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## INTERROGATING CHURCH-STATE PEACE APPROACH TO HERDSMEN-FARMERS' CONFLICT IN BENUE STATE, NIGERIA (2015-2018)

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Land and the resources therein have been among the prominent issues of conflicts globally. The crisis in the Upper Volta region and desertification compelled the southward relocation of herdsmen to Nigeria and Middle Belt in particular. The unholy competition for grazing land between nomadic herdsmen and the host communities coupled with poor governance occasioned persistent violence resulting in over 2000 death in Nigeria and over 170,000 internally displaced (2013 – 2016) in Benue State. This study therefore evaluated the efforts of the governments in resolving the violence and the propensity of church-state approach in evolving a lasting solution. Descriptive research design was adopted with qualitative approach. The data sources included relevant books, journal and Internet. The study found that no proactive measure was evolved to checkmate climate change and while weak regulatory system and porous border post encouraged free movement of herdsmen without respect for local laws. The governments lacked political will to comfort the issue of violence. The proposal for Cattle Colony and Ruga were poorly conceived while over politicization of the issues of conflict along ethnic and religious lines could not make church-state approach visible. The study concluded that inability of governments to modernize animal rearing and concerted efforts to address climate change have been the bane of the violence while loose security network has been a serious challenge. It recommended modernization of animal rearing, effective security coverage of Benue State and others and trial of culprits to serve as deterrence to other criminals. In addition, security issue should not be politicized so that alternate dispute resolution mechanisms like church state approach could be adopted.

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## INTRODUCTION

The term "conflict" depicts disagreement between two or more parties over basic and non-basic needs of man (Maslow, 1943). When these fundamental needs are not met or denied the people over time, violent conflict is inevitable (Stouffer, 1960). The nature of those needs could be political, economic, psychological or cherished value system of a people in the society. A conflict could be triggered by one or all of these factors. One of such crisis in Nigeria is the Herdsmen-Farmers' conflict over land use in Benue State, Nigeria that assumed a worrisome dimension particularly between 2015 and 2018. In Nigeria, over 2000 death have been recorded while over 170,000 were internally displaced in Benue state alone (GTI, 2018). The spate of mass killings in Benue for the past four years has reached alarming proportion that both national and international media are inundated with reports of

fatalities. Two primary stakeholders in the conflict are Herdsmen and the Benue farmers. In the same vein, there are two secondary actors namely; Benue State government and the Federal Government of Nigeria. The value chain between Benue State and the farmers stemmed from the fact that appreciable percentage of the state's internally-generated revenue comes from farm produce. Hence, the state is denoted as the "food basket of the Nation". There are various insinuations attributed to the root causes of the violent conflict in Benue State. For the herdsmen, desertification led to migration to Nigeria while the need for grazing land without restriction was issues of conflict. Benue Communities sees the herdsmen as potential threat to their sources of their livelihood by allowing their livestock to invade and feed on their food crops without remorse or compensation. Whereas, the presidency attributes the root causes to the influx of remnants of Gadhafi's militia from Libya into Nigeria. For the former Inspector General of Police, Abubakar Idris communal clashes

were responsible. To the Governor of Plateau State, Solomon Lalong and the Miyeti Allah spokesman, Garus Gololo, the signing of the anti-open grazing into law by Samuel Ortom was the cause of the conflict that snowballed into mass killings. In fact, Garus Gololo refers to the anti-open grazing law as a declaration of war against the Fulani herders in the state. In another perspective, environmentalists and public commentators see climate change and the rapid population growth as the root causes of the conflict. While, responses from federal government officials claimed that the opposition political parties are responsible for the carnage in Benue. Thus far, both state and Federal government have severally consulted all security apparatus and had mobilized additional security forces from the Army, Navy, Air Force and the Police in search of lasting solution to the problem but the killings has been on the increase since 2011. Hence, there is need to examine Church-state approach to herdsmen- farmers' conflict in Benue state as an alternative response strategy to the problem. The main objective is to establish the root causes and trigger factors as well as the role played by Governments and Christian religious institutions in the resolution of the dispute. Discussion of findings and recommendations are made. The major source of data was documentary review of extant literature and commentaries from electronic media. Relative deprivation theory that explained reasons for action and inactions of parties in the conflict was adopted. Content analysis technique was employed in analyzing the data. Descriptive research design was adopted and qualitative approach was employed.

**Conceptual clarification:** Politics for the Greeks is the organization and administration of the state. Greek philosophers were very much concerned about how to organize and administer the state in order to ensure the liberty of the individual and the enthronement of social justice. Many scholars have defined politics in different ways. Harold Laswell (1936) defines politics as who gets what, when, and how? Laswell, (1936) goes further to explain that politics deals with the study of power or the study of influence and that of the influential. According to David Easton cited in (Omolayo & Arowolaju, 1987:6), politics is the authoritative allocation of values for the society. On the other hand, Marx Weber saw politics as the struggle to share power or influence the distribution process hence, Aristotle describes man as "a political animal". Since we all belong to the supreme organization called the "state" and individuals or groups of individuals make competing demands over the allocation of scarce resources. Disagreements abound from time to time on the rationale for allocation of these resources. This brings us to the contentious issue in Benue state where various parties in the dispute felt that it has not been treated fairly hence, the continuation of the violence. On the other hand, there is no universally accepted definition of religion. According to Martineau (ND) religion is the belief in an ever-living God, that is, in a Divine Mind and Will ruling the Universe and holding moral relations with mankind ([web.pdx.edu/~tothm/religion/Definitions.htm](http://web.pdx.edu/~tothm/religion/Definitions.htm)). For Karl Marx, religion is the spiritual aroma of the world. Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress and the protest against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creatures, the heart of the heartless world, just as it is the spirit of the spiritless situation. Religion is the opium of the people (Maynard, 1974:12; Aja, 1997:28). To others, religion could mean the worship of different gods and goddesses. The Church represents the institution of Christian religion. The Mosque

depicts the institution of Islamic religion. There are other Religious institutions such as Hindu and Buddhism with peculiar peace tradition. The "church" has Christ-like peace tradition to preach the gospel of truth, love and forgiveness in accordance with God's commandment to the world. Church members are required to abide with biblical injunctions to live Christ-like life (Alao, 2018:19). On the other hand, the state has the primary responsibility of protecting human lives and property of the citizenry at all cost in consonance with the social contract principle. It is therefore expected that, the State and religious institutions must have the safety of citizens as common denominator.

**Herdsmen migration and violence:** The history of Fulani herdsmen dates back to the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries when they started migrating into northern Nigeria from the Sene-Gambia region. After the Othman Dan Fodio Jihad, the Fulani integrated themselves into the Hausa ethnic group of northern Nigeria. During the dry season, when tsetse fly population was low, the Fulani herdsmen drive their livestock towards the middle belt zone, dominated by non-Hausa groups and return to the north at the beginning of the subsequent rainy season (Ibrahim *et al.*, 2015). The increased human population and land use, drying of waterholes, shift in rainfall pattern, and drought as a result of climate change affected both the farmers and pastoralists in northern Nigeria. The implication of these occurrences has been the movement of cattle to grazing areas towards the middle belt region where the breeders have access to water and fresh feeds. However, reports have shown that this movement has led to the destruction of farm crops and the repeated appeals /complaints by the farmers to the Fulani herders attracted violent attacks in which locals were maimed, raped or killed in the wee hours (Ibrahim *et al.*, 2015). The conflict between herdsmen and farmers over land use has in recent years assumed worrisome dimension in Nigeria, particularly in Benue state. The incessant clash between herdsmen and farmers has polarized Nigeria, especially in the Middle Belt, the agrarian food basket of the country (Akinwotu, 2018). According to Fikoya (2018) maintains that in 2013, over nine cases of herdsmen attacks resulted in the death of over 190 people in Benue State. In 2014, 16 attacks claimed more than 230 deaths in the same state and, between Januarys - May 2015, attacks left more than 300 people dead (Fikoya, 2018).

**Native farmers' needs:** The needs of native farmers in Benue state is nothing less than having access to their ancestral land for the cultivation of food crop they are known for decades. The priority needs of Native Farmers in Benue ranges from food, shelter, Livelihood to protection of life and property. According to thematic report (2017) an approximately 132, 818 people are facing the challenges of food shortage. One of the problems the internally displaced person stand to face is the issue of Shelter, Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) are exposed to harsh weather conditions and in need of shelter due to the destruction of their houses. Communities in Benue state need the assurances from the government that if they go to their farm lands, their lives are protected. Agriculture being the mainstay of the state's population and expanses of farmlands had been destroyed, although no estimated costs are available, disrupting the livelihoods of thousands of farmers and farming households have been a serious problem to the natives (Thematic report, 2017).

**Theoretical framework:** It is a sociological theory propounded by Samuel Stouffer, a foremost American sociologist while studying social psychology during World War II (1939-1945). The major supposition of the theory is that people take action in order to get something, such as wealth, education, social status and material benefits that others are having which they also believe they must have. Although scholars like Edward Muller (1980 and Charles Tilly (2003) criticized it for lack of scientific evidence in determining the correlation between, for instance, unemployment and direct violence. Nevertheless, one of the contributors to the theory, Davies (1962) contends that sharp reversal of development creates an intolerable gap between what people want and what they get. Davies claims that political stability and instability are dependent on the mood of the society. In other words, poor people who are satisfied will not revolt, and rich people who are dissatisfied may revolt. What is important is their state of mind rather than how much goods they possess (Davies, 1962: 5-19). The assumption of the theory explains land use deprivation and frustration that led to aggression between the Fulani herdsmen and Benue Farmers.

### Responses from Benue state Government, Federal

**Government and the church:** According to Charles (2017), the intention of Benue state Government, in the face several attacks and the subsequent enactment of Anti- open grazing Law on 22 May, 2017 was to bring lasting peace between farmers and herdsmen in Benue state. Moreover, more than 13 out of 23 local government areas in the state were under siege. These included Guma, Maturdi, Gwer, Gwer-west, Agatu, Tarka, Logo, Katitna-Ala, Ukum, Gboko and Kwande (Charles, 2017). The law having listed its main objective empowered the Ministry of Agriculture and Natural Resources in the State to implement the law. The law provided interested ranchers to submit in writing an application with the consent of the owner of the land to be used for ranching to the appropriate department of the Ministry of Agriculture and Natural Resources through which the state governor's approval is sought and a ranching permit issued within 30 days. More so, the permit will be due for renewal yearly if the applicant wishes to continue. Any indigene of Benue State who wishes to set up a personal ranch on his land shall be exempted from the provisions of Sections 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9 of the law which is subject to the approval of the state governor without compensation to the applicants. The law provides a five-year jail term or one million naira fine or both for any herder found culpable. The law also abhors the free movement of cattle and other livestock within and across urban centers rural settlements or any part of the state and the offender is liable to pay five hundred million naira or one-year jail term or five-year jail term or both. However, reactions trailed the enactment. Responses from the officials of federal government such as the former Inspector General of Police and Miyeti Allah Cattle owners Association of Nigeria condemned the Anti-open grazing law in its totality. The former Inspector General of Police, Abubakar Idris the enactment of the law represent an action of a sinking man. He blamed the killings in Benue on communal clashes. For the Governor of Plateau State, Solomon Lalong and the Miyeti Allah spokesman, Garus Gololo, the signing of the anti-open grazing into law by Samuel Ortom was the cause of the conflict that snowballed into mass killings. In fact, Garus Gololo refers to the anti-open grazing law as a declaration of war against the Fulani

herdsmen in the state. In another perspective environmentalists and public commentators see climate change and the rapid population growth as the root causes of the conflict. While the ruling APC stalwarts blamed the opposition parties are responsible for the carnage in Benue.

**Federal government actions:** The actions and inactions of the Federal Government of Nigeria in the Benue herdsmen – Farmers has attracted a lot of criticisms from many Nigerians in three perspectives. First, the blame game syndrome among government officials that took much of their time and as such no prompt action to stem the tide of mass killings. Second, is that before the arrival of security agents at the flash points of attacks, mass killings of locals and destruction of property must have taken place. Third, the lack of superior fire power to confront those involved in the dastardly act of gruesome murder in wee hours of the day. This non-committal posture of the Federal government has accounted for reasons why none of the culprits have been prosecuted till date. Even though there were reports of several consultations made by federal government with a view to deploying additional police and military forces to stem the preponderance of violent attacks, there is no corresponding achievement on ground to justify such moves. Nevertheless, the on-going Cattle colonies' proposal by the Federal government, has attracted criticisms especially from state governments for a number of reasons. First, stems from the fact that Land Use Act of 1919 (as amended) has not been repealed and so state governors still have the right to appropriate state lands for the overall benefit of citizens in the state. It is noteworthy to state that the hitherto willing state governments to provide lands for grazing reserve few months ago have rescinded their pledge. According to Crisis Group (2018), many Nigerians sees the term "colony" as an administrative space acquired not through negotiation and with indigenes' consent but by force, conjuring memories of British imperial conquest. As narratives of "Fulani colonisation" already aggravate the farmer-herdsmen problem and passions still run high over the Benue killings, the government's adoption of the term was ill advised (Crisis Group, 2018). Worse criticism trails the modified cattle colony with the proposal to establish Ruga settlement. "Ruga" simply means Village in Fulani language which by implication got many of the antagonists of the idea upset and threatening national security with the allegation rightly or wrongly of extending or spreading the Fulani across Nigeria to complete the uncompleted task of Usman Dan Fodio. Other questioned the use of public fund to support a private driven business initiative while the primary victims of the attacks were unattended to. Nonetheless, efforts by the Federal Government have been severely opposed particularly in the Middle Belt and Southern part of the nation. Instead of the Federal Government efforts providing the need solution to the issue, the cracks along ethnic and religious lines is getting wider while it should be noted that only the migrants Fulani (Boroje) were the agent of violence and most of the are believed not to be Nigerians.

**The church:** The role of the Church is embedded in Church-State approach which included dialogue, prayer, moral and social teachings, peaceful protest, repentance and forgiveness of sin, open commendation/condemnation, fasting, occupation, negotiation, conciliation, conflict avoidance and diplomacy (Chidi, 2018-2019 Field work:52). These peaceful approaches are in agreement with the position of the Umbrella body of all Christians in Nigeria, the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) which runs counter to the hitherto Federal Government

interventions in the conflict. This was corroborated by the Crisis Group (2018) report:

It is patently and indisputably clear that the General Buhari-led government of Nigeria not only failed to protect its citizens after repeated early warnings by the state but has taken sides with their killers. Worse still the Federal Government is not adequately protecting /providing for its security personnel who continue to die in the line of duty under superior fire power and numbers of the Killer Herdsmen (Crisis Group, 2018). The Church's position in the conflict from the very escalation of direct violence has been the need to utilize available peace mechanisms in the resolution of the impasse with a view to safeguarding lives and property of , not only Benue citizens but also non indigenes staying in the state. Arising from these convictions, CAN's communique that was made public reads:

There should be an immediate stop to the impunity of the killer Fulani Herdsmen and for arrests and prosecutions of the perpetrators, an immediate stop to attacks by the government on civilians protesting their failure to protect, an end to the harassment, intimidation and demonization of the victims, people and state officials of Benue by the Federal Government. Compensation should be paid to the victims of these attacks, investigations into all the spates of attacks, arrest and interrogation of all organizations/individuals that have claimed responsibility and justified the massacres. The need for the Defense Minister who lacks the intellectual capacity and moral fortitude or integrity to defend his citizens and has endorsed genocide to resign. The removal of the IG for inability to conduct a logical investigation, to detect or prevent attacks, to protect and provide for his men who are being killed and absconding from duty in Benue where he was deployed in direct disobedience to a presidential order and for incompetence and dereliction of duty; reshuffling of the National Security Council which is almost a tribal council to ensure equity, balance and fair representation on a core national affair and an immediate stop to the entry of Fulani and cattle from outside Nigeria's borders and disarming of all Herdsmen and their registration as well as the cattle owners..... (CAN, 2018).

From the position of the CAN above, it shows that they are of the opinion that federal government has not done enough in finding lasting solution to the lingering crisis. A critical analysis of the position of Christian churches revealed that to achieve Church-State approach to peace, the church needs to stand as an impartial arbiter which is relatively difficult to achieve in this situation. The approach means that the State and the Church are committed to peace rather than rhetoric. From the Church as propounded by Papacy institution, the emphasis is drawn from Matthew 5: 38-40 concerning Christian spirit in treating of those who are standing in our way as enemies by showing them love. The politicization of the violence and the division on ethnic and religious lines might complicate the task of adopting Church- State approach as the genuine commitment on both parties is difficult to attain particularly when the Christians are seeing themselves as victims of violence. On the other hand, the herdsmen are also laying claims to loss of lives and cattle.

**Issues arising:** The paper observed that the Governor of Benue State has the constitutional power under the Land Use Act, 1999 (as amended) to cause the enactment and implementation. Some Nigerians argue that the conflict would

not have escalated if the law prohibiting open grazing was not enacted. This is debatable because states such as Kaduna, Yobe, Zamfara, Nasarawa, Kogi, Ebonyi, Enugu, Borno and Plateau that have not enacted Anti-open grazing law were not free from herdsmen attacks as at 2017. Besides, Ekiti enacted Anti-open Grazing Law before Benue but, it has not witnessed mass killings like Benue case. Notably debate on the possibility of forcing the states to donate lands for cattle colonies across the country attracted wide condemnation in the Senate. Majority of Nigerians including this researcher argues it is on record that., while the search for lasting solution to the conflict was made known to Nigerians, the Governor of Kano State, Ganduje pledged enough land and space for Cattle breeders. But, there was no response from federal government as regards the free offer rather States' land are being canvassed for Cattle colony without repealing the extant Land Use Act 1999 (as amended) which expressly confers power of land appropriation/ allocation on the state Governors. The power to appropriate state land is in residual list and not in concurrent list. The actions or steps taken by the Federal government in the Benue state debacle so far are alien to the Land Use Act of 1999.

The study found that the widely held notion that the enactment of grazing law was the root cause of the mass killings in the state might not stand under investigation. This is because; a revelation from one Terwase Agwaza (Alias Gana), a notorious militia kingpin on Channels Television, 17 October, 2016 goes thus:

The Fulani herdsmen approached me to help them capture four states such as; Plateau, Benue, Nasarawa, Yobe and Taraba. But, I promised them that I can only help them to capture Taraba because I know the security officers to settle. I told them to give me one billion naira. They refused but promised me 50 million which me ma, I refused because, Taraba have several security outfits. So, they then promised me 350million which I refused to collect from them because it will not be enough to capture Taraba with several presence of security offices.. I then told them to give me 750 million which they refused until the Government said they want to grant amnesty to all herdsmen and all those that have guns in the state which I surrendered with the expectation that the Government will train us abroad but nothing was done till today.

The revelation above was reaffirmed by Abah (2018) who wrote on Terwase Gana in the Daily Trust of September 10, 2015 thus:

Huge crowd witnessed the public surrender of 84 weapons by a notorious armed militia kingpin known to have terrorised residents within Benue and Taraba. The deduction of the researcher from the two reports is that the enactment of grazing Law is not the remote cause of the conflict but a trigger factor to the conflict. It is more of ideological struggle than economic hence the immediate occupation of the conquered Benue communities. Again, the declaration of war against Churches/pastors and Reverend fathers is testimony to the fact it is more of Islamic expansionism than cattle breeding business. In addition, the president's delayed condolence visit to the victims of the Benue massacre generated massive condemnation by the majority of Nigerians and this has created serious doubt about the president's integrity and sincerity of purpose in governance. Many well-meaning Nigerians, like the researcher, hold the view that Boko Haram

is succeeding in establishing Islamic caliphate in Nigeria using herdsmen as a decoy to achieve their goal. This is evident by the way they quickly occupied sacked communities in Taraba, Yobe, Plateau, Kaduna, Bornu and Benue states. It is also evident in their continued demand for cattle colonies in each state of the federation irrespective of the existence of land use Act provisions of 1999 which expressly gives each state governor power to appropriate state lands in the overall interest of the people. The continued silence of the President on this matter has suggested his culpability in the conflict. The study also observed many Nigerians are not satisfied with the Federal Government of Nigeria's look warm attitude to the conflict so far. Orji (2018) posed two brilliant questions about the lukewarm attitude of Federal Government and security agencies thus:

How does one rationalize the fact that the military and other security agencies were always conveniently unaware when the killer herdsmen go on rampage but spring up when to prevent reprisal attacks and disarm the locals that has already been disarmed the moment they recover and begin to mobilize for self-defence?. How come, despite all the killings and violence that is threatening to turn the country apart, the president has continued to keep faith with his security chiefs all of them from his part of the country and has been unable to sanction any of them even after it was established that one of them has clearly disobeyed presidential order. In the same vein, Yawe (2018) posits that the suspicion for the possible Islamization of Nigeria by the Government in power became more pronounced. This charge is further reinforced by the fact that most of the communities under the herdsmen's attack in the Benue valley Southern Kaduna, Plateau, Nasarawa, Benue, Taraba and Adamawa are predominantly inhabited by Christians. It becomes difficult to convince Christians who are at the receiving end of these attacks that the President means well especially when his security agencies fail to secure their lives.

## Conclusion

The findings in this study has shown that the root causes of the conflict between herdsmen and farmers in the Benue valley were rapid population growth, climate change and, Islamic expansionist tenet. Unless and until, these root causes are squarely addressed by Federal government with political will, peaceful resolution of the conflict will be farfetched because focusing attention to the manifestation of the crisis can only lead to its escalation. The enactment of grazing law is not one of the root causes of the Herdsmen- Farmers violent conflict in Benue state but a trigger factor. The Governor of Benue State has the constitutional power under the Land Use Act, 1999 to cause the enactment and the implementation of same if necessary. Herdsmen are fighting ideological war of Islamic Jihadist expansion and not for the basic needs of life and the actions of the Federal Government lacks decisive step at stemming the tide of killings in Benue State and beyond. The complexity of the causative factors and less than sincere Federal government stance might not work for the adoption of Church-State approach to resolving the violence.

**Recommendations:** Arising from the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made.

1. The Federal and State governments should desist from playing politics with grave security challenges and

develop the needed political will to confront conflicts rather than rationalizing issues and believing that pacification could be a solution to endemic and protracted ones.

2. The government should embark on modernization of animal rearing as found in nations like India, United States of America, and China among others to forestall possible clashes between the Benue natives and nomadic Fulani.
3. The governments should development sufficient political and administrative will to confront other associated challenges as well as ensure prosecution of agents of violence without fear or Favour.
4. There is the need for massive political and security enlightenment concerning governments programs and policies to minimize citizens reading wrong meanings to issues of grave importance . This will debunk religious and ethnic meaning attributed to governments actions thereby allowing alternate dispute resolution mechanisms to be applied as to build the needed confidence and integrity of the processes
5. The Federal government should set up a high powered committee from Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Nigerian Institute of Social and Economic Research (NISER) to research and advise it on how desertification and environmental degradation could be averted in the Northern region.
6. The Federal government should place more premium on intelligent gathering among her security agencies to allow for prompt intervention when and where an attack is about happening in Benue and its environs.

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