

Herdsmen as the Spiritual Arm of Fulani Expansionist Quest: A Threat to Integration in Nigeria

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Abstract: Most scholars have often interpreted herdsmen attacks on farmers in Nigeria from myriads of standpoints. However, this paper situates the herdsmen as the spiritual arm of Fulani expansionist mission in Nigeria while not down-playing other arguments. The paper further argues that the recent spate of Fulani migration into the northern, north-central and Southern parts of Nigeria in search of grazing land is an attempt to actualize the age long agenda of islamizing Nigeria. The paper adopts the expansionism theory which advocates aggressive policy of territorial or economic expansion. Using also both primary and secondary data, the paper reveals that herdsmen attacks is a continuation of the Fulani expansion which began in the 14th and 15th centuries particularly in West and Central Africa and 19th century in Nigeria. To save the nation from chaos and disintegration due to this untoward Fulani territorial acquisition, the paper recommends the enforcement of measures like declaring the move as terrorism and the application of extant laws on the perpetrators as terrorists.

Keywords: Spiritual arm, Fulani expansionism, grazing lands, resource control, national integration.

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Introduction

Nigeria is a multi-lingual as well as multi-ethnic and multi-religious country with diverse methods of self-sustenance. While some citizens are sedentary farmers, others are pastoralists. The two depend on land for their various economic engagements. The relationship between the two groups in recent times has long been conflict-ridden, posing an enormous challenge to the cordial intergroup relations, a necessary prerequisite for national growth, in contemporary Nigeria. This worsening relationship is a subject which historians must interrogate and address as a matter of priority. Obara Ikime suggests that “Historians should seek to address themselves to some broader issues related to the problems with which our nation has to contend”. The onus is on historians, in fact, a burden on the one hand, by virtue of their chosen profession, and a duty on the other, as citizens of the country to address the issues.

The call to duty on historians, of for nothing else, comes from the unpleasant appellation of Nigeria as the “poverty capital of the world” to xenophobic attacks cum the terrorism in the Lake Chad Basin, kidnapping, banditry as well as the heightened Fulani herdsmen vis-a-vis farmers’ conflict in Nigeria, which could be encapsulated in one word as insecurity, has assumed frightening dimensions in the country. More appalling is that, the government whose primary responsibility is security of lives and property appeared overwhelmed and suffocated. In some scenarios, government’s actions or inactions have given rise to some conspiracy theory of a tacit support towards a certain group to achieve a particular agenda.

This line of reasoning cannot be completely dismissed when phrases like “your land or your life” and “learn to live with your neighbours” statements in the face of mass murder credited to some political aides of Nigeria’s president are put into proper perspective. This is what has informed the research: “herdsmen as spiritual arm of Fulani expansionist quest and the threat to national integration”.

It must be noted that “spiritual” as used in this paper does not connote the lexical meaning of dealing with the human soul but of religion. It has to do more with people’s belief system. This perspective has become necessary because, according to Ikime in the preface to his book, *Can Anything Good Come Out of History?*

The issues which the historian decides to concentrate on are thrown up by the challenges which confront the society in which he/she lives, as well as the age in which he/she lives... The historian does not ply his profession *invacuo*. He or she writes knowing that what he or she writes is of value to his or her nation, in the first instance, and then to the wider world (Ikime, xi).

It is worrisome that while most African countries are making progress, Nigeria seems inundated with the issue of herdsmen’s murderous activities in the guise of searching for lush pasture. The broader issues to which Nigeria as a country is confronted with today call for concern among scholars and historians alike. These issues have threatened and still threaten the fabric of Nigeria’s existence. At the zenith of these challenges is the barbarism associated with killings of indigenous peoples in Kaduna, Kogi, Taraba, Benue, Adamawa, Delta and even Enugu states, in the guise of the search for grazing land. This has become recurrent in some parts of Nigeria today. This barbarism has been shrouded in the mask of the struggle for grazing land. In fact, it appears the premium herdsmen placed on their cattle is more than that of a human life. For example, a Fulani herdsman was quoted to have said:

Our herd is our life because to every nomad life is worthless without his cattle. What do you expect from us when our source of existence is threatened? The encroachment of grazing fields and routes by farmers is a call to war (Hame Saidu, a Pastoralist, Wuse, 2009-IRIN, 2009).

The above explains why the survival of their herds is of utmost importance than that of farmers and they care less when farmers’ crops are consumed by their herds. Obviously, it is not all herdsmen and cattle owners that are of Fulani ethnic group.

The overwhelming percentage of them are Fulani divided into town Fulani (residents in urban areas, mostly the cow owners), and Bush Fulani (those who live in the bushes and take the cattle out for grazing). They are found at various locations in Nigeria. The Table below is a representation of some pastoralists groups and their locations in Nigeria.

Table 1. Some Pastoral Groups and their Locations in Nigeria

S/N	Group	Location
1	ARAB	
	Baggara	South of Geidam
	Shuwa	Eastern Borno/Cameroun
2	FULBE	
	Anagamba	North-eastern Borno
	Bokoloji	Northern Borno
	Maare	South-eastern Borno
	Sankara	Southwestern Borno
	Wodaabe	Northeastern Nigeria
3	KANURI	
	Badawi	Central Borno
	Kanuri	Borno
	Koyam	South-central Borno
	Manga	North-west Borno
	Mober	North-eastern Borno/Niger
	Kanembu	
	Kuburi	Extreme north-eastern Borno Niger
	Sugurti	Lake Chad shore
Adapted and modified from Agbegbedia, 2015.		

The Table above reveals that herding cattle is not the exclusive preserve of the Fulani. Migrant pastoralists in Nigeria are made up of many ethnic groups and the largest being the Fulbe or Fulani; constituting over 90%. The Fulani pastoralists are the aggressive lot who place a higher premium on their cattle than human lives. They express it as quoted earlier, “Our herd is our life because to every nomad, life is worthless without his cattle” (cited in Abbas, 331). In a nutshell, the Fulani man’s life is dependent on cattle ownership. The Fulani are well integrated amongst the sedentary Hausa farmers, who emigrated into Northern Nigeria from the Senegambia Valley several centuries ago (Adebayo, 1995 cited in Abbas, M.I. 331).

It is equally expedient to state here that in some locations, the Fulani people have co-existed with their host communities with relative peace. A careful study of their migration into Hausaland before 1804 was similarly a peaceful affair. The peaceful nature of migrant Fulani nevertheless changed beginning from the Jihad masterminded by Uthman dan Fodio in 1804. Thus, historians have over the years analyzed the ascendancy of Fulani in Hausa land and other parts of northern Nigeria which began as not only a religious venture, but more importantly, a struggle aimed at political and socio-economic control. Today, irrespective of their minority status, the hegemony of the Fulani in the North West and most states in north east and north central Nigeria cannot be denied.

Hitherto, Fulani migration into the Middle Belt and Southern States of Nigeria were predominantly cloned in the search of grazing pasture which occasionally was propelled by dry season up north and the greener and lush pasture down south and they will return to the north when rainy season starts. However, in recent times, a new twist has emerged were some Fulani are being referred to as Fulani of the South East, Benue, Kogi, Plateau and southern Kaduna. We now have Fulani groups who claimed that they are aborigines to some states in the north central and some states in the south.

As we shall see shortly, Fulani migration, settlement, penetration, ascendancy and activities in Nigeria in particular and West Africa in general lay credence to the standpoint that recent activities of herdsmen around the North Central States of Benue, Kogi, Plateau and southern Kaduna, Taraba, Adamawa and some part of southern Nigeria are geared towards territorial expansion. This, however, is not to gloss over the point that there are genuine and peaceful herdsmen.

The Fulani: An Etymological Explication

According to Hampshire, the word *Fulani* is a Hausa term, which is also commonly used in English to describe the Fulani ethnic group. He further stressed that with the exception of Nigeria, most Fulani who live in Francophone West Africa, who are widely known by the French term as *Peul* or *Peulh*. In the westernmost parts of the Sahel that includes Senegal, Gambia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea, they are called *Fula* (Hampshire, 656). Adebayo also corroborated Hampshire's position pointing out that:

The fair-skinned people who inhabit the Sudan fringes of west Africa stretching from the Senegal valley to the shores of Lake Chad and who speak the language known as Fulfulde, are known by many names.¹ They call themselves Fulbe (singular, Pullo). They are called Fulani by the Hausa of Nigeria, and this name has been used for them throughout Nigeria. The British call them Ful, Fulani, or Fula, while the French refer to them as Peul, Peulh, or Poulah. In Senegal, the French also inadvertently call them Toucouleur or Tukolor. The Kanuri of northern Nigeria call them Fulata or Felata (1).

From the above, it is expedient to note that the varieties of names given to the Fulani in different countries indicate the extent of their geographical spread. The Fulani are distributed over a very large geographical area, essentially spanning the West African Sahel, from Senegal and the Gambia, as far as Chad and the Sudan. There are Fulani in every West African state, but in each country they constitute a minority of the population (Dupire, 1970; Riesman, 1992 cited in Hampshire, 656). The Fulani language is classified within the Atlantic branch of the Niger-Congo language family. They constitute the fourth-largest ethnic group in Nigeria with an estimated population of over seven million (Burton, 2016 cited in Oli, 31).

History of Fulani Migration and Expansion in Nigeria

Intra and inter-country movements of people have become a common feature of sub-Saharan African people (Adepoju, 298). This is to say that in times past and even now, migration has been a way of life. On the migration of the Fulani into Nigeria, some scholars, perhaps due to lack of evidence, could not assign any precise date of their migration into Nigeria. For instance, Aremu posits that the Fulani were said to have migrated over the centuries from Futa-Toro area of Senegal and had settled in towns and villages of north-western Hausaland (Robinson, 2004 cited in Aremu, 1,2).

Nwabara on the other hand believes that:

The precise date of the Fulani appearance on the Nigerian scene is uncertain, but it would appear that they entered northern Nigeria in small packets. One of the important groups appears to have come from the direction of Melli and got itself established in Sokoto, while others, it would seem, settled in Bornu, Adamawa, and Hausa land. By the 14th century, the Fulani chiefs, already versed in the art of "stooping to conquer", had secured important administrative offices in Zaria and other states long before the Jihad (232).

It is important to state here that the migration of the Fulani was different from their desire for expansion. While migration was normal and peaceful, their quest for expansion was a product of a religious war known as the jihad in 1804. It is also interesting to note that at the nucleus of the Fulani Jihad in Nigeria was Uthman dan Fodio, who was believed to have been born in 1754 (Fage 200; Crowder & Abdullahi, 83) in Marata, Gobir, to the Toronkawa tribe of Fulani descent (Milsome,1). His descent has been traced to one Mura Jakolo or Jakalo, who had migrated to Gobir from Futa-Toro at around the 15th century.

Uthman dan Fodio's ancestors were also believed to have settled originally in Konni before they eventually migrated to Degel. The above exposition has become necessary given the background information about the Fulani people in Nigeria and West Africa in general.

The Toronkawa, described by Hunwick as a "missionary tribe", had an ancient tradition of Islamic learning and piety (293). Boyd and Shagari also corroborated the above positions when they averred that:

Uthman Dan Fodio, the founder of the Sokoto caliphate in northern Nigeria, was himself a descendant of the Fulani herdsmen who promoted Islamic *Jihad*. Dan Fodio was born in Maratta, Sokoto State, but belonged to the clan of Fulani herdsmen known as the Toronkawa. He was brought up in Degel, a little village whose inhabitants had mostly migrated from Futa Toro in Senegal, which is why they are called Toronkawa, literally, the people of Toro (Boyd and Shagari, 2).

Despite their migration and settlement that lasted for over three to four centuries, the Fulani founded no state of their own. They were to be in little communities mostly as cattle breeders all over the great Savannah belt of Nigeria and West Africa. They moved around and were generally very devout Muslims and very cosmopolitan. It was they who saw in the revolt led by Uthman dan Fodio their chance to establish hegemony over the Hausa States, where hitherto they had been a tolerated minority (Ade Ajayi, 8).

Ade Ajayi observes that, though the jihad received the mass support of many Hausa, Tuareg, Nupe, Yoruba and other peoples, the town Fulani remained firmly in control. Of the 14 flag bearers, all but one were Fulani (8). Ajayi further stressed that:

Uthman gave green flags to the most trusted of his followers and to leaders of the different Fulani communities from far and near, commissioning them to raise armies and prosecute the holy war in different places. Wherever they succeeded, they were to become Emirs, rule according to orthodox doctrine and seek to expand the frontiers of Islam. One after the other, the Hausa states began to fall: Zaria in 1804; Kano, Daura and Bauchi the following year. Katsina and Gobir, not without resistance, also began to crumble.... Local Fulani leaders extended the Jihad to Adamawa, Nupe and Ilorin. Even the Old Muslim Kingdom of Borno was threatened as Mallams, Zakis and Mukhtar rallied the local Fulani community against the government of the Mai. Borno did not succumb (6).

As stated earlier, the rise, expansion and the hegemonic status of the Fulani was strictly a product of the Sokoto Jihad of 1804, although non-Fulani groups were part of the Fulani struggle, they were nonetheless the "useful idiots" who were soon discarded once the Fulani religious, political and socio-economic goals were achieved. As stated elsewhere in this paper, though the Fulani constitutes the minority groups in most states of the north, they nevertheless dominated the political landscape of not only the north but also Nigeria.

The area known today as the northern region of Nigeria is three times the size of the other three regions- South-East, South-South and South-West regions combined. It includes some portion of the Western Sudan- the Sudan in general being the belt stretching across Africa south of the Sahara. Traditionally, this area has constituted a route of infiltration into West Africa, along with trans-Saharan routes from the north and northwest. As a result of such infiltration, a section of the people in northern Nigeria was brought into direct contact with the Mediterranean civilization, a contact which greatly affected the history of the Hausa Kingdom (Nwabara, 231).

Herdsmen as Spiritual Wing of Fulani Expansionist Agenda

Kingdoms that accommodated Fulani herdsmen in the past were eventually overthrown by the Fulani. In all situations, these herdsmen took up arms and fought for a Fulani leader to overthrow the kingdoms that accommodated them and their cattle... (Femi Fani Kayode).

In 2015, the Global Terrorism Index rated Fulani herdsmen as the fourth deadliest terror group in the world. The conflict between herdsmen and farmers is known to have a long and brutal history not only in Nigeria, but also in West and Central Africa (Nasir, <https://www.thecable.ng/228912-2>). The classification was as a result of the group's murderous activities for having accounted for about 1,229 deaths in 2014 (Oli *et al.*, 31). Despite the above classification of Fulani herdsmen, most scholars have narrowed down the narrative of herdsmen attack on farmers in Nigeria today to a conflict that revolves around the struggle for resources. A few of those perspectives will suffice. Okolifor instance, sees herdsmen attacks as a consequence of ecological contestation (Okoli, 22). Oli *et al.*, observed that herdsmen-farmers conflict basically centred around resource conflict when they averred that "some of the factors that usually led to clashes were limited or unavailability of sufficient resources like grazing fields, farm lands, destruction or grazing on crops, long-standing disagreements, lack of access to farm or grazing fields and scarcity of fresh water"(30). In the same vein, Abbas submits that:

The continuing Fulani Pastoralists' militancy for the survival of their cattle makes fierce struggle and violent conflicts with farmers inevitable. As Farmers continuously encroach into the grazing routes, they leave the Fulani with no alternative to neither retreat nor surrender. The traditional practices that focus on the close integration between raising of livestock and enhanced farming have posed serious dialectics in the dynamic relationships between pastoralists and farmers in Northern Nigeria. (331)

Enor *et al.* maintain that, "Herdsmen attacks have been, and are still primarily anchored on resource conflicts, that is, the fight for land and water resources (281). However, they maintained that viewing herdsmen attacks solely as an issue of resource conflict is simply to trivialize other elements of their attacks such as acts of terror and criminality (282). However, in a more comprehensive analysis, Nasir enhances the argument further when she argued that:

The first possible line of thought could be the competition over resources, including land and water. The conflicts are fuelled by the herdsmen's quest for grazing field, but here is the sad thing: the pattern of attacks over the years have shown to be a complex mix of politics, identity, religion, terrorism and criminality (<https://www.thecable.ng/228912-2>).

It is in respect of the above that this paper introduces another perspective to the discourse on herdsmen-farmers conflict. This position views herdsmen as the spiritual wing of a quest for Fulani expansion and domination.

To lay credence to this standpoint, an analysis will be necessary. In their *The History of Islam in Africa*, Levtzion and Pouwels observe that on the surface of who the herdsmen really are, they could simply be seen as a people who are so often constantly in search of greener pasture for feeding their herds. They are equally viewed as people whose life, survival and tradition is encapsulated in the value attached to the herds, and the capacity they retain to protect their way of life. On the contrary, they aver that:

On the flip side of history, it must be taken into consideration that herdsmen in Africa have always played an important role in Islamic jihad. The role they play show that their use of terror is pre-meditated, justified by religious ideology and sometimes politically motivated, depending on the place, time and socio-political context (2).

Herdsmen's violent activities across the breadth and width of Nigeria clearly reminisce the Jihad of 1804 and bear the mark of expansionist tendencies. According to Abdulbarkindo *et al.*,

Christians have been killed, injured and displaced. Christians have seen their villages, farms and houses taken over by the Muslim herdsmen. As referenced in the Nasarawa report, a Hausa-Fulani Muslim nomad is reported to have argued: “*Komai na Allah ne. Ko wane fili na Allah ne, ba naku ba, ba na kafirai ba, na Allah ne*”. (Translation: Everything belongs to Allah. Every piece of land belongs to Allah and not you, it is not for you infidels but for Allah.) (31).

In the same vein, Jang, the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and Birom Educational and Cultrual Organisation (BECO) decried the killings in Plateau State. Jang described the killings as “heinous crimes against his people, genocide, and an attempt to forcefully take over and occupy the ancestral land of the Birom nation”. His position is further strengthened by the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), which also described it as a deliberate attempt to conquer and occupy the land of the people's ancestral heritage. The BECO also shares the same view, noting that it had addressed the media over three different occasions where it cried out to the state and federal governments that the Fulani have driven out the Biroms from over 10 of their villages and farms, and are now forcefully occupying them, but nothing has been done (*Adinoyi*, <https://allafrica.com/stories>).

Onwuka has equally expressed worry believing that the Fulani were being treated as extraordinary Nigerians when he averred that:

Buhari's latest action seems to have confirmed the fear, as expressed by many including former president Olusegun Obasanjo, that current government has a grand “Fulanisation” agenda. In Plateau State, for example, where there was ethnic violence for many years, the reason was that some people who settled in Plateau State some 100 years ago eventually saw themselves as owners of the land and began a contest with indigenes. This led to years of killings that turned a once peaceful Jos into an unsafe place (Onwuka, <https://punchng.com/treating-the-fulani-as-extraordinary-nigerians/>).

The above narrative also lays credence to the standpoint that sees the herdsmen as the spiritual arm of Fulani quest for territorial expansion. Again, Akinyetun argues that, herdsmen violence among indigenous groups especially across Nigeria in recent times has also been geared towards the fulfillment of Fulani expansionist quest which was a vision of Ahmadu Bello. Quoting Ahmadu Bello, he maintains that:

The new nation called Nigeria should be an estate of our great grandfather Uthman Dan Fodio. We must ruthlessly prevent a change of power. We use the minorities in the north as willing tools and the south as a conquered territory and never allow them to rule over us and never allow them to have control over their future. (40)

From the above narratives, it is safe to say that herdsmen murderous activities in Nigeria is geared toward the fulfillment of Ahmadu Bello's vision which revolves around ensuring that Nigeria's landscape- political, religious, and socio-economic space is controlled and dominated by the Fulani and at the centre of this are the Fulani herdsmen. This explains why herdsmen are always fearless and destructive. In fact, they can be described as merchants of death considering the violence they have perpetrated on innocent indigenous population. Ajour has shown in his studies on rural-rural migrant farmers that there abound mutual coexistence among rural-rural migrant farmers across Nigerian rural areas without rancour.

Conclusion

From the above discourse, it has been made obvious that various scholars have underpinned the murderous activities of herdsmen in Nigeria to resource conflicts even in the face of the glaring classification of the group as the fourth deadliest terror group in the world by the Global Terrorism Index (GTI) in 2015. Holding on to a standpoint is not an academic crime. Nevertheless, it becomes a problem when other shades of opinion are glaringly ignored. In this paper, we have looked at a few of those perspectives and maintain that recent activities of herdsmen in Nigeria are geared towards another dimension which is Fulani expansionism, using herdsmen as the spiritual wing.

Fulani expansion in Nigeria was a product of Jihad. The paper has explained that the expansion of the Fulani in Nigeria has been made possible through the activities of herdsmen. Though, not oblivious of the fact that some herdsmen sometimes have tended to live side by side peacefully with their host communities. However, historical events prove that they later displaced their host communities like in Hausa land, Southern Kaduna and some parts of Plateau to mention but a few.

The displacement of indigenous populations amounts to a call to war. The paper argues that herdsmen, just like during the Jihad of 1804, are the spiritual arm of Fulani expansionist agenda. In their paper titled "L'insurrection de Boko Haram au Nigeria ou une épiphanie de la peur: implications pour la sécurité au Nigeria et dans la sous-région ouest africaine" (The Boko Haram insurrection in Nigeria or the epiphany of fear: security implications for Nigeria and the West African sub-region), Basse Oben and Offiong Erete Ebong (2018: 1-11) added another leg to the security quagmire that the nation has been embroiled in with the Boko Haram insurgency since 2009.

The paper avers that the insurgency orchestrated by Hausa/Fulani muslim youths, has been responsible for acts of grave insecurity and savagery, killings, kidnapping, rape and plunder, sacking of non-Muslim and non Hausa-Fulani tribesmen, sowing of fear and forceful occupation of sacked communities in a manner akin to ethnic cleansing and genocide in Nigeria. Oben (2014: 20 - 27) also proffers a similar argument in *The African mind and globalization: rethinking the causes of Africa's underdevelopment*, where he argues that in traditional African cosmology, a non kinsman is considered a foreigner who can be sacrificed, if need be, so that the community can thrive in peace. The wanton heartless killings, the displacement and subsequent repopulation of whole indigenous communities by the Hausa/Fulani herdsmen fall squarely within the frame of this mindset.

The above scenario poses a serious threat to national integration. Except for the period of the Nigerian Civil War, Nigeria has never witnessed the depth and height of insecurity, distrust, suspicion and division that prevail in the country today like the one being perpetrated by the activities of herdsmen across Nigeria. The threat that herdsmen pose to national integration cannot be overemphasized. Even in the face of herdsmen murderous activities, Nigerian indigenous populations have been urged to surrender their land and accommodate the marauding herdsmen. The famous phrase, “your land or your life” credited to Femi Adesina, the Special Adviser on Media and Publicity to President Muhammadu Buhari readily comes to mind here. This again, validates the position of this paper which sees herdsmen as the spiritual wing of Fulani’s quest for expansion.

Because of this, many Nigerians cannot help but feel that the perpetrators of violence are above the law, having seen the levity with which the killer herdsmen have been treated. The government appears unwilling to stop the mindless rascality and plans of these herdsmen. This will not only encourage self-help in the form of self-defense, but may also steer the country to the path of anarchy. Again, the fact that herdsmen are predominantly Muslims also poses a serious threat to national integration as the victims of their attacks are mostly Christian. The dividing line along religious lines has further been widened thereby threatening national integration. There is therefore the urgent need to curtail open grazing and encourage herders to embrace ranching as the only solution to land grabbing and Fulani expansionism throughout Nigeria. Again, government needs to live up to its primary responsibility of securing the lives and property of Nigerians irrespective of ethnicity, regions, and religion.

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