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"The Fulani … don't have borders": Transhumant Pastoralism, Postcolonial Statehood and the Question of Citizenship in Nigeria

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Introduction

In September 2019, during a live television show examining a contentious policy proposal of the Nigerian federal government to establish "cattle colonies" or "rural grazing areas"[i] throughout the country in an effort to stem the tide of escalating herder–farmer conflicts, Mr. Bala Mohammed, the Governor of Bauchi State, claimed that all Fulani nomads across West Africa are "presumed … Nigerians." Pretty audacious in his tone, he argued that: "The Fulani … don't have borders … The Fulaniman is a global or an African person … His nationality? He is just a Fulaniman … They are all Nigerians."[ii] The governor and former federal lawmaker, who himself is partly Fulani, was responding to questions as to why countless foreign Fulani pastoralists should be allowed to come join their Nigerian kinsfolk to benefit from large-scale ranching and sedentarisation projects funded by the Nigerian government.[iii] He maintained that it was both impossible and needless to delineate which members of the widespread ethnic group were really entitled to partake in the projects under the "national livestock transformation plan," which seeks to put an end to the Fulani culture of transhumance and open grazing as a way to curb violent clashes that often result when hungry cattle destroy crops and livelihoods of farming communities.[iv] By this logic, every transhumant Fulani pastoralist from anywhere in the African Savanna would be eligible to come settle permanently in Nigeria—in the "cattle colonies."[v]

It would be mistaken to think that Mr. Mohammed was speaking only for himself during that exchange; there may well be many other Nigerians like him, specifically in the northern regions, who share a similar position.[vi] In any case, it should be quite easy for anyone to discern the contradictions and complications that Mr. Mohammed's view of a borderless, pan-African Fulani ethnic nationality poses for defining and managing statehood and citizenship in the Sudano-Sahel region of West and Central Africa.

The motility of Fulani pastoralists is fundamentally incompatible with the sedentary logics of postcolonial statehood.[vii] In fact, the collision between transhumant pastoral lifeways and the territorialised nation-state represents one of the most profound structural tensions in contemporary West Africa. Until recent decades, the biggest challenges that transboundary nomadism posed for the post-/colonial state were veterinary public health concerns in the face of constant risk of epizootic spread, tax evasion, as well as overgrazing and rangeland degradation.[viii] However, the problems have, in the last two decades, degenerated even further with uncontrolled cross-border pastoral movements being constantly linked to terrible waves of spiralling armed violence and national security threats across the subregion.[ix] In Nigeria alone, conflicts between largely Muslim Fulani herders and predominantly Christian sedentary farmers claimed over 15,000 lives and displaced hundreds of thousands more between year 2010 and 2021, with half of the casualties happening within the space of three years from 2018.[x] These hostilities, often mischaracterised as purely ethnic or religious conflicts, are in fact symptomatic of deeper contradictions embedded in the colonial and postcolonial organisation of African polities.

While numerous studies and literature have been dedicated to exploring different aspects of Fulani transhumance and/or the escalating tensions connected to it, very little or nothing has been done around questions pertaining to territoriality and postcolonial statehood particularly within the Nigerian context.[xi] This article critically examines how pastoral nomadism challenges fundamental assumptions of statehood, citizenship, sovereignty, and territoriality in Nigeria and the broader Sahel region. The paper establishes that these contemporary challenges have deep historical roots in the colonial encounter and the subsequent construction of the postcolonial African state along European models which are fundamentally incompatible with pastoral mobility.

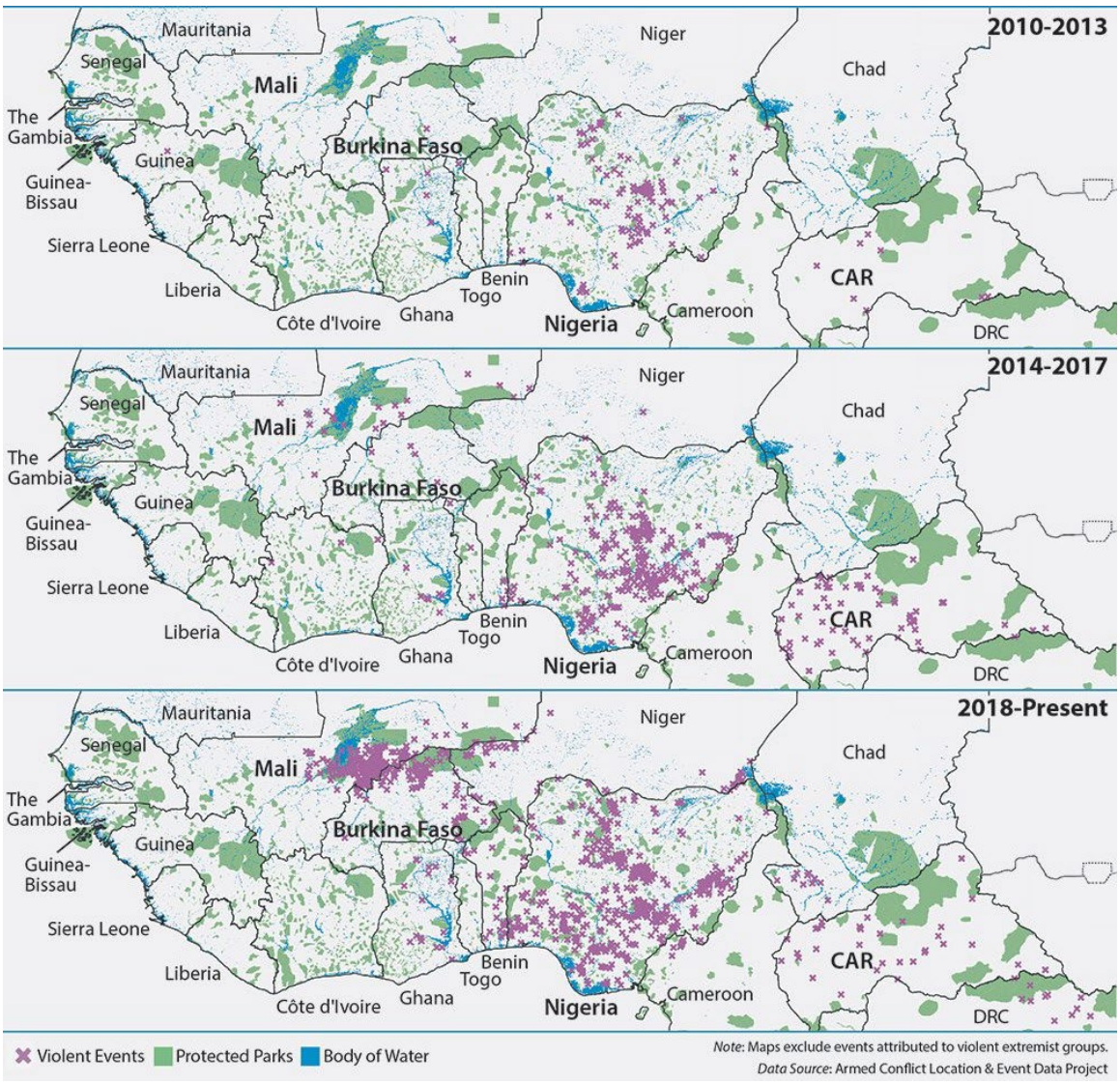

Fig. 1: Geographical Distribution of Herder–Farmer Clashes in West and Central Africa, 2010–2021.

Fulani Pastoralism and Precolonial Political Organisation: An Overview

Numbering approximately 30-40 million, the Fulbe or Fulani people are an ethnic group widely dispersed across West and Central Africa. Comprised of a significant pastoralist population, the Fulani make up the world's largest nomadic pastoral group.[xii] In Nigeria, where the Fulani currently constitute about 4 percent of the national population, their presence is commonly traced back to migrations from the Senegambia region into the northern Nigeria area between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries.[xiii] This historical fact complicates contemporary claims that often position

Fulani pastoralists as "strangers" or recent arrivals in certain territories they have traversed for centuries even as they may not hold any traditionally-assigned land rights.[xiv] Nigerian historian Akanmu Adebayo has noted that a major influx of Fulani pastoralists into Nigeria in the wake of the 1968-73 Sahelian drought had been responsible for some 500 percent growth in the population of the Fulani people in the country within the space of just forty years up to 1989.[xv]

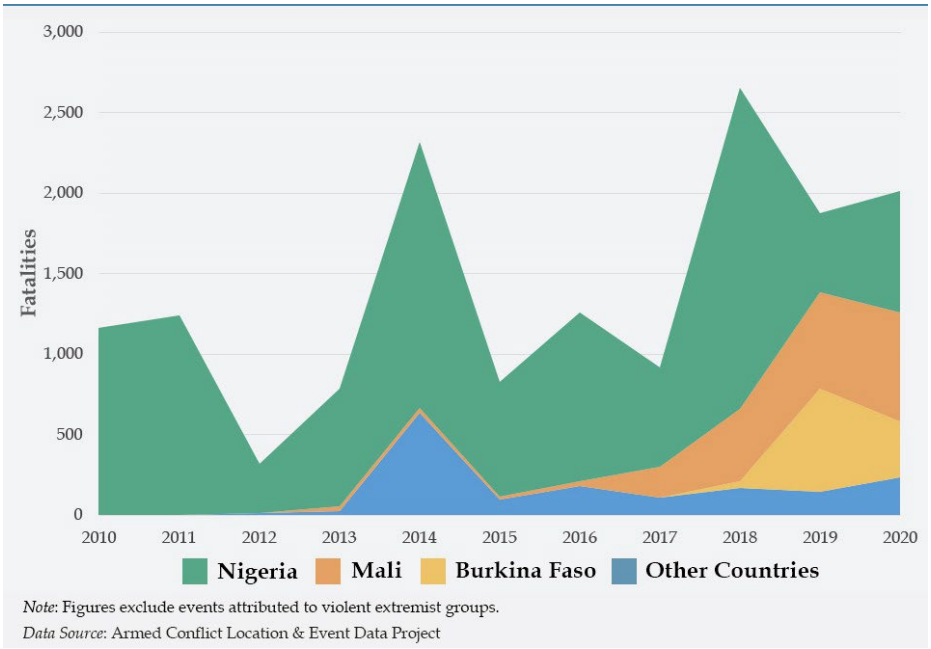

Fig. 2: Trends in Herder–Farmer Violence in West and Central Africa.

The establishment of the Sokoto Caliphate following Usman dan Fodio's jihad (1804-1808) fundamentally transformed the political landscape of northern Nigeria, clearing the path for the continued southward movement of the pastoral Fulani. Dan Fodio, a Fulani Islamic scholar and reformer, launched his "holy war" against the Hausa kingdoms in response to what he perceived as their corruption, oppression of Muslims, and deviation from proper Islamic practice.[xvi] The success of the jihad led to the conquest of most Hausa states and the establishment of the Sokoto Caliphate, a theocracy which by 1830 encompassed most of present-day northern Nigeria and northern Cameroon. Critically, this political and military expansion integrated both urbanised, settled groups as well as peripatetic, pastoral Fulani populations under a single Islamic administrative structure, establishing systems of governance that accommodated pastoral mobility within a broader political framework.[xvii]

The caliphate's success laid partly in its ability to organise political authority across diverse ecological zones and economic systems.[xviii] The Fulani, prior to the jihad, had developed complex relationships with Hausa agricultural communities, characterised by both cooperation and conflict over access to land and water resources.[xix] The jihad

transformed many previously pastoral Fulani into ruling elites in the conquered Hausa states, while others maintained their nomadic pastoral traditions. This dichotomy—between the settled, politically integrated Fulani and the transhumant pastoral Fulani—established patterns of differentiation that persisted until the dawn of colonisation and continues even today.[xx]

Fig. 3: Cattle grazing near a maize field in Nigeria.

The Colonial Encounter and the Territorialisation of Space

The British conquest of the Sokoto Caliphate and its Fulani rulers in 1903 marked a fundamental rupture in the organisation of political space in northern Nigeria and the broader Central Sudan subregion.[xxi] While British colonial administrators governed the area through the "indirect rule" policy which preserved the existing emirate structures and accorded considerable autonomy to local rulers, the system nevertheless imposed European conceptions of bounded territoriality, guarded sovereignty, and sedentary administration onto a landscape that had previously accommodated considerable seasonal mobility.[xxii] This development fundamentally complicated notions of "colonial subject," "native," "indigène," and, much later, "citizen," with political rights being tightly tied to ethnic identity and territorial belonging rather than to any universal conception of citizenship.

For pastoral nomads, who were often seen as a landless people, this colonial restructuring proved particularly problematic. British colonial administrators and veterinary experts, influenced by Victorian ideals of agricultural improvement and sedentary modernity, viewed transhumance and nomadism with suspicion and sought to encourage settlement.[xxiii] The result was the marginalisation of pastoral communities owing partly to their mobility, which placed them outside the neat administrative and spatial categories that colonial officials sought to impose, and partly to the remoteness of many grazing areas, which made them difficult to govern according to colonial logics.[xxiv] Thus, seasonal mobility, which had been a time-honoured adaptive strategy for dealing with the region's diverse climatic and ecological realities, increasingly came to be seen as a problem requiring administrative solutions.

Moreover, the artificial borders established across Africa by the different colonial powers in the late nineteenth century imposed arbitrary divisions onto the landscape and societies. The arbitrary borders split up many ethnic communities, cultural areas and economic regions while creating new post-/colonial states that grouped distinct populations together.[xxv] For the Sahelian pastoral nomads whose traditional rangelands and grazing routes crossed multiple territories, colonial borders represented both practical obstacles to movement and symbolic violations of their historical claims to land use. Grazing routes that had been established over centuries, following seasonal patterns of rainfall and vegetation growth, now intersected with international boundaries and competing claims to territorial sovereignty.

A case in point was when pastoral movements across the Central Sudan came under inter-colonial policing in the 1930s in an effort to curtail the transborder spread of cattle epizootics, particularly contagious bovine pleura-pneumonia. British and French colonial authorities from present-day Nigeria, Niger, Benin Republic, and Chad agreed in 1933 to establish "ports of entry" (points de pénétration in French), also known as "inspection stations," along the main Sahelian cattle routes through which cattle "imports" into Nigeria must be conducted.[xxvi] The French colonial authorities followed British Nigeria's lead by also establishing sanitary control posts along their borders with Nigeria between 1935 and 1936.[xxvii] Every drover was then required to obtain a "Permis d'exportation de bétail" or "Cattle Movement License," which served as both a health certificate and a laissez passer, attesting that his herd had been vaccinated or confirmed upon examination to be free from contagious diseases.[xxviii] Various colonial legislations, such as the "Rules for the Control of the Movement of Trade Cattle," were enacted to give the arrangement the force of law.[xxix] Clearly, colonial rule brought many complications for the lifeways of the pastoral nomad, and many of the disruptions endured into the postcolonial era.

The Land Use Act of 1978 and the Dispossession of Pastoral Rights

The promulgation of Nigeria's Land Use Act of 1978 just about two decades after the end of British colonial rule represented a watershed moment in the relationship between pastoral communities and the Nigerian state. Enacted by a military government seeking to unify the country's land tenure system, the Act vested all land in each state in the Governor, who would hold such lands in trust for the people and administer them for the common benefit of all Nigerians.[xxx] While ostensibly designed to promote equitable access to land and prevent land speculation, the Act's practical effect was to centralise control over land allocation. By virtue of its centralisation of land acquisition and administration in the country, the Land Use Act put transhumant pastoral communities particularly at a grave disadvantage.

The Act gave state and federal governments the right to assign and lease land, and empowered indigenous communities with the right to apply for certificates of occupancy to claim ownership of their ancestral lands.[xxxi] This legal framework privileged sedentary agricultural communities, who could more easily document continuous occupation and, thus, make claims to ancestral territory. The pastoral Fulani, whose livelihood depended on constant

mobility across extensive territories and who had not traditionally conceived of land in terms of fixed ownership or settlement, found themselves largely excluded from this process of claiming rights of occupancy. The implementation of the Land Use Act thus placed pastoral communities in an increasingly precarious position.

Traditional grazing routes, water sources, and seasonal pastures that had been used for generations suddenly fell under the control of state governors or local government authorities. In many cases, these lands were allocated to agricultural communities for farming, to corporations for development projects, or simply enclosed as private property. This is partly responsible for the frequent encroachment into farming settlements by established pastoral communities as well as new waves of herders moving into ecozones where they have no traditional relationships, thus setting the stage for violent conflict.[xxxii]

Fig. 4: White Fulani cattle (Bunaji) being herded along a road in Ikogosi, Ekiti State, Nigeria.

It has been reported that, from 1996 to 2006, conflicts between pastoralists and farmers in Bauchi and Gombe states resulted in approximately 121 deaths.[xxxiii] These numbers pale in comparison to the level of escalation that has occurred since 2016. The violence has taken on catastrophic dimensions, with thousands killed and entire communities displaced. Between just 2016 and 2018, an estimated 3,641 deaths were recorded in herder–farmer conflicts, with 57 percent of those killings occurring in 2018 alone.[xxxiv] The scale of the violence surpassed even that attributed to the Boko Haram insurgency during these periods, leading some observers to characterise Fulani militants as among the world's deadliest conflict groups.[xxxv]

It is important, however, to establish that there is a long history to the herder–farmer clashes. To be clear, tensions between transhumant pastoralists and sedentary farming communities in the Nigerian area predate the postcolonial era. There were various recorded instances of conflicts between pastoralists and farming communities throughout the colonial period, and there is no reason to assume that the realities would have been fundamentally different

during the precolonial era. The main difference that could be tenably established pertains to the ever-increasing scale, frequency and casualty levels of the confrontations with the passage of time.[xxxvi] But beyond this historicity and the impact of the 1978 Land Use Act, there is also an important ecological dimension to the issue.

Climate Change, Desertification, and the Crisis of Pastoral Livelihoods

The intensification of herder–farmer conflicts cannot be understood apart from the broader environmental transformations taking place across several countries in West and Central Africa. The Sudano-Sahel zone, characterised by scant and unreliable rainfall and poor soils, has historically supported more than 20 million people through pastoralism.[xxxvii] Nomadic and transhumant pastoralism represents an adaptive livelihood strategy particularly suited to the region's ecological conditions, where the intermittent movement of livestock allows for the exploitation of dispersed and temporally variable forage resources while permitting land to recover between grazing periods.

In recent decades, however, multiple environmental and demographic pressures have fundamentally threatened the viability of pastoral livelihoods. Recurring droughts, particularly the catastrophic Sahelian drought of 1984, triggered mass migrations of pastoral communities southward in search of more reliable water sources and pasture.[xxxviii] Desertification and soil degradation, exacerbated by climate change, have progressively reduced the carrying capacity of northern grazing lands. Simultaneously, population growth, urban sprawl and the expansion of agricultural cultivation have encroached upon traditional grazing areas and seasonal migration corridors.[xxxix]

The southward migration of Fulani pastoralists from the arid Sahel regions into the Guinea savanna and even tropical forest areas has brought them into direct competition and confrontation with sedentary farming communities. While the environmental conditions of the Sahel had historically limited agricultural expansion and minimised competition between farmers and herders, these ecological barriers have broken down. Farmers have also moved northward as population pressure has increased, creating zones of intensified competition over land and water resources.[xl]

Climate change has fundamentally altered seasonal patterns, with dry seasons lasting longer and becoming more severe. This has forced pastoral communities to extend their migrations further south and to spend longer periods in agricultural zones, increasing the chances for conflict. As they move through farm settlements, the livestock that pastoralists relied on for their survival increasingly damage crops that farming communities depended on, while farmers view the establishment of agricultural lands in traditional grazing areas as their legitimate right to develop land they occupy.

Citizenship, Belonging, and the Politics of Indigeneity

The question of citizenship lies at the heart of the tensions between pastoral nomadism and postcolonial statehood across the Sahel. In the Nigerian political context, formal citizenship is complicated by parallel notions of indigeneity

and belonging which are tied to settlement in specific localities. The Nigerian constitution recognises both federal citizenship and state of origin, with the latter concept carrying significant implications for access to political representation, employment, education, and land rights.[xli]

This dual structure creates particular difficulties for pastoral communities. The emphasis on state of origin and indigenous rights within specific localities privileges populations who can demonstrate continuous, sedentary occupation of particular territories. Mobile pastoral communities, whose patterns of livelihood revolve around seasonal movement across multiple local government areas, states or even countries, fit poorly into this framework. They are often characterised as "settlers" or "strangers" even in areas they have traversed for generations.

The colonial legacy of indirect rule, which emphasised native administration and the association between ethnic identity and territorial control, continues to shape contemporary understandings of citizenship and belonging. British colonial policy created rigid associations between ethnic groups and particular territories, with political rights and access to resources mediated through these territorial-ethnic identifications. This system fragmented political identity along ethnic and territorial lines in ways that persist in postcolonial Nigeria.

For the pastoral Fulani, this fragmentation manifests in multiple forms of marginalisation. In many states of Nigeria's north central region where farmer-herder conflicts have been most intense—including Benue, Plateau, Taraba, and Kaduna—pastoral communities are denied autochthonous status and the associated rights despite their long historical presence. Local governments, controlled by sedentary agricultural communities, make land-use decisions that prioritise crop agriculture over livestock production and fail to recognise the legitimacy of pastoral land claims.[xlii] Anti-grazing laws, such as the one implemented in Taraba and Benue States in 2017, prohibit the open grazing practices that pastoral livelihoods depend upon, effectively criminalising pastoral mobility.[xliii]

On the other hand, new waves of transhumant pastoralists, many of whom have been commonly characterised as "foreign" or non-Nigerian "militant" Fulani herders from different parts of the Sahel, increasingly penetrate southwards colonising fallow bushes and agricultural settlements.[xliv] Trailed by varying levels of disruptions and destruction, this constant immigration of pastoral nomads and their herds intensifies the problem and renders the situation almost intractable. Some of the immigrants, whose herds have been depleted owing to the escalating crises, have taken up arms and have been perpetrating all kinds of violent crimes including cattle rustling, banditry, kidnapping for ransom, and so much more.[xlv]

The religious and ethnic dimensions of the conflicts further complicate the citizenship question. While the conflicts are fundamentally about access to land, pasture and water resources, they have taken on dangerous religious and ethnic dimensions, with predominantly Muslim Fulani herders pitted against predominantly Christian farming communities of various ethnicities.[xlvi] This religious polarisation has recently fuelled conspiracy theories and accusations of ethnic cleansing and "Christian genocide" intensely amplified by international leaders and actors, further deepening communal divides and making resolution more difficult.[xlvii]

Political leaders have been accused of inflaming tensions rather than mediating them, with opposition parties characterising the federal government as sympathetic to Fulani interests due to the ethnic identity of the president during certain periods.[xlviii] Very recently, Nigeria's Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) accused the government of Mr. Bala Mohammed of terrorism financing. On December 30, 2025, the Bauchi State commissioner for finance, the accountant-general and a few other officials were arraigned for conspiring to release 2.3 million US dollars of state funds to one Bello Bodejo, a leader of Miyetti Allah Kautal Hore, a Fulani sociocultural organisation repeatedly accused of perpetrating terror attacks across the country.[xlix] The EFCC alleged that Bodejo and others used the money, wholly or in part, to finance a terrorist or terrorist group. While the last is yet to be heard regarding this case, allegations of government complicity in pastoral violence as well as the religious and ethnic undertones to the crises are not uncommon across West and Central Africa.

The Regional Dimension: Transnational Pastoralism and State Sovereignty

The challenges that pastoral nomadism poses to citizenship and statehood are not unique to Nigeria but reflect broader regional dynamics across the Sahel. Herders in the Sahel have historically moved not just within nations but across international borders, following seasonal grazing patterns that predate colonial partition.[l] The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has attempted to facilitate this cross-border movement through instruments such as the International Transhumance Certificate, designed to allow pastoral communities to move livestock across member states.[li]

However, the implementation of regional cooperation frameworks has proven difficult. National governments remain jealous of their sovereignty and often view cross-border pastoral movements with suspicion, particularly when such movements are informal and beyond state control. Perceptions that transhumant herders crossing in from neighbouring countries like Niger, Chad, and Cameroon contribute to insecurity have fuelled xenophobic rhetoric and calls for border controls in Nigeria. The distinction between Nigerian Fulani and foreign Fulani herders has become politically salient, with some violence attributed to cross-border movements rather than internal dynamics.

The regional character of pastoral conflicts is evident in the violence statistics. Between 2010 and 2016, herder-farmer conflicts across several West African countries resulted in 3,068 deaths, with conflicts spreading from the Sahel into coastal regions as pastoralists moved southward.[lii] In Mali, terrorist organisations such as the Macina Liberation Front have become intertwined with Fulani pastoral grievances, using recruitment narratives that emphasise pastoral marginalisation and state oppression.[liii] As is often the case in Nigeria, the tactics employed in some of the attacks—including the use of military-grade weapons, coordinated assaults, and the targeting of specific communities—suggest a level of organisation that transcends spontaneous resource conflicts.

The proliferation of arms and armed gangs across the Sahel has fundamentally altered the region's security landscape. Jihadist insurgents, local militias, cattle rustlers, and bandits all operate in zones where state authority is weak or absent. For innocent pastoral communities, this environment is doubly threatening: they face violence from non-

state armed groups even as they are blamed for insecurity and violence by sedentary populations and state authorities. In northern Nigeria, pastoral communities have been forced to abandon some areas due to the presence of Boko Haram and armed bandits, further concentrating pastoral populations in areas already experiencing resource stress.[liv]

State Responses and the Persistence of Structural Tensions

The Nigerian government's responses to herder-farmer conflicts have proven largely ineffective, often arriving too late and failing to address the underlying structural causes of violence. Security forces are frequently positioned near conflict zones but respond slowly or not at all to attacks, which can last for hours or even days.[lv] In some cases, security forces have had prior warning of imminent attacks but failed to prevent them. The dysfunctional nature of the country's law enforcement and criminal justice system means that perpetrators of violence—whether herders or vigilantes—are rarely arrested or prosecuted, creating a climate of impunity that encourages further violence.[lvi]

Policy initiatives have similarly failed to resolve the crisis. Almost nothing has been achieved 18 months after Nigeria's current president, Bola Tinubu, announced the creation of a Federal Ministry of Livestock Development and more than two years since the constitution of a Presidential Livestock Reform Implementation Committee.[lvii] Early last year, it was reported that the Tinubu government had entered into partnerships with Brazilian authorities aimed at boosting local livestock production and processing.[lviii] Indeed, the government has initiated an array of schemes including the National Livestock Masterplan, a ten-year National Livestock Transformation Plan, a Livestock Productivity and Resilience Support Project, a National Livestock Transformation Bill, National Livestock Conflict De-escalation Framework, a National Livestock Information System, a Nigeria Livestock Investment Fund and a Livestock Innovation Grant Scheme.[lix] The results of all these initiatives remain to be seen.

As mentioned earlier, the administration of the immediate past president—Muhammadu Buhari, who is himself a Fulani man—attempted to address the crises through the development of grazing reserves and stock routes, announcing plans in 2016 to map grazing areas in all states as a temporary solution until pastoralists could be persuaded to adopt ranching. However, most central and southern states opposed these plans, viewing them as favouring Fulani herders at the expense of agricultural communities. The proposed Rural Grazing Area (RUGA) policy, which would have allocated lands in agricultural zones for pastoral settlement, provoked intense opposition and was ultimately abandoned.

Anti-grazing laws implemented by several states also represent an alternative approach, prohibiting age-long free ranging practices and mandating ranch-based livestock production. While proponents argue that such laws promote peace and modernise animal husbandry, critics contend that they effectively criminalise pastoral mobility without providing viable alternatives. The capital requirements for establishing ranches place them beyond the reach of most pastoral families, while the ecological unsuitability of intensive livestock production in many areas makes ranching economically unviable.[lx]

Civil society and international organisations have advocated for alternative, sustainable approaches emphasising regional cooperation, desertification control and protection of livestock corridors, pasture improvement schemes, improved conflict resolution mechanisms, and support for pastoral livelihoods.[lxi] The Supporting Pastoralism and Agriculture in Recurrent and Protracted Crises (SPARC) programme has recommended securing and facilitating pastoral mobility as essential for following seasonal pasture cycles and avoiding conflicts.[lxii] The Food and Agriculture Organization and other international actors have supported monitoring and early warning systems, institutional capacity building, and the development of pastoral codes to regulate resource access and mobility in countries such as Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger.[lxiii]

Yet these initiatives confront fundamental obstacles rooted in the structure of postcolonial states. The territorial logic of the nation-state, with its emphasis on bounded sovereignty, fixed populations, and centralised control over land allocation, remains fundamentally incompatible with the nimbleness of nomadic pastoral livelihoods. Land tenure systems that privilege sedentary occupation and documented ownership systematically disadvantage mobile populations. Political systems that allocate representation and resources based on ethnic identity and territorial indigeneity exclude those whose identity is defined partly by movement across territories.

Conclusion: Toward Alternative Imaginaries of Political Community

The conflicts between pastoral nomads and settled populations in Nigeria and the broader Sahel region reflect profound contradictions embedded in the postcolonial African state. These countries, inheriting colonial boundaries and administrative structures designed to facilitate extraction and control rather than to accommodate African social, economic, and political realities, have proven poorly suited to mediating competing claims over land and resources. The emphasis on territorial sovereignty, sedentary citizenship, and ethnic autochthony creates systematic disadvantages for highly mobile pastoral communities whose livelihoods and identities are organised around (semi-)nomadism rather than fixity.

The historical trajectory examined in this article reveals how colonial policies of territorialisation, continued through postcolonial land tenure regimes exemplified in Nigeria's Land Use Act of 1978, have progressively dispossessed pastoral communities of their traditional rights to land use. Environmental pressures including climate change and desertification have intensified competition over diminishing resources, while population growth and rapid urbanisation have driven agricultural expansion into former grazing lands. The result has been a humanitarian catastrophe, with tens of thousands dead and hundreds of thousands displaced by violence that shows little signs of abating.[lxiv]

Addressing these conflicts requires moving beyond technocratic solutions focused solely on security interventions, grazing reserves, or ranching programmes. It is imperative for governments in the affected regions to fundamentally reconsider how citizenship, belonging, and land rights are conceived in communities and states characterised by high mobility and diverse livelihood strategies. This might involve recognising multiple forms of legitimate land use beyond fixed ownership, protecting the mobility rights of pastoral communities through legally enforceable corridors and transhumance routes, and developing citizenship frameworks that accommodate rather than penalise mobility.

Regional cooperation is essential, given that pastoral routes cross national boundaries and environmental challenges affect multiple countries simultaneously. The ECOWAS framework provides a potential foundation for such cooperation, but implementation requires political will at the national level and a genuine commitment to protecting pastoral livelihoods rather than viewing pastoralism as an anachronistic practice requiring elimination. International climate finance and development assistance must support pastoral communities as they adapt to environmental change rather than assuming that sedentarisation represents the only viable future.

The crisis of pastoral nomadism and postcolonial statehood in Nigeria and the Sahel ultimately challenges us to imagine alternative forms of political community that can accommodate diverse economic practices and patterns of belonging. The nation-state model, imposed through colonialism and maintained through postcolonial governments, has proven inadequate to this task. Whether new imaginaries can emerge from the current crisis—or whether violence will continue to be the primary mechanism through which these contradictions are negotiated—remains an open and urgent question.

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[i] For more on the proposed policy, see Taiwo Ojoye, "South-East govs, Ortom, Ishaku, others reject FG's Ruga settlements for herdsmen," The Punch, June 26, 2019; George Opara, "FG sued over controversial Ruga Settlement policy," Daily Post, July 3, 2019; Solomon Fowowe, "FG Suspends Ruga," The Guardian, July 3, 2019; Orji Sunday, "Nigeria's 'cattle colony' problem," Aljazeera, Feb. 8, 2018.

[ii] "Foreign Fulani Herders Will Benefit from RUGA Initiative – Gov. Mohammed," Sunrise Daily Show, Channels Television, Sept. 16, 2019.

[iii] While Nigeria has witnessed a few attempts at semi-intensive livestock farming in the past, virtually all of these efforts have for various reasons been unsuccessful, with the result being that commercial stock production and meat supply in the country has largely remained in the hands of the nomadic Fulani pastoralists.

[iv] International Crisis Group (ICG), "Ending Nigeria's Herder–Farmer Crisis: The Livestock Reform Plan," Africa Report No. 302, May 4, 2021; Olu Fasan, "Cattle colonies: Buhari's provocative response to the herder-farmer conflicts," Business Day, July 8, 2019.

[v] It must be noted that Nigeria is home to more than a dozen other pastoral groups apart from the Fulani, and that all of those groups engage in cross-border movements. See Roger Blench, "Pastoralists and National Borders in Nigeria," in African Boundaries: Barriers, Conduits and Opportunities, ed. Paul Nugent and A. I. Asiwaju (London: Pinter, 1996), 112, 118, 121.

[vi] See David Olagunju, "No Peace Unless Herdsmen Move Freely – Northern Group," The Nigerian Tribune, July 6, 2019; Johnbosco Agbakwuru, "Controversy over Ruga settlements for Fulani unnecessary – Gov Lalong," The Vanguard, July 1, 2019; Alfred Olufemi, "Governors must defend citizens' rights to live anywhere in Nigeria – El-Rufai," Premium Times, Feb. 4, 2021.

[vii] For cases beyond West Africa and the Sahel, see Tobias Hagmann and Alemmaya Mulugeta, "Pastoral conflicts and state-building in the Ethiopian lowlands," Africa Spectrum (2008): 19-37; Eion F. McGuirk and Nathan Nunn, "Transhumant Pastoralism, Climate Change, and Conflict in Africa," NBER Working Paper 28243, 2020.

[viii] Blench, "Pastoralists and National Borders in Nigeria," 116.

[ix] Chika Oduah, "Nigeria: Deadly nomad-versus-farmer conflict escalates," Al Jazeera, July 6, 2016.

[x] Leif Brottem, "The Growing Complexity of Farmer-Herder Conflict in West and Central Africa," Africa Security Brief no. 39, Africa Center for Strategic Studies, July 12, 2021; Udo Jude Ilo, Ier Jonathan-Ichaver, and 'Yemi Adamolekun, "The Deadliest Conflict You've Never Heard of," Foreign Affairs, Jan. 23, 2019.

[xi] See Francis B. Nyamjoh, "The nimbleness of being Fulani," Africa Today 59, no. 3 (2013): 105-134; Mary B. Settana, "Citizenship, indigeneity, and the experiences of 1.5-and second-generation Fulani herders in Ghana," Africa Spectrum 56, no. 1 (2021): 81-99.

[xii] Yaa Pokua Afriyie Oppong, "Fulani," Encyclopedia of Africa, vol. 1 (Oxford University Press, 2010), 495-96; F. W. de St. Croix, The Fulani of Northern Nigeria (Lagos: Govt Printer, 1945), 1.

[xiii] Derrick J. Stenning, "Transhumance, migratory drift, migration; patterns of pastoral Fulani nomadism," The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute 87, no. 1 (1957): 57-73; Mustafa B. Ibrahim, "The Fulani: A nomadic tribe in northern Nigeria," African Affairs 65, no. 259 (1966): 171.

[xiv] Blench, "Pastoralists and National Borders in Nigeria," 116; Celia Lebur, Florian Plaucheur and Luis Tato, "The Fulani: An AFP Special Investigation," AFP, June 25, 2019.

[xv] Akanmu G. Adebayo, "Of man and cattle: A reconsideration of the traditions of origin of pastoral Fulani of Nigeria," History in Africa 18 (1991): 1-21.
[xvi] Samuel Nwabara, "The Fulani conquest and rule of the Hausa Kingdom of Northern Nigeria (1804-1900)," Journal des Africanistes 33, no. 2 (1963): 231-242.
[xvii] Mustafa B. Ibrahim, "The Fulani," 171; C. Edward Hopen, The Pastoral Fulbe Family in Gwandu (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), 8-15.
[xviii] Charles M. McDowell, "An introduction to the problems of ownership of land in Northern Nigeria," Nigerian Law Journal 1, no. 2 (1965): 202-205.
[xix] Oppong, "Fulani," Encyclopedia of Africa, 495; de St. Croix, Fulani, 15; J. R. Wilson-Haffenden, The Red Men of Nigeria (London: Seeley, Service & Co., 1930), 44-45, 92.
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