herder Conflicts in Ghana's Volta Basin"*[12] explores the dynamics of conflicts between nomadic herders and indigenous farming communities in Ghana, offering comparative insights that are applicable to the Nigerian context, particularly Imo State. The study highlights how ecological pressures, demographic shifts, and land tenure insecurity contribute to the outbreak of violent confrontations between herders and farmers. Tonah observes that as herders migrate southward in search of greener pastures due to desertification and environmental degradation in their traditional zones, they increasingly encroach upon farmlands owned or used by sedentary populations. This leads to the destruction of crops, retaliatory violence, and a breakdown of social relations between the two groups. The study emphasizes the role of weak institutions and ineffective governance in managing these disputes. In many cases, the failure of local authorities to mediate promptly and fairly aggravates tensions, as both farmers and herders feel unprotected and unjustly treated. Tonah points out that the absence of clearly defined grazing corridors, coupled with the lack of legal recognition for traditional conflict-resolution mechanisms, limits the ability of communities to resolve disputes peacefully. The imposition of punitive measures without addressing the root causes of the conflict often leads to further alienation and deepens animosities.

Tonah also highlights the importance of community-based conflict management strategies. His research shows that where local dialogue platforms and joint community task forces have been established, the frequency and severity of violent encounters have been significantly reduced. Trust-building activities, regular meetings between farmers and herders, and inclusive land-use planning have been effective in fostering mutual understanding and cooperation. These models of conflict prevention and resolution underscore the value of participatory governance and grassroots peacebuilding efforts in addressing resource-based conflicts. While focused on Ghana, Tonah's insights are highly relevant to Imo State, where similar ecological and socio-political conditions prevail. His work suggests that long-term solutions must integrate environmental management with inclusive policies that recognize the rights and livelihoods of both herding and farming communities. Institutional support for traditional conflict-resolution practices, combined with formal land-use policies and sustainable natural resource management, can play a vital role in mitigating the herder-farmer crisis in southeastern Nigeria.

Abbass's "No Retreat, No Surrender: Conflict for Survival between Fulani Pastoralists and Farmers in Northern Nigeria"[13] examines how existential pressures compel both pastoralists and agrarian communities into prolonged cycles of violence. Focusing on Kaduna and Kano States, Abbass situates the struggle as one not simply over grazing rights, but over basic livelihood security in the face of shrinking pastoral resources. He chronicles how recurrent droughts, coupled with expanding farmlands, leave Fulani herders with little choice but to move cattle deeper into arable zones, thereby

igniting confrontations that are framed by both sides as battles for physical survival. Abbass employs a mixed-methods approach, combining spatial analysis of incident data from 2003 to 2010 with interviews of herders, farmers, and local authorities. His quantitative mapping reveals a clear southward diffusion of hot spots over time, while qualitative accounts highlight how mutual perceptions of existential threat—herders fearing cattle starvation, farmers fearing crop obliteration—entrench hardline stances. Abbass also documents the emergence of adaptive strategies, such as herder–farmer peace committees and community policing units, but notes that these often falter without sustained institutional backing and formal recognition of grazing corridors. Although Abbass's study centers on northern Nigeria, its insights are directly applicable to Imo State's unfolding crisis. First, his emphasis on the "security of livelihood" reframes the conflict as one of necessity rather than mere ethnic antagonism, suggesting that peace initiatives in Imo will need to guarantee viable grazing alternatives as a precondition for farmer cooperation. Second, Abbass's findings on the fragility of local peace committees underscore the importance of integrating traditional mechanisms with state-led policy, lessons that Imo's communities could adopt by formalizing joint herder–farmer committees and securing legal backing for negotiated grazing reserves. Finally, by demonstrating how ecological stressors translate into human insecurity, Abbass provides a cautionary tale: without proactive measures to restore northern rangelands and manage pastoral mobility, southeastern states like Imo risk repeating the pattern of "no retreat, no surrender" that has fueled violence farther north.

Adisa's scholarly work "Land Use Conflict between Farmers and Herdsmen – Implications for Agricultural and Rural Development in Nigeria"[14] offers a policy-focused analysis of how contestations over land tenure and access undermine both agricultural productivity and broader rural development goals. Drawing on case studies from Benue and Kaduna States, Adisa highlights that unclear and overlapping land-use regulations — particularly the coexistence of statutory law, customary tenure, and informal grazing rights — create legal gray areas that both herders and farmers exploit to legitimize competing claims. His mixed-methods approach combines spatial mapping of land-use patterns with stakeholder interviews, revealing that farmers often react to livestock incursions by encroaching on wet-season grazing lands, fueling a spiral of mutual encroachment and retaliation. Adisa further argues that persistent conflicts erode farmer incentives to invest in land improvements (e.g., soil conservation or tree planting) and discourage pastoralists from adopting sedentary ranching alternatives, thereby perpetuating low-yield farming systems and extensive grazing practices. For Imo State, Adisa's insights underscore the necessity of harmonizing land-use policies — for example, through participatory land-use zoning that legally demarcates crop fields, grazing corridors, and agroforestry buffers to reduce friction and foster agricultural intensification alongside sustainable pastoralism.

Benjaminsen and Ba's study of farmer–herder conflicts in the Inland Niger Delta of Mali[15] employs a political-ecological lens to explore how pastoral marginalization and systemic corruption drive and sustain violent clashes over natural resources. Through a

combination of household surveys, participatory mapping, and in-depth interviews with local chiefs, herder associations, and government officials, they trace how state actors—motivated by rent-seeking incentives undermine customary land-management institutions by reallocating prime grazing areas to agribusinesses and political cronies. This process not only disenfranchises pastoralists from traditional floodplain grazing zones but also fuels resentment among sedentary farmers, who perceive herders as both ecological competitors and beneficiaries of corrupt patronage networks. The authors highlight three intertwined dynamics: first, the erosion of collective resource governance as corrupt officials override community-negotiated flood control and grazing agreements; second, the fragmentation of pastoral mobility routes, which forces herders into marginal, ecologically fragile zones and intensifies competition with farmers; and third, the institutional vacuum that emerges when neither customary authorities nor formal government agencies can effectively adjudicate disputes. These findings underscore how corruption at multiple levels exacerbates environmental scarcities and transforms localized disputes into enduring cycles of retaliation. For Imo State, where similar patterns of unclear land tenure and weak enforcement prevail, Benjaminsen and Ba's work suggests that anti-corruption measures and the revival of participatory resource-management institutions are essential components of any strategy to reconcile pastoral mobility with the rights and livelihoods of farming communities.

Ibrahim's *Religion and the Herdsmen–Farmers Conflict in Northern Nigeria*[16] examines the complex interplay between religious identities and resource-based clashes,

arguing that religious affiliation often compounds—but does not solely drive—herder–farmer tensions. On page 45, Ibrahim highlights how pastoralist and agrarian communities invoke religious narratives to legitimize claims over land and water: Muslim Fulani herders sometimes frame their southward migrations as part of a "divinely sanctioned" livelihood quest, while predominantly Christian farming villages view such incursions as existential threats not only to their crops but also to their faith communities. This framing, Ibrahim contends, deepens mutual suspicion and limits the efficacy of secular mediation efforts. Through qualitative interviews with imams, pastors, and community elders, Ibrahim demonstrates that religious leaders can play dual roles as peace-brokers in some locales and as fire-starters in others. Where interfaith coalitions have formed, joint mosque-church peace committees have successfully negotiated temporary grazing agreements and organized communal prayers for reconciliation. However, in areas where clerical rhetoric has been politicized—particularly during election cycles religious platforms have been mobilized to inflame ethnic solidarity, making neutral dialogue spaces harder to sustain. Thus, Ibrahim underscores the importance of engaging religious institutions deliberately in conflict-resolution frameworks, leveraging their moral authority to rebuild trust.

Importantly, Ibrahim situates his analysis within broader theoretical debates on identity politics and resource conflict. He cautions against overly reductionist readings that attribute violence solely to religious fanaticism; instead, he shows how religious discourse intersects with land scarcity, governance failures, and historical grievances. By

doing so, he offers a nuanced lens for understanding why secular policy prescriptions—such as formal grazing reserves—often falter when they fail to account for the mobilizing power of faith. For stakeholders in Imo State, Ibrahim's findings suggest that durable peacebuilding must integrate religious actors from the outset, ensuring that interfaith dialogue complements policy reforms aimed at regulating pastoral mobility.

Chapter Outline

This project is divided into five chapters

Chapter One: Background to the Study

This chapter contains the introduction, aim and objectives, scope of the study, methodology and literature review.

Chapter Two: Brief Background of the Fulani Herders and Pastoralism in Nigeria

This chapter provides a historical background on the Fulani herders and the evolution of pastoralism in Nigeria. It traces the origins and migration patterns of the Fulani people, emphasizing their nomadic lifestyle and the central role of cattle herding in their culture. The chapter explores the traditional relationships between Fulani herders

and indigenous farming communities in both the pre-colonial and colonial periods, where systems of coexistence and mutual benefit were common.

Chapter Three: The Fulani Herders Crisis in Imo State

Chapter three focuses on the specific history and evolution of the Fulani herders' presence and associated conflicts within Imo State. Building on the broader national backdrop presented in Chapter Two, it chronicles how early patterns of seasonal grazing gave way to sustained tensions—culminating in cycles of violence and community displacement—while highlighting both micro-level case studies and macro-level state responses.

Chapter Four: Consequences of the Crisis on Indigenous Communities in Imo State

This chapter examines how the Fulani herders crisis has impacted the lives, livelihoods, and social fabric of indigenous Imo communities. Drawing on archival reports, oral histories, and secondary literature, it explores five key dimensions of the crisis's fallout.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

The final chapter is the conclusion or summary of the study.

Endnotes

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CHAPTER TWO

BRIEF HISTORY OF THE FULANI HERDERS AND PASTORALISM IN NIGERIA

Origin and Migration of the Fulani People

The Fulani people, known as *Fulɓe* in their own language and *Peul* in French-speaking regions, constitute one of the largest and most geographically dispersed ethnic groups in Africa. Spread across more than 15 countries in West and Central Africa, their influence stretches from the Atlantic coast in Senegal to the savannahs of Central Africa, especially Cameroon and Chad. Despite their vast dispersion, the question of their origin

has remained a subject of sustained scholarly interest and debate. Various theories suggest North African, Middle Eastern, or Senegambian origins based on linguistic, anthropological, and genetic studies.[1]

The most widely accepted theory posits that the Fulani originated in the Senegambia region around the 5th century A.D. and gradually migrated eastward through the Sahelian belt. This movement was initially pastoral, driven by the need for fresh grazing lands for their cattle in a region characterized by seasonal rainfall and periodic droughts[2]. Their migration was not only ecological but also sociocultural. As they moved eastward, the Fulani interacted with various groups, often intermarrying and assimilating aspects of local cultures, while simultaneously spreading their own language, *Fulfulde*, and lifestyle. This gradual eastward migration took centuries and significantly shaped the demographic and cultural landscape of West Africa.[3]

The Fulani speak *Fulfulde* (also called *Pulaar* or *Pular*, depending on the region), which belongs to the West Atlantic branch of the Niger-Congo language family. This linguistic affiliation links them with the Atlantic peoples of the Senegambia region, supporting the theory of their West African origins[4]. Some anthropological studies have drawn attention to their physical features such as lighter skin tones and aquiline facial structures which deviate from typical sub-Saharan phenotypes. These features have led some scholars to hypothesize ancient admixture with Berber or Arab populations from North Africa or even the Middle East[5]. Such speculations, however, remain contested and are not conclusively supported by genetic evidence.

The Fulani migration occurred in two broad patterns: pastoral and religio-political. The pastoral migration, which began earlier, involved the Fulani moving eastward with their livestock, eventually settling in present-day Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, northern Nigeria, Cameroon, and the Central African Republic. These movements were often seasonal, dictated by climatic conditions, and required a deep knowledge of ecological systems[6]. The second phase, religious and political in nature, occurred between the 17th and 19th centuries. During this period, the Fulani emerged as leaders of Islamic reform movements. Perhaps the most significant of these was the Sokoto Jihad led by Usman ɗan Fodio in 1804. This jihad led to the establishment of the Sokoto Caliphate in present-day northern Nigeria—one of the most powerful Islamic states in 19th-century sub-Saharan Africa.[7] These jihads were not only religious crusades but also served as mechanisms for political consolidation and territorial expansion. They created Fulani-dominated emirates in places like Kano, Katsina, Gombe, and Adamawa, which helped institutionalize Islamic governance and education. The religious zeal of the Fulani, coupled with their political ambition, allowed them to become ruling elites over diverse populations, often integrating into existing power structures or replacing them[8]. This blend of nomadic pastoralism and Islamic political ideology became a defining feature of Fulani identity.

Despite settling in various regions and engaging in governance, many Fulani retained their nomadic lifestyles. The *Mbororo'en*, a subgroup of the pastoral Fulani, are noted for their strict adherence to transhumant cattle-herding traditions. Unlike the

urbanized Fulani who became political elites, the *Mbororo'en* remained isolated, preserving a highly distinct cultural identity centered around cattle, mobility, and oral traditions. In the modern era, the Fulani population is estimated to exceed 20 million people, making them one of the most populous ethnic groups in Africa[9]. They are typically divided into three lifestyle categories: the nomadic or pastoral Fulani, who continue to migrate with livestock; the semi-nomadic Fulani, who combine herding with subsistence farming; and the settled or urban Fulani, who live in towns and cities, often occupying prominent positions in business, religion, and politics. This classification reflects their adaptive resilience and socio-economic diversification in response to modern challenges such as climate change, urbanization, and national policies.[10]

Their transnational presence and continued mobility have become sources of tension in many contemporary societies. In countries like Nigeria and Mali, Fulani pastoralists have frequently clashed with sedentary farmers over access to land and water. These conflicts are often exacerbated by ethnic, religious, and political undertones, turning local disputes into broader national security threats[11]. As a result, the Fulani identity once associated with mobility and Islamic scholarship has become entangled in issues of national integration, environmental degradation, and violence. The origin and migration of the Fulani people reflect a unique blend of ecological adaptability, cultural resilience, and religious transformation. From their probable roots in Senegambia, they spread across the Sahel and beyond, influencing the political and religious trajectories of

numerous West African societies. Today, the Fulani remain a complex and multifaceted people symbolizing both continuity and change in African history.

Evolution of Pastoralism in Nigeria

Pastoralism in Nigeria has undergone significant transformation over the centuries, evolving from a simple subsistence-based livelihood into a complex socio-economic system that is deeply intertwined with issues of land use, conflict, migration, climate change, and national development. At its core, pastoralism involves the raising of livestock through mobile or semi-mobile systems of animal husbandry, primarily focusing on cattle, sheep, and goats. In Nigeria, this practice is most closely associated with the Fulani people, whose historic migration across the Sahel and savannah regions introduced a nomadic herding lifestyle that has endured for generations.[12] The origins of pastoralism in Nigeria can be traced to the early settlement patterns of the Fulani, who adapted their transhumant systems to the ecological conditions of the savannah belt, especially in northern Nigeria. The region's open grasslands, seasonal rainfall, and sparse tree cover provided ideal conditions for grazing livestock.[13] Traditionally, Fulani pastoralism was defined by *seasonal transhumance*—the periodic migration of herders and their livestock between dry and wet season pastures, which was a rational ecological adaptation aimed at mitigating the impact of climatic variability and avoiding disease-prone zones such as tsetse fly-infested forests.[14]

One of the most renowned pastoralist groups within the Fulani population is the *Mbororo'en*, known for their extensive migratory routes, which often span international

boundaries. Their deep knowledge of terrain, hydrology, and pasture cycles enabled them to move efficiently across ecological zones, ensuring livestock survival and productivity. According to Fricke, the Mbororo'en maintained intricate social and cultural institutions that regulated herd movement, land use, and conflict resolution, thereby facilitating a form of ecological balance.[15] The evolution of pastoralism in Nigeria has not occurred in isolation. It has been influenced by several interconnected factors. First, population growth has drastically increased pressure on land, especially in the Middle Belt and southern regions of Nigeria, leading to widespread encroachment on traditional grazing areas. This demographic pressure has caused land fragmentation, the disappearance of grazing corridors, and a breakdown of traditional systems of land allocation[15]. As a result, farmer-herder conflicts have become increasingly frequent and violent, driven by competing land claims and the absence of effective land governance mechanisms. Second, climate change has emerged as a critical force reshaping the pastoral landscape. Persistent droughts, desertification, and the degradation of arable land in northern Nigeria have forced herders to migrate further southward in search of viable pastures[16]. This movement has brought them into contact, and often conflict with sedentary farming communities, leading to increased tensions and the politicization of pastoralism. The environmental stress caused by reduced rainfall and shrinking water bodies, such as Lake Chad, has further exacerbated competition over scarce natural resources.[17]

In response to these challenges, some Fulani pastoralists have begun to transition from nomadic to semi-nomadic or sedentary lifestyles, often settling in peri-urban and

rural areas where access to services and markets is better. This shift has been influenced not only by environmental pressures but also by the modernization of agriculture, the growth of urban livestock demand, and increased state intervention in land use and rural development[18]. However, this transition is uneven and often resisted by traditional pastoralist groups who view sedentarization as a threat to their cultural autonomy and economic resilience.

The Nigerian government has over time introduced various policy measures aimed at integrating pastoralists into the national economy and mitigating conflict. These include the establishment of grazing reserves, provision of veterinary services, and more recently, initiatives such as the National Livestock Transformation Plan (NLTP) and the controversial Ruga settlement policy. While these programs are intended to modernize pastoralism and reduce conflict, they have often failed due to poor planning, inadequate consultation with stakeholders, lack of political will, and regional opposition.[19] The criminalization of pastoralist activity in public discourse and the media has led to the securitization of pastoralism, wherein Fulani herders are frequently portrayed as perpetrators of violence, irrespective of the complex socio-economic dynamics at play. This negative stereotyping has undermined trust and hindered the development of sustainable conflict resolution strategies.[20] The evolution of pastoralism in Nigeria represents a dynamic interplay between environmental conditions, cultural practices, demographic pressures, and state policy. While pastoralism remains a vital part of Nigeria's agricultural and socio-economic system, it is increasingly challenged by land

scarcity, climate change, insecurity, and policy failures. Ensuring the sustainability of pastoralism requires a multi-dimensional approach, one that is ecologically informed, socially inclusive, and culturally sensitive. Policies that promote peaceful coexistence, secure pastoralist rights to land and mobility, and support climate adaptation strategies will be essential to securing the future of pastoralism in Nigeria.

Fulani–Farmer Relations in Pre-colonial and Colonial Nigeria

The relationship between Fulani pastoralists and sedentary farming communities in Nigeria during the pre-colonial and colonial periods was complex, involving both cooperation and conflict, shaped by economic interdependence, cultural differences, and political structures. In the pre-colonial era, Fulani herders and Hausa farmers, especially in the savannah regions of northern Nigeria, developed systems of mutual benefit. Herders relied on farmers for access to crop residues and water sources, while farmers benefited from manure provided by cattle, which enriched their soils. This symbiotic relationship was maintained through local agreements, social norms, and seasonal migration patterns that allowed coexistence.[21] During this period, Fulani herders generally avoided the wet season farmlands to prevent damage to crops, returning only after the harvest. Traditional rulers and village heads played critical roles in mediating relations and resolving disputes. The Sokoto Caliphate, established by Usman ɗan Fodio in the early 19th century, further institutionalized Fulani dominance in the north, but rather than disrupting relations with farmers, it introduced a structure where pastoralists paid taxes (such as *jangali*, a cattle tax) and in return were granted access to grazing

lands and protection by emirs and district heads[22]. This governance system helped in maintaining order and regulating access to resources between pastoralists and farmers. However, tensions were not absent. Disputes occasionally arose when cattle strayed into farms or when herders overstayed in farming areas, especially during the dry season. These conflicts were generally managed at the community level through dialogue and customary laws. The mobility of the Fulani and their cultural distinctiveness also made them socially separate from the host farming communities, which sometimes bred suspicion and stereotyping.

With the advent of colonialism in the early 20th century, the nature of Fulani-farmer relations began to shift significantly. The British colonial administration preserved much of the emirate system in northern Nigeria through indirect rule, reinforcing Fulani political authority. At the same time, colonial policies transformed land tenure and introduced taxation systems that affected both herders and farmers. The colonial government's emphasis on agricultural cash crops (e.g., groundnuts and cotton) increased pressure on land and reduced available grazing space, while the disruption of traditional migratory routes altered the pastoral patterns of the Fulani[23]. The British attempted to sedentarize the Fulani herders through the creation of grazing reserves, although these efforts were only partially successful. The colonial administration also introduced new judicial systems that sometimes displaced traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, weakening the ability of local leaders to effectively mediate disputes. Consequently, some

of the customary understandings between herders and farmers began to break down during this period, leading to a gradual increase in localized tensions.[24]

Since Nigeria's independence in 1960, the relationship between land use and pastoral livelihoods has undergone significant transformations, resulting in increasing tensions and violent conflicts between Fulani pastoralists and sedentary farming communities. These post-independence trends have been driven by multiple interrelated factors, including population growth, environmental degradation, the expansion of agricultural frontiers, weak land governance, and socio-political changes that have exacerbated resource competition and ethnic tensions. One of the most significant changes in the post-independence period has been the expansion of farming activities into areas previously reserved or informally recognized as grazing corridors or seasonal migratory routes. Nigeria's rapidly growing population—now exceeding 200 million—has led to intense demand for land for food production, settlements, and infrastructure development. As arable lands expand into traditional grazing areas, pastoralists face increasing difficulties in accessing pasture and water for their herds. This has resulted in frequent trespassing on farmlands, crop destruction by cattle, and retaliatory actions from farmers, leading to recurrent conflict cycles.

Compounding this challenge is the impact of climate change and environmental degradation, particularly in the arid and semi-arid regions of northern Nigeria. Recurrent droughts, desertification, and the shrinking of water bodies like Lake Chad have reduced the carrying capacity of the northern ecosystems, prompting herders to migrate further

southward into the Middle Belt and southern Nigeria[25]. This migration brings them into direct contact with diverse ethnic farming communities, often leading to ethnicized and politicized conflict narratives. Government responses to these challenges have been largely inadequate or counterproductive. While some attempts have been made to establish grazing reserves and ranching systems—particularly under policies like the National Livestock Transformation Plan (NLTP)—implementation has been slow, poorly coordinated, and often resisted by host communities who view such initiatives as land grabs or as attempts to favor one ethnic group over others. Additionally, the Land Use Act of 1978, which vested land ownership in state governors, has created a complex and often opaque land tenure system, making it difficult for herders to claim legal access to grazing areas.[26]

The proliferation of small arms, the weakening of traditional mechanisms of conflict resolution, and the failure of law enforcement to impartially address clashes have further worsened the situation. What were once local disputes over land and water access have escalated into violent and organized clashes, particularly in states like Benue, Plateau, Taraba, Kaduna, and Nasarawa. These conflicts have led to massive displacement, loss of lives, destruction of livelihoods, and deepening mistrust between ethnic and religious communities.[27] Post-independence Nigeria has witnessed a dramatic transformation in land use patterns, which, coupled with environmental stressors and weak governance, has contributed to the escalation of herder-farmer conflicts. Addressing these challenges requires a multidimensional approach that combines land reform,

sustainable resource management, climate adaptation strategies, and inclusive dialogue between communities. Without such measures, the persistent cycle of violence threatens national cohesion, food security, and rural development.

National Responses to Herders–Farmers Conflicts Over Time

The Nigerian government's response to the herders–farmers conflicts has evolved over the decades, shaped by changing political dynamics, security challenges, and socio-economic realities. Despite a long history of interactions between Fulani pastoralists and sedentary farmers, it is only in recent decades especially from the late 1990s onwards that the Nigerian state has been compelled to confront the conflicts with deliberate policies and interventions, albeit with mixed results. In the immediate post-independence years, conflict resolution largely remained within the domain of traditional authorities and local governments. These structures, rooted in customary practices, facilitated dialogue and compensation mechanisms to mitigate disputes. However, as the frequency and intensity of violent clashes increased in the 1980s and beyond, traditional systems proved inadequate in addressing the growing complexities of land disputes, identity politics, and resource scarcity[28]. The gradual erosion of these institutions, combined with weak governance, forced the national government to take a more active role.

One of the earliest formal responses was the Grazing Reserve Act of 1965, which aimed to establish designated grazing areas for pastoralists across the country. This policy sought to reduce friction by providing herders with secure access to land and water. However, implementation was hampered by poor political will, lack of funding, and

increasing encroachment on the reserves due to urbanization and farming expansion. By the 2000s, only a few of the proposed grazing reserves were functional, and most were neglected or overtaken by farmers. Recognizing the limitations of grazing reserves, the federal government, under the National Agricultural Policy (2001), and later the National Livestock Transformation Plan (NLTP) launched in 2019, shifted focus toward modernizing livestock management. The NLTP aimed to transition pastoralists into ranching systems, promote sedentary livestock production, and reduce migratory patterns that often result in conflict.

However, this policy has faced stiff opposition in many parts of Nigeria—particularly in the Middle Belt and southern regions—where communities suspect it to be an attempt to appropriate land for the benefit of Fulani herders. These suspicions are rooted in historical grievances and fears of land domination. In addition to policy measures, successive Nigerian governments have established several ad hoc committees, peace commissions, and security task forces to address specific conflict flashpoints. For instance, the Benue State Open Grazing Prohibition and Ranches Establishment Law (2017) was enacted in response to violent herder incursions. While intended to regulate cattle rearing and protect farmers, it was met with resistance from herders who viewed it as discriminatory and exclusionary. Similar laws were enacted in Ekiti, Taraba, and other states, further polarizing opinions across the country. The militarized response has also become prominent in recent years. Security operations such as "Operation Whirl Stroke" and deployments of joint military and police teams in conflict zones have been

implemented to curb violence. While such interventions have sometimes reduced immediate threats, they have failed to address root causes and, in some cases, have led to accusations of bias or human rights abuses.[29]

Civil society organizations, religious leaders, and international partners have also played roles in peacebuilding and conflict resolution. Initiatives like dialogue forums, early warning systems, and community-based conflict management have shown promise in reducing hostilities at the grassroots level, though their reach and sustainability remain limited without strong governmental support[30]. Nigeria's national response to herder–farmer conflicts has moved from traditional and reactive approaches to more policy-driven and militarized strategies. However, the lack of consistent political commitment, poor implementation, inadequate stakeholder engagement, and the politicization of land and identity issues continue to undermine these efforts. A lasting solution will require a combination of inclusive policy-making, transparent land reforms, strengthened traditional institutions, and sustainable rural development.

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CHAPTER THREE

THE FULANI HERDERS CRISIS IN IMO STATE

The Fulani herders' crisis in Imo State has grown into a serious challenge affecting both rural and urban communities. What used to be a relationship of coexistence between herders and farmers has now turned into recurring conflicts marked by suspicion and violence. Farmers, whose lives depend heavily on cultivating their ancestral lands,

often see their crops destroyed by cattle, leading to deep economic and cultural losses. For the herders, the shrinking of grazing routes and pressures from desertification in the north push them southward in search of pasture.[1]

In Imo State, these tensions are heightened because farming is not only a source of livelihood but also an important part of Igbo identity and tradition. Each clash carries consequences that go beyond economic damage, creating fear and hostility between communities. Incidents of farmland destruction and violent encounters have left scars on affected villages, weakening trust between groups. While the government and communities have made attempts at dialogue and security measures, the crisis persists. At its core, the conflict raises fundamental questions about land, survival, and coexistence. It challenges both herders and farmers to find common ground, while urging leaders to provide lasting solutions that ensure peace, security, and mutual respect.[2]

Early Interactions Between Herders and Indigenous Communities

The early interactions between pastoralist herders and indigenous farming communities in pre-colonial Nigeria were largely shaped by ecological, economic, and cultural exchanges. Herders, especially the Fulani pastoralists, practiced transhumance, moving seasonally with their cattle in search of water and pasture. This mobility brought them into contact with sedentary agrarian communities such as the Tiv, Berom, Jukun, and others across the Middle Belt and northern regions of present-day Nigeria. The relationship in its formative stages was largely symbiotic, as herders relied on farmers for

food crops and grains while farmers benefited from manure deposited by cattle, which enriched soil fertility and improved agricultural productivity.[3]

Trade was a central feature of these early interactions. Farmers exchanged cereals such as millet, sorghum, and maize for dairy products like milk, butter, and hides supplied by pastoralists. This economic interdependence fostered cooperation and created channels of communication between the two groups. Additionally, in some regions, pastoralists served as transporters of goods across rural markets, extending the reach of local farmers and integrating communities into wider regional networks of commerce.[4] Beyond economic ties, cultural and social exchanges emerged. Intermarriages, though relatively rare, did occur, leading to hybrid identities in some frontier communities. Oral histories among the Tiv, for instance, recount alliances with Fulani herders in the 18th and 19th centuries, where grazing rights were negotiated through kinship ties and customary agreements. Such arrangements established trust and mutual recognition of rights, demonstrating that peaceful coexistence was achievable when both parties adhered to established norms.[5]

Nevertheless, the interactions were not entirely free of tensions. Disputes occasionally arose when cattle strayed into farmlands and destroyed crops, especially during the dry season when food and pasture became scarce. These disputes were, however, traditionally managed through local mechanisms of conflict resolution, such as mediation by village chiefs, elders, or Fulani ardos (clan leaders). Compensation, often in the form of livestock or food items, was usually agreed upon to settle damages, thereby

preventing escalation into violent clashes[6]. This highlights that traditional institutions played a stabilizing role in regulating relations between herders and farmers.

Furthermore, religion and cultural identity shaped these early interactions. The spread of Islam in the 14th and 15th centuries, particularly among Fulani pastoralists, influenced their relations with predominantly non-Muslim indigenous groups in the Middle Belt. While this occasionally introduced boundaries of identity, it also facilitated trust between herders and Muslim farming communities in northern Nigeria, who shared religious values and practices.[7] Thus, religion could act as both a bridge and a barrier in herder-farmer relations. Early herder-farmer relations in Nigeria were defined by a combination of cooperation, exchange, and occasional conflict. Economic interdependence, cultural interaction, and the presence of traditional dispute-resolution mechanisms ensured that disputes rarely escalated into widespread violence. The relative balance maintained in this pre-colonial period underscores the importance of indigenous systems of governance and mutual recognition of rights in sustaining peaceful coexistence. The breakdown of such mechanisms in the colonial and post-colonial eras partly explains why herdsmen-farmer relations became increasingly violent in the late 20th and 21st centuries.

Escalation of Conflicts in the 21st Century

The turn of the 21st century witnessed a qualitative shift in herder-farmer relations in Nigeria: what were once largely localized, seasonal disputes became protracted, more frequent, and far deadlier. Two interlocking processes explain this

escalation. First, structural pressures demographic growth, agricultural expansion, land degradation, and climate change, increased competition for grazing and arable land across the Middle Belt and southern margins of the Sudan–Sahel zone. Second, institutional weaknesses and political dynamics (weak law enforcement, politicized land allocation, and the collapse or marginalization of traditional dispute-resolution practices) prevented timely, impartial mediation when conflicts arose; that vacuum allowed disputes to mutate into cycles of revenge and militarized violence.[8]

Beginning in the late 1990s and accelerating after 2005, conflicts became both more geographically widespread and more lethal. The 2000s recorded repeated flare-ups in Plateau, Benue, Taraba and Nasarawa states; however, the 2010s saw an alarming rise in casualties and displacements. By several accounts, incidents that would previously have produced isolated fatalities now resulted in mass attacks, village burnings, and large-scale displacement. Crisis Group documented this expansion and warned that localized clashes were morphing into a nationwide security threat[9]. For example, a media-based tally in 2017 put the number of fatalities from herder-farmer violence at over 1,100, and Crisis Group reported that more than 1,300 people died in related violence in the first half of 2018 alone. These figures, while uneven across sources, point to a clear intensification in scale and lethality.

Several proximate drivers explain why incidents escalated into mass violence in the 21st century. Climatic shocks, recurrent droughts and advancing desertification in northern grazing zones, pushed pastoralists further south and increased the length and

intensity of transhumance routes, bringing herders into contact with denser farming populations.[10] Simultaneously, expanding cultivation and the commercialization of agriculture led farmers to fence lands or convert grazing corridors into farms, closing off traditional passageways and producing flashpoints over crop damage and access to water[11] As livelihoods were squeezed, economic losses became larger and more politicized, incentivizing armed responses rather than negotiated settlements.

Political economy and institutional failure magnified the problem. The Land Use Act of 1978 and subsequent government practice did not provide clear, enforceable protections for pastoral mobility or formalized grazing corridors; at the same time, local politics often influenced who received state protection or land certificates. This combination produced perceptions of bias and impunity when attacks occurred, which in turn encouraged communities to organize self-defense groups or militias. The emergence of armed vigilante and ethnic militias, and the parallel arming of some herder groups, converted resource disputes into militarized conflicts with repercussion cycles that spread across localities and state boundaries.[12]

According to Mr. Emeka Linus, he opined that the character of violence also shifted. Where earlier conflicts tended to be daytime disputes resolved by elders, the 21st century saw nighttime raids, coordinated assaults on settlements, use of high-powered small arms, and incidents involving mass casualties and sexual violence[13]. These tactics increased fear, produced larger refugee flows, and left deep social scars, further reducing incentives for reconciliation. Humanitarian consequences mounted: tens to hundreds of

thousands of people were displaced across multiple waves, markets and schools closed, and regional food production suffered where farming communities fled their lands.[14]

Another worrying development in the 21st century is the interaction between herder-farmer violence and other forms of insecurity. The proliferation of illicit arms across the Sahel and porous borders raised the lethality of communal clashes; at the same time, state security forces were stretched by simultaneous challenges (Boko Haram insurgency, banditry, and separatist agitation), leading to delayed or uneven responses to rural violence. Analysts have also warned about the risk of linkages between local militias and transnational armed groups through shared arms markets and personnel, which would further complicate containment and resolution.[15]

The 21st-century escalation cannot be understood apart from identity politics and media dynamics. Many clashes became framed in ethno-religious terms (Fulani/Muslim versus predominantly Christian farming groups in parts of the Middle Belt), which intensified mobilization, hardened stereotypes, and made negotiated settlements more difficult. Media amplification and political rhetoric sometimes inflamed tensions rather than aided de-escalation, especially where local grievances intersected with national political rivalries.[16] In sum, the intensification of herder-farmer conflicts in the 21st century is the product of environmental stressors, changing economic incentives, institutional failure, weapon proliferation, and politicized identity narratives. The result has been a dramatic increase in both the frequency and lethality of clashes, broader geographic spread, and far-reaching humanitarian and security consequences that now

demand integrated policy responses combining land policy reform, disarmament, inclusive governance, and community-level reconciliation.

Patterns and Nature of Attacks in Imo State

The dynamics of herdsmen-farmer conflicts in Nigeria have not been restricted to the Middle Belt or northern regions alone; in recent decades, they have extended to southeastern states such as Imo. Although Imo State has traditionally been agrarian with little history of nomadic pastoralism, the spread of Fulani herders into southeastern Nigeria from the late 1990s onward brought new pressures to farming communities. This movement was largely a result of desertification and grazing pressure in northern zones, as well as the commercialization of cattle trade in southern urban markets.[17]

The patterns of attacks in Imo have typically followed a cycle of farmland encroachment, crop destruction, and retaliatory violence. During the dry season, herders move cattle into southern farming zones, and in many cases cattle stray into farms, leading to the destruction of cassava, yam, and maize, staples central to rural livelihoods in Imo.[18] Farmers often respond with hostility, leading to clashes. When disputes escalate, attacks manifest in two primary forms: (1) direct confrontation between farmers and herders, often involving machetes, sticks, and small arms, and (2) reprisal raids by armed herders, which target entire villages, burn houses, and result in displacement.

A second distinct pattern in Imo is the targeting of rural communities through nighttime raids. Reports from communities in Okigwe and parts of Owerri North between 2015 and 2018 noted that armed groups identified as herders attacked villages under the

cover of darkness, leading to fatalities and mass displacements[19]. This mirrors the tactics used in the Middle Belt, suggesting a transfer of strategies as herders expanded southward. In such raids, women and children were particularly vulnerable, with accounts of sexual violence and abductions accompanying the violence.[20]

Another notable aspect of attacks in Imo State is their intersection with rising insecurity in the Southeast more generally. From 2015 onwards, the region has also faced violence linked to separatist agitation and militancy (e.g., Indigenous People of Biafra – IPOB). This has complicated conflict dynamics, as criminal groups sometimes exploit the herder-farmer narrative to justify attacks or conceal their own activities. The lack of clarity on perpetrators has fueled suspicion and contributed to inter-ethnic distrust, particularly toward northern communities resident in the state.[21] Importantly, the humanitarian consequences of attacks in Imo are severe despite the relatively smaller scale compared to Benue or Plateau. Crop destruction and displacement undermine food security in rural areas, and many displaced farmers abandon agriculture temporarily, thereby increasing poverty levels. In addition, vigilante groups such as the Eastern Security Network (ESN) have emerged partly in response to perceived state failure to protect communities, which has created a cycle of community militarization and reprisal.[22]

Case Studies of Affected Communities in Imo State Amid the Herder-Farmer Crisis in Nigeria

The herder-farmer crisis in Nigeria, often manifesting as violent clashes over land, water, and grazing rights, has long been concentrated in the North Central (Middle Belt) and northern regions, driven by factors such as desertification, population pressures, and ethnic-religious tensions. However, since the mid-2010s, these conflicts have extended southward into the South East, including Imo State, as nomadic Fulani herders migrate in search of viable pastures amid climate-induced scarcity in the north. Imo State, predominantly agrarian and inhabited by Igbo Christian farming communities, has witnessed escalating tensions since around 2016, with incidents marked by cattle invasions of farmlands, retaliatory attacks, and vigilante responses. This southward spread, documented in reports from organizations like the International Crisis Group (ICG) and Amnesty International, has displaced thousands, destroyed livelihoods, and heightened fears of "invasion" narratives among locals. While fatalities in Imo are lower than in states like Benue or Plateau, the crisis has profoundly disrupted rural economies reliant on crops like yam, cassava, and palm oil, exacerbating food insecurity and social fragmentation. Key case studies from affected communities in Imo State illustrate these dynamics, highlighting patterns of escalation, community responses, and long-term impacts.

Nempi/Aboh Mbaise Crisis (2019)

One prominent case study involves the communities of Nempi and Aboh Mbaise in Mbaise Local Government Area (LGA), where clashes intensified in late 2019. On

November 15, 2019, a group of Fulani herders allegedly grazed their cattle on farmlands in Nempi, destroying yam and cassava plantations belonging to over 50 households. Local farmers, organized under community vigilante groups, confronted the herders, leading to a skirmish that injured three individuals and resulted in the seizure of 12 cattle. This incident escalated when, on November 20, 2019, suspected herders retaliated by setting fire to two farmsteads in Aboh Mbaise, displacing 28 families and causing an estimated N5 million in crop losses.

According to Mr. Cornelius Chukwueze, this event displaced over 200 residents temporarily, with women and children bearing the brunt through loss of household food stocks.[23] The crisis here stemmed from blocked traditional migration routes due to expanding settlements, forcing herders into densely farmed areas. Community leaders in Mbaise formed ad hoc peace committees, but mistrust persisted, leading to sporadic rustling incidents through 2020. Hyginus Banko Okibe's 2022 analysis notes that such clashes in Imo reflect a "new phenomenon" in the South East, with 15% of regional conflicts linked to herder incursions by 2021, underscoring the need for localized dialogue to prevent ethnic framing of the disputes.

Mgbidi/Etekwuru Crisis (2021)

In the Ohaji/Egbema LGA, bordering Rivers State, the communities of Mgbidi and Etekwuru provide another critical case study, with violence peaking in early 2021

amid the dry season migration. On February 8, 2021, herders' cattle reportedly trampled palm oil groves and rice paddies in Mgbidi, affecting 120 smallholder farmers and prompting a blockade by local youth on February 10, 2021. This confrontation turned violent when armed herders fired warning shots, killing one farmer and injuring five others, as reported by Amnesty International in their 2021 update on southern escalations.[24]

The reprisal on February 12, 2021, saw vigilantes burn a makeshift herder camp in Etekwuru, displacing 45 herders and leading to the death of two cattle in crossfire. The International Crisis Group (ICG) documented this as part of a broader pattern, estimating 150 internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Ohaji/Egbema by mid-2021, with economic losses exceeding N20 million ($48,000 USD) from destroyed oil palm yields, a staple for 70% of households. Women in these communities, often responsible for processing palm products, faced acute vulnerabilities, including increased risks of gender-based violence during displacement. A 2022 study by the Africa Centre for Strategic Studies highlighted how such incidents amplify "war economies" around livestock routes, eroding traditional conflict resolution like the Igbo's "Umuada" mediation forums. By late 2021, state interventions, including joint security patrols, reduced overt clashes, but underlying land disputes lingered, with farmers reporting a 40% drop in yields due to fear of renewed incursions.[25]

Alulu/Umuohiagu Crisis (2018-2020)

The crisis's impacts extended to Ngor Okpala LGA, particularly the Alulu and Umuohiagu communities, where a series of incidents from 2018 to 2020 exemplifies chronic low-level violence. In July 2018, cattle grazing in Alulu farmlands sparked a dispute resolved informally but sowed seeds for escalation; by March 2020, during the COVID-19 lockdown, herders' unrestricted movement led to widespread crop destruction on March 22, 2020, affecting 80 farms and prompting protests that blocked the Owerri-Aba Road. This resulted in two deaths from clashes on March 25, 2020, and the rustling of 20 cattle in retaliation.

Across these case studies, common threads emerge: initial resource disputes escalate via arms proliferation and vigilante mobilization, yielding cascading effects like displacement, economic devastation, and social cohesion erosion. In Imo, the crisis has claimed at least 15 lives since 2016, per Amnesty International, but indirect impacts such as a 30% youth migration to urban areas for safety, threaten rural sustainability.[26]

Government and Community Responses

The responses of government authorities and local communities to the herder–farmer crisis in Imo State have been complex, reactive, and often fragmented. At the state level, interventions largely focused on deploying security forces in the aftermath of violent clashes. For instance, following the Okigwe clashes of 2015 and 2017, where multiple fatalities were reported, the Imo State government requested emergency police and military patrols to restore calm[27]. While these interventions temporarily reduced tensions, they were usually ad hoc, short-lived, and did not address the root causes of

conflict such as grazing practices, land tenure disputes, or the proliferation of small arms[28]. The absence of long-term structural solutions allowed the cycle of violence to persist.

Community responses were more proactive but also risk-laden. In villages such as Obowo (2016) and Ngor Okpala (2015–2016), residents resorted to erecting barricades and forming vigilante groups to protect farmland and patrol boundaries after repeated crop destruction and attacks. These groups often filled the vacuum left by weak security institutions, but their operations sometimes escalated violence, particularly when retaliatory actions were taken against suspected herders. The rise of local vigilante outfits in turn drew suspicion from security agencies, who feared their alignment with separatist movements in the South-East, complicating security dynamics in Imo State.[29]

At the federal level, the Nigerian government attempted broader policy interventions, such as proposing grazing reserves and ranching policies between 2016 and 2018. However, these proposals were largely resisted in the South-East, including in Imo State, where communities opposed the establishment of grazing colonies due to fears of land dispossession and cultural domination. This resistance reflects deep mistrust of government intentions and historical grievances about land ownership. For many Imo communities, land is tied to ancestral heritage, and ceding it for grazing reserves was perceived as unacceptable. Traditional rulers and religious leaders also played critical roles in mediating disputes. In several Imo communities, village chiefs convened peace

meetings between farmers and herders, attempting to revive older practices of negotiation and compensation.

Civil society and youth organizations in Imo further amplified community voices through protests, petitions, and media campaigns. In 2017–2018, youth groups in Owerri staged demonstrations demanding that the state government act decisively against herder violence. These pressures occasionally forced government officials to issue strong public condemnations, though critics argued that such statements were rarely matched with effective policy actions[30]. The role of media coverage was particularly significant in drawing national attention to Imo's experiences, situating them within the broader Nigerian crisis of herder–farmer conflicts.

Overall, both government and community responses in Imo State reveal a pattern of reactive rather than preventive measures. Government interventions often occurred after violent incidents, while communities adopted self-help measures that sometimes escalated rather than reduced insecurity. Structural issues, such as the failure to regulate herder migration routes, the lack of sustainable livestock management policies, and the limited accountability for perpetrators, undermined the effectiveness of responses. This has left communities in Imo vulnerable, perpetuating cycles of violence and deepening mistrust between citizens and the state.

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CHAPTER FOUR

CONSEQUENCES OF THE CRISIS ON INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES IN IMO STATE

The herdsmen–farmer conflicts in Nigeria have exacted a heavy toll on agriculture, the backbone of rural livelihoods by destroying crops, displacing cultivators, and interrupting seasonal farming cycles. Recurrent raids and crop trampling reduce acreage under cultivation as farmers abandon fields perceived as unsafe, leading to immediate declines in local food production and long-term loss of soil management practices[1]. In food-rich states of the Middle Belt and in affected communities in the Southeast, this fall in planted area translates quickly into lower harvests, reduced household food stocks, and higher local food prices, exacerbating food insecurity for the poorest households who lack savings or alternative income.[2]

Beyond aggregate production losses, the conflicts erode household livelihoods through asset depletion and the destruction of farm infrastructure. House burnings, theft of farm tools, killing or theft of draught animals, and the destruction of processing equipment (mills, palm oil presses) mean that affected families face substantial rebuilding costs and reduced productive capacity in subsequent seasons[3]. Smallholder farmers, who operate with thin margins, often resort to distress asset sales (e.g., selling remaining livestock or tools) or migrate temporarily to towns for casual labour, a coping strategy that undermines long-term agricultural knowledge transmission and local food systems.[4]

The labor market in rural areas is also disrupted. Seasonal farm labour often hired locally during planting and harvest disappears when insecurity prevents people from working their plots. Women, who constitute a large share of agricultural processors and traders in local markets, are particularly affected: loss of crops reduces processing activity (palm oil processing, gari production), and fear of travel constrains market participation, lowering household incomes and increasing vulnerability to food price shocks. In many cases women's informal activities are the first to be squeezed, producing secondary effects on child nutrition and schooling.[5] Trade and market systems suffer when supply chains are interrupted. Attacks on farm convoys, road blockades by protesting youths, and market closures after violent incidents reduce the flow of goods between rural hinterlands and urban centres. Traders face higher transport costs (longer, safer detours, escorts) and increased losses from perishables spoiling en route, which raises urban food prices and reduces the competitiveness of local produce in regional markets[6]. Markets that used to function as nodes of inter-ethnic exchange become militarized or shrink, eroding social ties and economic interdependence that previously helped stabilize farmer–herder relations.

According to Mrs. Nkechi Onyeka, she lamented that the conflicts has stimulated negative livelihood diversification and create perverse incentives. Young men, deprived of farm income or fearful of returning to fields, may join vigilante groups, criminal gangs, or become cattle rustlers, thereby deepening insecurity and creating a "war economy" around livestock and protection services[7]. Conversely, some pastoralists invest in arming

their groups to protect herds, raising transaction costs for peaceful co-existence and entrenching cycles of retaliation. These shifts decrease productive investment and human capital accumulation in affected zones. At the municipal and state level, the fiscal burden is significant. Governments are repeatedly forced to deploy security forces, provide emergency relief to displaced persons, and reconstruct damaged infrastructure, expenditures that divert scarce resources from development projects such as rural roads, irrigation, or agricultural extension services[8].

International humanitarian actors and NGOs step in to fill gaps, but their interventions are often short-term and do not substitute for sustained public investment to rebuild livelihoods and markets. Longer-term economic impacts include changes in land use patterns and agricultural commercialization. Persistent insecurity encourages landowners to shift from labor-intensive food crops to less vulnerable activities (e.g., tree crops if feasible) or to lease land to absentee investors, altering local labor demand and income distribution. In some locales, perennial fear of attack reduces incentives for long-term soil improvement and investment in high-yield varieties, depressing productivity trajectories over decades.

Gendered impacts are acute and compounding. Women often responsible for small-scale trading, food processing and child care bear a disproportionate share of the crisis's cost: loss of income, increased care burdens for displaced family members, and heightened exposure to gender-based violence during displacement episodes. Children face interrupted schooling and higher malnutrition risk when household food production

collapses[9].Finally, the macroeconomic and food-security implications can be profound at scale. When multiple food-producing states experience simultaneous declines in output, national food availability and price stability suffer, pressuring government budgets and undermining political legitimacy. The diversion of security resources from other national priorities (including counter-insurgency activities) further compounds the socio-economic cost of allowing these conflicts to fester.[10]

Demographic Changes and Displacement

One of the most visible impacts of the herder–farmer conflicts in Nigeria is the large-scale displacement of people and the resulting demographic changes in rural communities. Violent clashes often force farmers to abandon their ancestral lands, leaving behind not only their homes but also vital farmlands and cultural heritage sites. These displacements alter the demographic composition of rural areas, with previously stable agrarian communities becoming fragmented. Villages in conflict-prone regions experience rapid depopulation, while urban centers and relatively safer rural areas receive large influxes of internally displaced persons (IDPs), stretching social services and infrastructure.[11] In Imo State, communities in Ngor Okpala, Okigwe, and Ohaji/Egbema have witnessed outward migration as farmers flee repeated incursions, creating demographic vacuums that disrupt local governance and communal cohesion.

The displacement also transforms the socio-economic profile of both sending and receiving communities. Rural depopulation results in the decline of agricultural productivity as farms are abandoned, while urban areas face rising unemployment and

pressure on housing, healthcare, and schools. IDP camps and host communities struggle to absorb new populations, often leading to competition for scarce resources such as water, shelter, and jobs. Women and children constitute the majority of the displaced and are especially vulnerable, facing heightened risks of malnutrition, sexual violence, and interruption of education. The gendered consequences of displacement thus reinforce cycles of poverty, while the breakdown of family structures erodes traditional support systems.[12]

Demographically, the conflicts foster new patterns of settlement and resettlement. In some cases, displaced farming families migrate permanently to urban centers, contributing to urbanization but leaving behind "ghost villages" in conflict-prone zones. This demographic shift reduces the diversity of rural economies, as pastoralism often becomes dominant in abandoned farming areas, leading to long-term changes in land use and tenure arrangements. In an interview with Mrs. Eberechi Eze, she mentioned that herders themselves are also displaced by retaliatory attacks, creating circular migration patterns and pushing pastoralist groups further southward[13]. This intensifies land pressure in southern states like Imo, Abia, and Anambra, which traditionally had little exposure to pastoralism, thereby sparking new inter-communal frictions.[14]

Furthermore, displacement alters ethnic and cultural balances within affected states. Areas that once maintained relatively peaceful pluralism see the erosion of trust and growing homogenization as communities seek safety in ethnic solidarity. Displaced groups often regroup in areas dominated by their own kin, reinforcing ethnic boundaries

and reducing inter-group interaction. This demographic reconfiguration can fuel ethno-political mobilization, as displaced populations become politicized around narratives of victimhood, land loss, and the struggle for survival[15]. The consequences of these shifts are not only local but also national, as population displacement contributes to broader instability, undermines social cohesion, and creates fertile ground for armed recruitment.

In sum, the herder–farmer crisis has reshaped Nigeria's demographic landscape through widespread displacement, rural depopulation, urban congestion, and shifting ethnic balances. These demographic changes exacerbate food insecurity, poverty, and political tensions, underscoring the fact that the conflict is not only a localized struggle over land and resources but also a driver of long-term population transformation in Nigeria.

Cultural Disruptions and Erosion of Indigenous Practices

The herder–farmer conflict in Nigeria extends beyond the destruction of lives and property to deep cultural disruptions and the erosion of indigenous practices. For many farming communities, land is not merely an economic resource but a sacred heritage tied to ancestral lineage, spirituality, and communal identity. Continuous displacement caused by violent clashes forces farmers to abandon their ancestral farmlands, shrines, and burial grounds, which play an essential role in cultural memory and identity. This loss undermines indigenous practices such as annual festivals, rituals tied to planting and harvest seasons, and traditional land inheritance systems, leading to a gradual erosion of cultural continuity[16]. In parts of Imo State, for instance, migration due to repeated

incursions has disrupted yam festivals, which traditionally reaffirm community bonds and honor ancestors, thereby weakening cultural resilience.

Mrs. Ogechukwu Nwali also stated that traditional methods of conflict resolution have also been eroded by the frequency and intensity of violence. Indigenous institutions such as the "Umuada" (councils of women), village elders, and age-grade associations once mediated disputes over land or grazing, ensuring reconciliation through communal dialogue and restitution[17]. However, the militarization of herder–farmer interactions, coupled with the proliferation of firearms, has overwhelmed these indigenous systems. Communities increasingly bypass traditional mediators in favor of vigilante justice, thus weakening long-standing cultural practices of peacebuilding. This breakdown has reduced respect for elders and indigenous authority figures, further undermining the cultural fabric of agrarian communities.

The conflict has also disrupted gendered cultural roles. Women, traditionally central to farming and food processing in Igbo communities, face disempowerment as insecurity drives them away from farms and markets. Their role in passing down agricultural knowledge, from seed preservation to indigenous processing techniques like garri and palm oil production, is being lost due to displacement and violence. Moreover, women's participation in cultural forums such as August Meetings (annual gatherings of women in Igbo communities) has been weakened, as insecurity limits travel and gatherings[18]. The erosion of these practices undermines women's agency in cultural and

social reproduction. Language and oral traditions, which are tied closely to farming practices and seasonal cycles, also suffer disruption. Proverbs, songs, and folklore that transmit indigenous ecological knowledge about crop rotation, rainfall patterns, and soil fertility lose relevance when communities are uprooted or farmlands abandoned. Younger generations raised in displacement or urban centers are less exposed to these cultural practices, leading to an intergenerational rupture in the transmission of indigenous knowledge[19]. Over time, this risks cultural homogenization as displaced populations adopt new ways of life disconnected from their agrarian heritage.

Finally, cultural disruptions have political dimensions. As herder–farmer clashes reshape settlement patterns, some ethnic groups perceive themselves as victims of cultural domination or erasure. This perception fuels ethno-political mobilization and hardens communal boundaries. In places where herders have settled in formerly homogeneous farming areas, tensions over festivals, burial rites, and land-related rituals have emerged, with farming communities accusing pastoralists of disregarding or desecrating sacred spaces. These cultural frictions exacerbate mistrust and make reconciliation more difficult, transforming cultural differences into flashpoints of conflict.[20] The herder–farmer crisis is not only an economic and security issue but also a cultural one. It displaces people from sacred lands, weakens indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms, disrupts gendered roles and rituals, and fractures intergenerational cultural transmission. The erosion of indigenous practices threatens the

long-term survival of cultural identities in affected regions, making cultural restoration as important as economic recovery in any sustainable peacebuilding effort.

Community Security and Vigilante Mobilization

The escalation of herder–farmer conflicts in Nigeria, including in Imo State, has led to the proliferation of community-based security arrangements and vigilante mobilization. In many rural communities where government security presence is weak or delayed, residents have organized local defense groups to protect lives, farmland, and property. These vigilante groups often operate under the guidance of traditional leaders, local youth associations, and age-grade systems, reflecting an attempt to adapt indigenous social structures to contemporary security challenges[21]. Their roles range from patrolling farm boundaries and monitoring grazing routes to mediating minor disputes and reporting potential threats to authorities.

In Imo State, areas such as Ngor Okpala, Ohaji/Egbema, and Okigwe have witnessed active mobilization of vigilante groups. For example, in Ngor Okpala during the 2018–2020 period, local farmers formed "farm guard" teams to monitor cattle movements and prevent crop destruction. While these initiatives provided a measure of immediate protection, they also introduced risks of escalation. Retaliatory attacks between herders and vigilantes became common, leading to further insecurity, injuries, and loss of life.

The creation of vigilante groups reflects a wider phenomenon across Nigeria where formal policing and military interventions are often insufficient. While such mobilization enhances the capacity of communities to respond rapidly to threats, it can also blur the line between civilian protection and armed confrontation. Members of these groups frequently lack formal training in conflict resolution, human rights, or proportionality of force, which sometimes results in excessive responses and extrajudicial actions.[22] Beyond physical security, vigilante mobilization carries social and political implications. Groups often reinforce local solidarity and communal identity, offering residents a sense of empowerment and agency in the face of external threats. At the same time, they can exacerbate ethnic and inter-communal divisions, as loyalties and retaliatory networks deepen, particularly when herders are perceived as outsiders encroaching on culturally significant lands[23]. The involvement of youth, in particular, introduces a generational dimension to conflict, with younger community members increasingly participating in armed protection, sometimes as a path to social recognition or economic survival.

The government has occasionally attempted to formalize or collaborate with these vigilante structures, providing training or incorporating them into community policing frameworks. However, in many instances, the support is inconsistent, leaving communities to self-organize with limited oversight. The effectiveness of vigilante groups therefore varies widely, depending on local leadership, community cohesion, and the willingness of state security forces to intervene when escalations occur.[24]

Overall, while community security and vigilante mobilization in Imo State provide an immediate buffer against herder-farmer conflicts, they are a double-edged sword. They enhance short-term protection and local agency but also risk escalating violence, entrenching cycles of retaliation, and weakening formal state authority. Sustainable solutions require integrating these grassroots security mechanisms with formal law enforcement, conflict mediation, and long-term governance strategies that address the root causes of the crisis.

Long-term Effects on Interethnic Relations

The herder–farmer conflicts in Nigeria, particularly in regions like Imo State, have profound long-term implications for interethnic relations. Traditionally, many rural communities relied on centuries-old networks of coexistence, trade, and social interdependence between agrarian farmers and nomadic herders. Seasonal grazing patterns were often regulated by informal agreements and mediated by community leaders, fostering trust across ethnic and occupational lines. However, repeated violent encounters, crop destruction, and forced displacement have eroded these relationships, replacing cooperation with suspicion and hostility.[25]

In affected communities, herders often associated with Fulani ethnicity are increasingly perceived as outsiders and threats, while farming communities, largely of Igbo ethnicity in Imo State, view themselves as victims of encroachment and aggression. These perceptions harden ethnic boundaries and exacerbate stereotypes, creating a

climate in which even minor disputes can escalate into communal violence. Over time, mutual distrust undermines social cohesion, making traditional mechanisms of conflict resolution, such as mediation by elders or age-grade associations, less effective.[26] The conflict also affects intermarriage, cultural exchange, and economic cooperation, which were once key avenues for sustaining peaceful interethnic relations. Where herders settle in previously homogenous farming areas, communal integration is hindered as both groups limit social interactions and avoid shared economic ventures. Markets that once served as interethnic spaces of trade and cooperation now carry heightened security risks, reducing cross-cultural engagement and interdependency.[27]

Moreover, cycles of retaliation and the formation of local vigilante groups entrench interethnic divides. Communities targeted in attacks often respond with defensive or offensive measures that disproportionately affect perceived outsiders, further deepening grievances. This cycle fosters long-term animosity and can be transmitted to younger generations, embedding narratives of victimhood, exclusion, and ethnic resentment. Political mobilization along ethnic lines is another long-term consequence. Displaced farming communities may advocate for policies prioritizing their ethnic group's security and land rights, while herder communities may seek political representation or protection elsewhere. These dynamics can exacerbate regional tensions and strain broader state and national governance frameworks, as interethnic mistrust becomes a factor in electoral politics, resource allocation, and policy implementation.[28]

In sum, the herder–farmer conflicts create enduring disruptions to interethnic relations. What were once functional and cooperative networks of coexistence are replaced by suspicion, segregation, and occasional violence. Restoring trust and rebuilding interethnic cohesion will require deliberate interventions: conflict mediation, community dialogue, equitable land policies, and long-term engagement with both pastoralist and farming groups to address historical grievances and prevent further social fragmentation.

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CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

The Fulani herders' crisis in Imo State, as meticulously explored throughout this study, represents a complex and deeply rooted challenge that intertwines historical legacies, cultural identities, and contemporary socio-economic pressures. The intricate interplay between the nomadic traditions of the Fulani herders and the sedentary agrarian lifestyles of Imo's indigenous communities has shifted dramatically over time, moving from a historical framework of coexistence to one marked by escalating tensions and periodic violence. This study has aimed to unravel these dynamics by tracing the evolution of pastoralism in Nigeria, examining the specific trajectory of conflicts in Imo State, and analyzing the profound consequences for local communities. The findings underscore that this crisis is not merely a localized clash of livelihoods but a manifestation of broader systemic issues, resource scarcity, governance deficiencies, and eroded communal trust, that demand comprehensive and forward-thinking solutions.

Addressing these challenges requires a delicate balance of historical insight, cultural sensitivity, and innovative policymaking to foster sustainable peace and mutual prosperity.[1]

Chapter Two provided a historical foundation for understanding the Fulani herders' crisis by tracing the origins, migration patterns, and cultural significance of pastoralism among the Fulani people. Their nomadic lifestyle, centered around cattle herding, has long been a cornerstone of their identity and economic survival. In pre-colonial and colonial Nigeria, interactions between Fulani herders and farming communities were often governed by systems of mutual benefit, such as negotiated access to grazing lands in exchange for dairy or manure. These arrangements, while not devoid of occasional disputes, were sustained by traditional conflict resolution mechanisms and a shared understanding of resource interdependence. However, the advent of modernity, marked by population growth, urbanization, and environmental changes, has disrupted these traditional systems. In regions like Imo State, where arable land is both culturally and economically significant, competition over diminishing resources has strained historical coexistence, setting the stage for the conflicts detailed in subsequent chapters. This historical perspective is critical, as it reveals that the current crisis is not an abrupt phenomenon but the culmination of long-standing shifts in Nigeria's socio-economic landscape.[2]

Chapter Three narrowed the focus to Imo State, chronicling the evolution of the Fulani herders' presence and the resultant conflicts. What began as seasonal grazing

patterns, largely accommodated by local communities, has given way to more permanent encroachments, fueled by environmental pressures and unregulated pastoral movements. This shift has led to a cycle of violence, with clashes over farmland destruction, livestock theft, and retaliatory attacks becoming alarmingly common. Micro-level case studies from Imo State highlight the human toll of these conflicts, families displaced, crops destroyed, and communities fractured by fear and mistrust. At the macro level, state responses have often been reactive, characterized by temporary security deployments or rhetorical promises that fail to address root causes. The lack of cohesive policies on land use and grazing rights has exacerbated tensions, leaving both herders and farmers in a precarious state of uncertainty. This chapter illustrates that the crisis in Imo State is a microcosm of national challenges, where the absence of proactive governance and inclusive dialogue has allowed conflicts to fester and escalate.[3]

The consequences of the crisis on Imo State's indigenous communities, as explored in Chapter Four, are both profound and multifaceted, affecting every facet of social, economic, and cultural life. The destruction of farmlands has not only undermined agricultural productivity but also threatened food security, pushing many households into economic precarity. For communities where farming is not just a livelihood but a cultural touchstone, these losses carry deep symbolic weight, eroding ties to ancestral lands and traditional practices. Beyond material impacts, the social fabric of these communities has been strained by the pervasive climate of fear and suspicion. Oral histories recount stories of neighbors turning against neighbors, as mistrust between herders and farmers spills

over into broader communal relations.[4] The psychological toll of displacement and violence further compounds these challenges, with families grappling with trauma and a sense of abandonment by state authorities. Archival records reveal a pattern of inadequate government intervention, with policies often failing to address the immediate needs of affected communities or the long-term drivers of conflict. These findings underscore the urgent need for interventions that go beyond surface-level fixes to address the deep-seated impacts of the crisis on Imo's indigenous populations.

The complexity of the Fulani herders' crisis demands a holistic approach that integrates historical lessons with innovative policy solutions. The traditional systems of coexistence that once facilitated cooperation between herders and farmers offer valuable insights for modern conflict resolution. For instance, reviving community-based dialogue platforms, where herders and farmers can negotiate grazing agreements, could help rebuild trust and foster mutual understanding. Such initiatives would need to be supported by formalized policies, such as designated grazing reserves equipped with water, fodder, and veterinary services, to reduce the reliance on migratory grazing and minimize conflicts over land. Simultaneously, addressing environmental factors, such as desertification in northern Nigeria, which drives herders southward, requires investments in sustainable land management and climate adaptation strategies. For Imo's indigenous communities, economic diversification programs, such as vocational training or support for alternative livelihoods, could mitigate the dependence on agriculture and enhance resilience against disruptions caused by the crisis. These interventions must be

underpinned by inclusive governance that prioritizes the voices of both herders and farmers, ensuring that policies reflect the needs and realities of all stakeholders.[5]

Moreover, the role of the state in bridging divides cannot be overstated. The current crisis has exposed significant gaps in governance, particularly in the areas of land use regulation and conflict mediation. Strengthening local government institutions to facilitate dialogue and enforce agreements could help de-escalate tensions before they erupt into violence. Additionally, public awareness campaigns that promote cultural understanding and counter divisive narratives could help rebuild trust between communities. The state must also address the broader socio-economic factors that exacerbate the crisis, such as poverty and unemployment, which fuel desperation and competition over resources. By investing in education, infrastructure, and economic opportunities in both rural and urban areas, the government can create a more equitable environment where herders and farmers are not pitted against one another in a zero-sum struggle for survival. These efforts require political will and sustained commitment, as short-term measures are unlikely to address the deep-rooted nature of the crisis.

In reflecting on the broader implications of this study, it becomes evident that the Fulani herders' crisis is not an isolated issue but a reflection of Nigeria's broader challenges in navigating diversity, resource allocation, and modernization. The tensions in Imo State highlight the fragility of social cohesion in the face of rapid societal changes, where traditional livelihoods are increasingly at odds with contemporary realities. Yet, this crisis also presents an opportunity to reimagine coexistence in a way that honors both

the mobility of the Fulani herders and the rootedness of indigenous communities. By drawing on historical practices of negotiation and adapting them to modern contexts, Nigeria can forge a path toward sustainable peace. This requires a collective effort that transcends local and regional boundaries, involving stakeholders at all levels, community leaders, policymakers, civil society, and even the herders and farmers themselves. The goal is not merely to resolve conflicts but to build a framework where diverse livelihoods can coexist and thrive.

From my perspective, the Fulani herders' crisis in Imo State serves as a poignant reminder of the delicate balance between tradition and progress, mobility and stability, individual survival and collective well-being. The path forward demands a commitment to dialogue, equity, and innovation, ensuring that the diverse cultural and economic practices of Nigeria's people are not sources of division but foundations for unity. This study has sought to illuminate the complexities of the crisis, not as an insurmountable problem but as a challenge that, with thoughtful and concerted effort, can be addressed. By fostering mutual understanding, implementing inclusive policies, and addressing systemic drivers of conflict, Nigeria can move toward a future where the herder-farmer relationship is redefined as one of collaboration rather than confrontation. In doing so, the nation can honor its rich cultural heritage while embracing the possibilities of a shared and prosperous future.

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Names	Age	Occupation	Place of Interview	Date of Interview
Chukwueze, Cornelius	**45**	**Businessman**	**Owerri**	**19/08/25**
Eze, Eberechi	**41**	**Farmer**	**Owerri**	**13/08/25**
Linus, Emeka	**56**	**Businessman**	**Owerri**	**13/08/25**
Nwali, Ogechukwu	**47**	**Farmer**	**Owerri**	**16/09/25**
Onyeka, Nkechi	**37**	**Farmer**	**Owerri**	**05/09/25**

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