



The Moral Economy of the Agatu “Massacre”: Reterritorializing Farmer-Herder Relations

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Abstract

The Agatu “Massacre” is a conflict between pastoralists and farmers in the Agatu area of Benue State, Nigeria. The conflict is significant because of the event’s gravity, but no scholarly inquiry that involves thoughtful and reflective methodological and theoretical approaches has been made. This paper investigates how the farmer-herder relations in Agatu became a violent crisis and situates it within relevant literature to fill gaps in farmer-herder conflicts literature in Africa. Existing literature demonstrates the pertinence of moral economies for resource use, spatial pattern, and manifestations of conflicts in developing and developed worlds. However, studies have yet to use the moral economy concept to explore the African farmer-herder conflicts from a political ecology perspective. This paper demonstrates that the Agatu crisis emerged due to reterritorializations in the moral economy of farmers and herders, disrupting their social ties. It further illustrates that the violence in Agatu was caused by the deviation from the traditional approach to addressing the damage done to crops by herding livestock. Nevertheless, the paper argues that this deviation is the consequence of modifications in the moral economy of farmers and herders driven by the aspiration for financial gain rather than the subsistence of agro-pastoral relations. The paper argues that changes in moral economies can disrupt social relations and lead to farmer-herder conflicts, leading to the exclusion of pastoralists from resource access through policy and legislation.

Keywords Agatu “Massacre” · Farmer-herder conflict · Moral economy · Political ecology · Reterritorialization

Introduction

The Agatu “Massacre” is a conflict between native Idoma farmers and the Fulani herders in the Agatu local government area (LGA) of Benue State in Nigeria. The crisis began in 2012, leading to the heaviest battle in 2016, dubbed the Agatu “Massacre” (Mayah, 2016). The Agatu crisis began in Akpeko in the Ocholoyan village of Okokolo ward and eventually spread throughout the Agatu LGA. The Idoma farmers claim that the Fulani pastoralists aim to take over Agatu, especially the riverine villages such as Obagaji, Adagbo, Akwu, Odugbehon, Aila, Okokolo, and Odejo, due to their fertile land and freshwater suitable for agro-pastoral production (Mayah, 2016). However, the Fulani herders stated that

the Agatu people were wrong and pretended to be victims. The conflict escalated when an Agatu and Tiv militia group killed a Fulani herder named Sehu Abdullahi and stole over 200 cattle (Mayah, 2016). Despite the murder, no serious action was taken by the police or government. The herders indicated that the conflict intensified when the Agatu militia beheaded a well-known Fulani leader named Madaki. Madaki attended a meeting to resolve issues surrounding the death of Sehu Abdullahi and the damage his cattle inflicted on crops (Mayah, 2016). His death provoked the Fulani people, which resulted in a crisis involving killings and the destruction of property. A report indicates 3920 people died from the conflict between 2013 and 2017, and 2000 died in internally displaced person camps (Duru, 2017). Exploring the nature and dynamics of this conflict can contribute to the literature on farmer-herder conflicts in Africa.

Although the media reports offer some background information about the crisis, serious scholarly research on the conflict that involves thoughtful and reflective methodological and theoretical approaches has not been conducted. The research examines the nature of the Agatu massacre to understand how the farmer-herder conflict in Agatu became

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violent using grounded theory methodology. The paper uses the moral economy concept within a political ecology framework to explicate the crisis. It shows how reterritorializations of moral economy guiding farmer-herder relations engendered the violent Agatu crisis. A moral economy is composed of moral rationales based on culturally and historically specific production relationships that farmers and herders employ to define the ideal structure of their relations, particularly how productive assets (especially land) should be accessed and distributed (Wolford, 2005, p. 243). Relevant to this is reterritorialization, which implies shifts in anticipated behaviour and practices regarding farmer-herder associations due to past interactions between them. Reterritorialization occurs as rival factions usually have vested interests in a particular arrangement of resource utilization because of changes in the values of resources in the agro-pastoral economy (Brogden & Greenberg, 2003).

Therefore, the paper frames the conflicts around a moral dimension of the political ecology literature on the African farmer-herder conflicts (Turner, 2004; Nwankwo & Okafor, 2021). In doing this, the article contributes to the literature on the farmer-herder conflicts in Nigeria as the political ecology perspective is scarcely adopted. Most research into the farmer-herder conflicts in Nigeria usually relies on the environmental security framework of environmental degradation, resource scarcity, population density, and climate change (e.g., Madu & Nwankwo, 2021; Bello & Kazibwe, 2022; Lenshie et al., 2022). Political ecologists have highly jettisoned these environmental security framings (e.g., Turner, 2004; Benjaminsen & Ba, 2009, 2021; Benjaminsen et al., 2009) as incapable of properly explaining violence triggers. Secondly, while political ecology literature has gained its footing in the scholarly analysis of farmer-herder conflicts in Africa, scholars have scarcely adopted or engaged with one of the two moral dimensions Matthew D. Turner stated (Turner, 2004).

More attention has been paid to the ethics of narrating the farmer-herder conflicts wherein Turner encouraged political ecologists to jettison scarcity narratives (e.g., Benjaminsen & Ba, 2009; Benjaminsen et al., 2009; Walwa, 2020). The second moral dimension that concerns how the farmer-herder conflicts develop from moral transgressions has not received significant engagement or interrogation. In addition, little literature looks at the farmer-herder conflicts from the moral economy perspective. Thus, more broadly, there has not been serious engagement with the moral dimension of farmer-herder conflicts. Therefore, the article contributes to the literature by exploring through a political ecology lens and the moral economy concept how the farmer-herder relations in Agatu became a violent crisis. Conflict and cooperation are part of everyday farmer-herder interaction in Africa, but when do conflicts become violent? Using grounded theory methodology, the overall question that the study asked was: how did the farmer-herder relations in Agatu become a violent conflict?

This paper demonstrates that the reterritorialization of the moral economy of farmers and herders resulted in the deterioration of their social relations. It further shows that the violence in Agatu resulted from divergences from established customary methods of dealing with destructive crop damage by pastoralists' cattle. Additionally, it argues that the divergence results from alterations in the moral economy of farmers and herders propelled by the wish for financial gain instead of subsistence agro-pastoral production. Lastly, it underscores the need to pay attention to how changes in moral economies result in farmer-herder discord and how the conflict motivates the exclusion of pastoralists. The structure of the paper is as follows: the next section establishes the gap in and contribution to literature. The following section articulates the theoretical approaches and methodology before a thematic discussion of the findings under four headings, followed by "Discussion" and "Conclusion" sections.

Review of the Literature

Existing literature demonstrates the pertinence of moral economies for resource use and spatial pattern and manifestations of conflicts. However, studies have yet to use the moral economy perspective to explore the African farmer-herder conflicts from a political ecology perspective. Studies of the moral economy of agrarian conflicts and associated issues outside Africa are not scarce, e.g., Berman-Arévalo's (2021) examination of the connections between armed conflict, alterations in land orders, and moral economies in Montes de María, a Colombian agrarian area of the Caribbean. However, while there are growing studies using the moral economy to explore resources-related concerns in Africa (e.g., Olwig et al., 2015; Leonardi, 2011; Harrison, 2020; Schwieger et al., 2022), those that specifically explore agrarian issues that relate to farmers or pastoralists are dated (e.g., Anderson, 1986; Neumann, 1998; Turner, 2004).

Research has been conducted from various angles to examine the moral economy, for example, examining ethnic distinctions in southern Sudan (Leonardi, 2011), the regulatory framework of rural water systems in Namibia (Schwieger et al., 2022), access to scarce resources in southern Malawi (Harrison, 2020), customary approaches for managing natural resource clashes in rural Mali (Calmon et al., 2021), the effects of COVID-19 on pastoralists globally (Simula et al., 2021), and elite holding of resources related to diversification (Marty et al., 2023). Studies exploring the moral economy of agrarian conflict-related issues that relate specifically to farmers or pastoralists are dated (e.g., Anderson, 1986; Neumann, 1998) and need to be updated with ongoing conversations. Neumann (1998, p. 37) showed that African farmers and villagers had a moral economy around resource use inside national parks that countered colonialism's idea of

separate land uses. Anderson's (1986) study on rural Kenya showed how colonial administration responded to cattle raiding and livestock theft by creating legislation recognizing the moral ground underpinning stock theft, which was seen as a traditional game for young people. Africans' reluctance to prevent or detect the crime was interpreted as tacit approval, leading to a perception that it was not considered a crime in their communities.

Turner (2004) contends that comprehending the moral dimensions of resource conflicts in Africa is vital. He employed a political ecological approach to expose two moral aspects of farmer-herder conflicts in the Sahel. The first dimension highlights the intertwined moral and material motivations of resource conflicts and how examining resources' physical and economic aspects can offer a deeper comprehension of such conflicts. The second dimension pertains to the ethics of how conflicts are depicted and mentioned and how such depictions are used to back neoliberal programs that pursue environmental and political stability by enclosing common property resources in dryland areas of Africa. While scholars have focused more on the second moral dimension, the first aspect needs to be addressed. Political ecology studies of resources conflicts have significantly focused on critiquing resources scarcity narratives demonstrating how agricultural modernization policies of states marginalize pastoralists in Africa (Benjaminsen & Ba, 2009; Benjaminsen et al., 2009) and the capitalist, neoliberal, and green economy agenda of land grabs that dispossess farmers and pastoralists (Bergius et al., 2020; Walwa, 2020). Thus, this paper contributes to the literature by picking up the first moral dimension to show how it is still relevant to explaining resource-related conflicts through using the moral economies concept in productive dialogue with political ecology to explicate the Agatu Massacre.

Nevertheless, most studies examining the farmer-herder conflicts in Nigeria do not often use the political ecology approach and do not explore the moral dimensions. Instead, most research into resource-based disputes in Nigeria usually relies on the environmental security framework of scarcity, population density, and climate change, which cannot properly explain violence triggers (e.g., Madu & Nwankwo, 2021; Bello & Kazibwe, 2022; Lenshie et al., 2022). Overall, the literature reviewed has shown that studies of the moral economy of agrarian conflicts and associated issues outside Africa are not scarce. However, while there are growing studies using the moral economy to explore resource-related concerns in Africa, those that specifically explore agrarian issues related to farmers or pastoralists need to be updated.

While Turner (2004) argued that the moral dimension of resources conflicts in Africa is pertinent to understanding them using political ecology, most studies have focused on the second dimension that called for the critique of scarcity narratives and particularly, there has not been an

examination of the farmer-herder conflicts through the moral economy perspective. It is essential to comprehend the moral economy discourses of the farmer-herder conflict due to adding to the policy options and the actual political and economic repercussions derived from unequal access to resources that political ecologists emphasize. Thus, the article contributes to the political ecology literature on conflicts in Africa by using the moral economy lens and the political ecology perspective to examine the farmer-herder conflict.

Moral Economy Concept

The moral economy concept is mostly credited to E. P. Thompson. The concept of moral economy, which emphasizes the interplay between sociocultural systems and economics, has been explored across different social science disciplines. Thompson's (1971) theory suggests that food riots in the eighteenth century were motivated by what crowds believed were morally justifiable conditions. Scott's (1976) argument extends this to Southeast Asian peasants, who only rebelled when their subsistence rights were infringed, according to their shared moral code. Reuter (2019) emphasizes the moral element in political-economic assessments. Neumann (1998) and Berman-Arévalo (2021) apply the moral economy concept to understand the livelihood of underprivileged groups and the political reactions of disadvantaged groups to the economic structure, respectively. Boucquey's study (2017) reveals how different views on resource usage and moral values lead to disagreements and shape economic practices. Ripoll (2022) emphasizes the importance of a moral economy in understanding how different groups can adopt economic practices. Farmers and herders adhere to ethical codes to coexist harmoniously with the potential for reducing impoverishment through bartering and subsistence agriculture. Wolford (2005) explores the moral economies of Brazil's landless labourers and landed elites, showing how these ideologies contain historical and geographical variations. Wolford's (2005) use of the term "moral economy", pertinent to this study, describes individuals' and social groups' norms that shape how to maintain fairness in resource access and distribution among them based on their histories, locations, and political-economic circumstances.

Brogden and Greenberg (2003) explain the concept of reterritorialization, which occurs when certain groups redefine the value of goods and consequently gain control over access rights to a natural system. This can lead to the deprivileging of earlier commodity values, often leading to conflicts. Kröger's (2020) research in Brazil highlights this process; moral and economic changes have enabled cattle capitalism to expand due to deforestation while at the same time endangering future moral and political economies

connected with forests. The paper emphasizes how these transgressions contribute to violent behaviour in farmer-herder relations and how the reterritorialization of the moral economy of farmers and herders can aggravate resource disputes between them. Therefore, reterritorialization occurs because competing groups typically have vested interests in a certain pattern of resource usage, given changes in the values of resources in the agrarian economy. Hence, moral economies are frequently re-evaluated as connections and need change, such as economic values and conditions. Farmers and herders may re-evaluate their position in agro-pastoral relations based on economic circumstances choosing to reterritorialize as they strive to protect their positions by adopting particular socio-economic practices. This comes from acknowledged changes in established agro-pastoral relations. The incongruence between the new practices and the norm informs how moral economies engender conflicts in Agatu.

Political Ecology

Political ecology research disproves the assumption that clashes over resources result only from scarcity, showing that they have their roots in social and physical factors (Bassett, 1988; Turner, 2004; Benjaminsen & Ba, 2009, 2021; Benjaminsen et al., 2009; Walwa, 2020). Turner's (2004) findings indicate that "moral violations" are essential in how material issues become conflicts. Therefore, the "moral economy" concept is useful for this type of political ecology investigation. The idea of "moral economy" is applicable here because all economic activities and relationships depend on moral principles and ethical leanings. Land or resource utilization or tenure set-ups are determined by particular moral economies, which a certain group of resource users may oppose because of differences in their moral code. Consequently, the ethical nature of economic activities and structures is demonstrated by customs and rules governing them, such as rights and obligations and a sense of fairness. A political ecology perspective is useful in discerning the various moral economies that may be found in farmer-herder relations. Turner (2004) indicates that competition between farming and herding can be rooted in this material pressure, such as livestock straying onto a farmer's field due to herder negligence or a new field blocking a livestock corridor, which can influence people's access to resources and thus their livelihood strategies. However, conflict does not arise from these situations alone; it requires an ideological commitment violation to manifest (Turner et al., 2011).

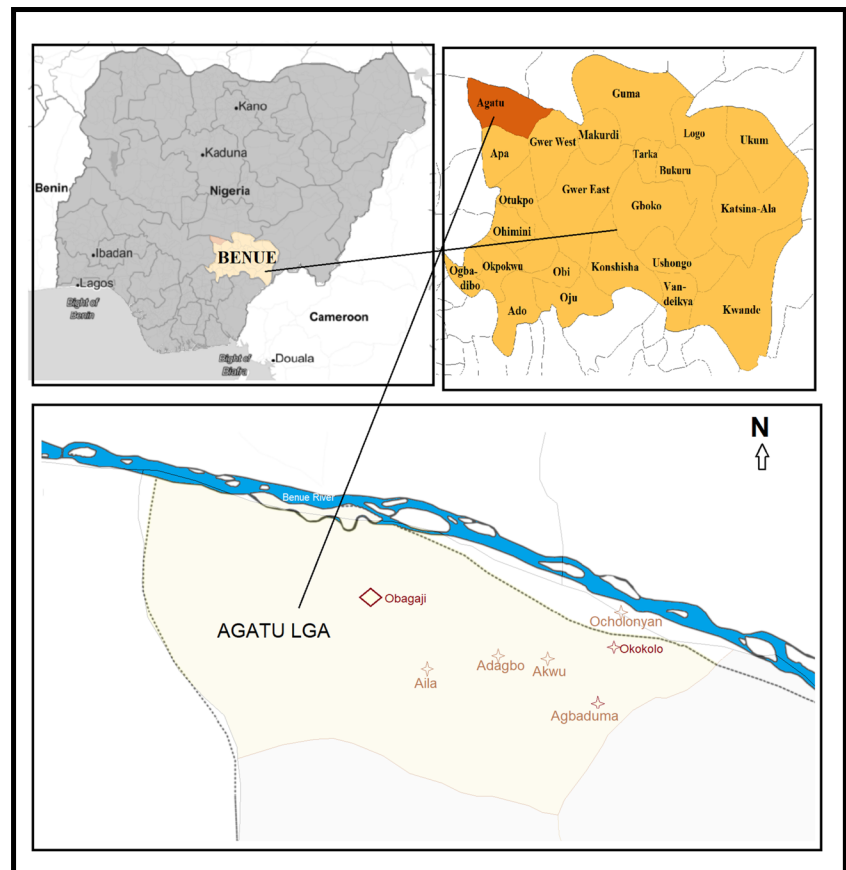
Resource conflict is often caused by the feeling that one's access to them has been breached because such changes to the traditions of utilizing them are considered morally unfair. Hall et al. (2011) indicate that access and

exclusion are determined by moral values accepted as right, which are the fundamental basis of exclusive claims and socially acceptable grounds for exclusion. Turner (2004) similarly proposed that moral grievances with a material foundation play a major role in explaining farmer-herder conflicts, stating that material interests, moral claims and narratives are more likely to cause these clashes than scarcity of resources. According to Turner, most disputes in the Sahel are unrelated to the resources at hand. However, rather they come from deeper issues such as broken marriages, bride prices, the political gain ambition of local chiefs, and national party affiliation differences. Consequently, Turner (2004) argued that political ecologists should delve into what motivates these farmer-herder conflicts: material interests, moral claims, and stories. Therefore, moral economies are related to moral claims about resource use and expected behaviour patterns and practices. Conflict may occur when the particulars of a moral economy stand in opposition to the established practice. This phenomenon is based on historical events and shaped by cultures, societies, politics, environments, and individuals within these contexts.

Methodology

This study used qualitative techniques, specifically the grounded theory approach, to explore farmer-herder conflicts in Central Nigeria. This method seeks to create a theory that illuminates the major issues present in this environment. It involves specific ways of collecting and analyzing data while allowing the researcher to gain insights during the research process (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021). First, snippets of information are carefully labelled and examined to recognize their meanings and actions (Glaser & Strauss, 2012). Line-by-line coding is recommended to consolidate data and form new concepts explaining what is happening. The grounded theory approach provides academics with beneficial methods for generating theoretical analyses or ideas that explain social phenomena (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021). The study occurred in the Agatu LGA of Benue State, one of the key areas where the conflicts had occurred in Central Nigeria (Fig. 1). The researcher visited the area multiple times between January and July 2022 to make observations and carry out interviews. Field observation was utilized, as well as unstructured interviews with farmers in Agatu and herders in neighbouring communities, namely Loko, Rukubi, and Doma, because the herders fled Agatu to these areas as the conflict started in 2012.

An unstructured interview is useful for grounded theory research because the subject is not fully comprehended (Foley, Timonen, Conlon & O'Dare, 2021), as in Agatu. The aim is to investigate the conflict with as much

Fig. 1 The study area

liberty as possible. In this type of interview, there is no pre-determined set of questions or scripts; instead, the interviewer uses open-ended questions to get the interviewee to open up about their views (Foley et al. 2021). Purposive random sampling was employed in interviews with key informants, namely traditional rulers, the Hardo—the herders’ leader, village heads, village land dispute committees, and security personnel in the villages in Agatu. The sample size was determined theoretically as grounded theory uses theoretical sampling defined as the point of saturation where no new data collected offer new insights into the study question (Foley et al., 2021). The larger study completed 93 interviews, of which 24 were related to the Agatu crisis. Of the 24 interviewees, 10 were farmers, pastoralists (4), traditional rulers (3), the Hardo (1), village heads (2), village land dispute committees (2), and security personnel (2).

The interviews began with a brief overview of the purpose of the research. Then they proceeded to engage the interviewees in a discussion of the farmer-herder conflicts in Agatu by asking them to talk about their experiences of the crisis. Further questions are asked to clarify points raised by the interviewees but prepared to uphold ethics of care. Before conducting interviews, ethical considerations were made. All participants were given written

consent forms detailing their willingness to participate and selecting either audio recording or note-taking for their responses. The aim and scope of the project were clarified before each interview, with participants allowed to opt out at any time and to decline to answer any questions. No references to the participant’s personal and identifying information were made in the research paper. Hence, each interview is coded, i.e., “Interview A1... An”, “Interview B1...Bn”. The grounded approach was employed to analyze the data collected, which involved repetitively comparing existing and new information to identify discrepancies, similarities, and correlations. This process is referred to as the constant comparative technique. This method enabled researchers to assess the accuracy of their data collection efforts and make any necessary revisions. Afterwards, interviews were sorted through and coded into relevant themes while grounded theory perspectives were used to trace their conceptual origins (Nwankwo & Okafor, 2021). Using these grounded theory principles and techniques, the most suitable theorization that encapsulates the farmer-herder conflict in Agatu is a moral economy concept with a political ecology flavour. The next section discusses how tensions in the farmer-herder relations developed because of crop damage by cattle termed “barna”.

Barna: On the Question of Destruction

Farmers often accuse herders of invading their land, destroying crops, and committing sexual assault. Poor herd management can be attributed to a lack of labour within the managing family and has made it harder to control herds due to increasing crop fields. In contrast, pastoralists allege that farmers steal cattle and infringe upon grazing paths and pastures. The problem in Agatu is more intricate than just conflicting material interests between farmers and herders; understanding how to manage these conflicts is essential to comprehend why farmer-herder relations became so violent that it was labelled as a “massacre”. Conflict actions can include social tension/avoidance, political action, and violent action. Violence is typically the last resort and occurs only when rights or established relations systems have been severely violated (Turner, 2004). Social tension/avoidance acknowledges the conflict but takes no public action, while political action is organized action within existing institutions to resolve the conflict (Turner, 2004). Political action options include verbal discussion/bargaining and mediation by elders. Violence is usually avoided as it can result in harm or death and further deteriorate intergroup relations. To understand the violent conflict between Idoma farmers and Fulani pastoralists in Agatu, changes in the moral economy of the groups must be explored, as moral expectations regarding the established relations system have been significantly altered.

The conflict between farmers and herders in Agatu began with issues of cattle destruction of crops and cattle rustling, known as “barna”. These issues are usually resolved without violence, as crop damage from cattle is expected by farmers and seen as a part of the pastoralist way of life. However, changes in expected behaviours have led to reterritorialization, and the magnitude of damage and expected behaviour post-damage can determine the form of political action taken. Conceptually, barna has two meanings. First, barna is a social practice with animist underpinnings, where herds commit small destruction to receive blessings of growth and reproduction. Farmers and herders understand that “small” crop damage is inevitable and part of the moral economy.

Barna has become reterritorialized, with the mischievous destruction of crops or farmlands distinguished from the former practice by italicizing it. The original barna did not involve the destruction of farmland but only eating a tiny piece of leaves from crops grown on a farm, which was considered morally acceptable. However, the reterritorialized *barna* encompasses all forms of mischievous destruction of farms and crops beyond herds, seen as morally wrong. The farmers argued that herders admit that barna is a part of their culture, and indeed, they do. As stated by a farmer, “They said that is in their culture; their cattle must do that. They must spoil something” (Interview

A1, farmer). The Hausa are the closest to the Fulani in terms of cultural ties. Hence, their views can be weightier than other groups, at least in the simplest sense of explanation. A Hausa key informant who is also a farmer and has had disagreements with Fulani herders indicated that barna is not a tradition but a belief that comes from the rational calculation of the cost and benefit of causing mischief to receive a blessing.

I am curious to know whether it is their tradition, but it is their belief. So, a Fulani will believe in putting his cow to eat your farm and let him lose like four to five cows for fifty to feed. For example, now, if they come and destroy somebody’s crop, they may be charged three to four or five hundred thousand, so they will believe that of fifty cows, they rather sell five cows for those forty-five to eat because they believe that if those forty-five eats the blessing is there (Interview B25, commandant of a military camp).

The spokesperson of the pastoralists’ advocacy group, Miyetti Allah, noted:

The mischief is the real traditional culture of Fulani because they have a cow, but most of these cattle chop somebody’s farm but traditionally not like now. Now, somebody can pack all the cows and put am inside somebody’s farm, but before, it was to touch it like this (Interview B32, Fulani herder).

Here the spokesperson implies the first meaning, barna, even though he uses the word “mischief”. Traditionally, barna in Fulani pastoralists’ culture is not to destroy crops on a farm but to allow the cattle to have a piece of leaf from a crop to receive a blessing. So, it is, as the spokesperson argued, “a touch like this, small and go”... “just to touch small, that is our own culture”... “because we have a cow, the cow they must chop somebody farm small” (Interview B32, Fulani herder). A farmer argued that the herders believed that “anytime the cattle spoil the farm, they quickly give birth” (Interview A1). Another farmer argued, “that is the belief they have, so, for them, eating from somebody’s farm is just like a blessing” (Interview B10). According to a farmer:

They [herders] say that when they do barna, all their cattle will produce plenty of younger ones. That is why they will not stop barna... If they do barna today or tomorrow before the end of this year, the cattle will give birth to younger ones plenty, and the cattle will be very fat (Interview A2, farmer [member of peace committee]).

However, in its reterritorialized connotation, *barna* involves the deliberate destruction of crops or farmland by herds

under the supervision of the herder, which farmers considered morally wrong. Framers argued that before the last one and half decades, farmers and herders resolved issues of barna peacefully and amicably such that farmers would feel that the herders should commit barna again because the compensation paid is considered commensurable to not just the cost of labour and farm products but also the intangible congenial relations between the farmer and his farm and crops:

As we grew up, we encountered a certain type of Fulani. The ones we were used to seeing were shepherds with sticks. You would come across a Fulani man who had inadvertently trespassed into your farm with his cattle. If you were not there, they would track you down to apologize for their mistake and offer compensation for the damage. It would be a peaceful, satisfactory resolution for all parties when they paid. It was even to the point that you might wish they would trespass again so you could be more compensated—no heated arguments. However, the Fulani now carry dangerous weapons. We used to leave our farm seedlings and cassava on the farm to process there. However, now they will come and open it, even if you secure it in one place, so their cattle can eat it. If you ask, they will threaten you with a cutlass or the gun they carry. (Interview C7, farmer and community leader).

Thus, crop damage is a regular feature of farmer-herder relations and is not the main trigger of violent conflicts. However, changes to the expected behaviour from herders have made barna seem to cause the violent conflict. While herders' access to sophisticated weapons backed by top political and business leaders could be stated to have made them neglect established practices (see Ajala, 2020, for a discussion of neo-pastoralism in Nigeria), the growing sense of injustice because of deviations from the established system of relations offers a better explanation. These deviations relate more to the increasingly profit-oriented nature of farmer-herder relations, as discussed in the next section.

Changing Values and Social Relations

The change in the established values, behaviours, and practices of farmers and herders has contributed to the development of *barna* shaped by the increasingly profit-oriented nature of their relations. Previously, farming communities and herders' relations were less transactional in monetary terms as their forefathers related through mutual respect and recognition of interdependence:

The relationship between the Fulani herders with elders before was just love. Sometimes when these

Fulani men come, they will give something called “go”. They will collect small money to give the elders, say, they take as a go—that is kolanut. So, that they will chop, they will know, say somebody gives them something and the person requesting to chop something in their areas or within the houses. Moreover, sometimes if their cows die, they will carry the cow and give the elders within the areas so that they will share (Interview A2, farmer).

The conflict between farmers and herders in Nigeria and other parts of Africa has a long history of violence since the 1900s (Onyima & Iwuoha, 2015). However, in the last two decades leading up to the 2012 crisis, farmers began expanding their farms to produce crops for profit rather than subsistence (e.g., Interview A12, A19, A49, A50). The Hardo of the herders also confirmed that they started having “small” problems with farmers because of crop damage by cattle twenty years before the crisis, i.e., the 1980s (Interview A30). This change in farming practices led to an increase in the compensation demanded by farmers for crop damage by herds. The huge compensation farmers levied on herders comes from the changing value of crops. Experts suggest that the rational calculation between crop damage and compensation is the root cause of barna. Herders felt it was morally wrong to demand high compensation for damage to crops that were way too high for the value of the crops they had damaged. The reterritorialization of the moral economy may have started in the 1980s with the deployment of the Structural Adjustment Program, which led to the expansion of Nigeria's neoliberal and market-led economy (Ezeibe et al., 2017), encouraging profit-driven farming in subsistence communities. This shift in farming practices intensified the conflict between farmers and herders.

Nevertheless, there is evidence of a reterritorialization of the value of cattle. Traditionally, pastoralists did not sell many cattle as they were seen as a symbol of wealth, stability, and prestige (Lawal-Adebawale, 2012) such that those who have no cattle sell crops and “use the money to buy cattle” (Interview B20B, Fulani herder). However, cattle are now being reared for profit, with herd sizes surging from 70 to 1000. The rising cost of cattle has turned cattle ownership into a profitable venture attracting non-traditional pastoralists. Ajala provides examples of the increase in cattle prices over time, from ₦70,000 in 1997 to ₦170,000 in 2019 (Ajala, 2020, p. 2051). There are few ways to identify who owns what livestock, making it easy for dishonest politicians to invest in cattle to hide their illegal wealth, causing an artificial price spike. However, this can cause conflicts with local farmers who may experience crop damage from the cattle, leading to disagreements over compensation. The hired herders may not build relationships with local farmers because they carry firearms that can be used to scare them (Ajala, 2020).

Historical practices and anticipated behaviours shape the relationship between farmers and herders in Nigeria. Herders complain about the high fees they must pay to access farming communities, a departure from the less materialistic relationship between their forefathers. Farmers demand increased compensation for their land commensurate with or more than the profit they would have made from cultivating the land to grow crops. The value of land differs for farmers and herders, with farmers valuing it based on the number of crops it can produce and herders valuing it based on the quality of pasture and proximity to freshwater resources. Floodplains typical of most of Agatu villages are in high demand by herders due to their high-quality pasture and proximity to freshwater resources such as a river or large stream. Farmers need the floodplains to grow rice. Farmers demand higher accessibility fees, “gafara”, as compensation for not cultivating fields to allow herders to graze, which negates the established practice but does not lead to conflict. Conflict arises when farmers demand exorbitant financial compensation for cattle trespass to fields, particularly when farmers try to evict the herders. The herders consider this act as a moral transgression:

They are saying when they go there for the excuse, for the gafara. Sometimes, they meet the ward head and the community committee if they go there. Every community has their committee who are taking care of that place. So, either their chairman or their president is there. So, they do sit down they start paying from ₦100,000 to ₦500,000 for just a portion of land. When they have paid the gafara to the community, they go there. Mistakenly, cows are not human; sometimes they misconduct to another portion of a farm; maybe they chop small crops, but the farmers will still tax them. The herders will pay huge amounts of money. Moreover, they sit down and settle it, but that is not over. Later, they say they do not want to see them at all. The farmers are sending them away. So, that was their pain. If I pay you the money, later you send me out, go out, go out. So, that is very painful to them and wrong (Interview A16, Fulani herder, interpreted from Hausa).

The herders complained about the new practice of farmers charging exorbitant monetary compensation for crop damage and the high accessibility fees they have to pay. The herders believe that the gafara they pay should be a form of offering to establish socio-economic ties and peaceful coexistence, not just to have access to grazing portions. Demanding large amounts of compensation for small crop damage (*barna*) thus negates the guiding principles established by their ancestors for peaceful coexistence. The herders consider this practice morally wrong, and after paying huge financial compensation for small crop damage, they expect to be allowed to graze on the crops in proportion to the amount

they paid. On the other hand, farmers argued that herders did not want to pay compensation for the crops they destroyed. As the farmer indicated, if the herders commit “do *barna*” and are asked for compensation, “they will try to pay a little amount”, which does not measure up to the destruction made. Farmers consider this to be morally wrong:

The problem is that the Fulani people, you know, farm do not move when they came, only that the Fulani people bring their cow. If they bring their cow, if their cow makes destruction when you talk at times the Fulani and when he destroys something worse than 50,000, he will tell you that he will give you 500 naira or 5000 (Interview C3 farmer).

The farmer argued that some of their forefathers’ benefits have since been stopped, such as herders’ gifting the dead cow to the community and allowing the farmers to cultivate the land manured by cattle. These reterritorializations developed as farmers and herders increasingly invested in making huge profits from their production. Thus, instead of gifting a dead cow or bush meat they killed to the farmers, the herders would rather sell it:

According to our forefathers, there is no food or fresh grass like in this place in the herders’ place of origin. That is why they migrated here. That time when they come, they are begging us. They will come and dash you when they even kill this azomo [bush meat] from bush here. Now it is different from that they will sell it for us (Interview A15, farmer).

This analysis shows that changes in the moral economy of herders and farmers that defined how they negotiated resource access and social relations have been altered. Thus, changes in their moral economy are critical to breaking down social relations. Material scarcity, be it an encroachment on grazing routes or reduction of grazing spaces, cannot be used to explain livestock-induced crop damage. *Barna* is a widespread and expected occurrence in agro-pastoral relations in Central Nigeria and rarely results in long-lasting schisms between herders and farmers. However, *barna* is largely the result of a breakdown in social relations rather than resource scarcity. The issue of *barna* only sometimes leads to disagreements. However, the *barna* (mischievous destruction) of crops is more a product of changes in the moral economies of farmers and herders regarding the traditional resource access process and social relations. Perceptions of injustice because of changes in expected practices shaped by the sense of the history of the system of socio-economic relation engendered *barna*. Thus, *barna* is more socially produced from issues bordering on the perception of injustice that results from deviations from expected values, norms, and practices. In addition to these changes, the killing of the Fulani herders’ chief (*Hardo*) over disagreement

on compensation for *barna* and the rustling of this cattle led to the violent episode of the conflict in Agatu. The next section discusses this aspect of the Agatu crisis.

Beyond Destruction: Handling *Barna* and Outbreak of Violence

Violent farmer-herder conflict is socially produced; it is not a direct consequence of a competitive struggle for scarce resources. How conflicts from *barna* are handled could be associated with the outbreak or absence of violence. In Agatu, instead of carefully managing the conflicts from *barna*, the pastoralist chief was killed, perhaps because it would deter the herders from perpetrating *barna*. The sidestepping of the established traditional mechanism for conflict management that has guided the resolution of issues of crop damage played a critical role in the outbreak of violence that has been tagged the Agatu “Massacre”. A traditional ruler explains changes to the traditional approach to resolving *barna*:

Herders report to the ward or village head when their cattle destroy crops. Then the ward head or village head will see the destroyed farm product, and they will estimate the cost of the damage. The Fulani herders will pay money for the farm products that they have destroyed. However, in the years leading to the crisis, the farmers and herders sought alternative means of seeking redress as many preferred to go straight to the police or military to solve their problem immediately rather than following the steps of traditional institutions that were established. In addition to this change in approach to seeking redress, some farmers and herders began to take laws into their hands. (Interview A29, traditional ruler).

In 2012, a violent conflict between Fulani pastoralists and farmers occurred in Agatu, Nigeria, after the chief of the pastoralists was kidnapped and murdered by aggrieved farmers. Before this, the Fulani herders and Tiv farmers in neighbouring Gwer West LGA had conflicts over the killing of cattle by farmers. The herders moved to Akpeko in Agatu East, where they disagreed with some Idoma farmers over cattle-damaged crops, which led to the death of a herder named Sehu Abdullahi. Agatu is an Idoma LGA with a limited Tiv population in the border areas with Gwer West. The herders’ chief, Hardo, was invited to a meeting at the palace of the Oketa of Akpeko in Ocholoyan to resolve the conflict but was kidnapped and killed by heavily armed militia, which was filmed and circulated on the internet and social media. His kidnapping and murder are testaments of change in established practice for resolving disputes about *barna*. The killing angered pastoral communities across West Africa, who felt wronged.

The killing of the Fulani *Hardo* Alhaji Mahmah, followed by attacks on the herders’ houses and the rustling of their livestock, forced the pastoralists to flee to Loko, Rukubi, and other neighbouring villages in Doma LGAs in Nasarawa State (Interview A30, Fulani pastoralists chief). The farmers deny rustling the herders’ cattle: “Not that Agatu are killing their cow, no! We did not touch their cow at all. It is a lie if somebody says that Agatu is killing or rustling their cow. They did it because of the Hardo, their chief that Tiv kidnapped from here” (Interview A50, traditional ruler). Indeed, pastoralists often consider the killing of a herder by farmers unacceptable and a transgression that must be avenged (Nwankwo & Okafor, 2021, 2022). The herder fled Agatu following this incident and planned for revenge for a year. During this planning period, they continued to graze cattle in Agatu from neighbouring villages at the boundary between Doma LGA and Agatu LGA. However, they destroyed crops and farms not just in Akpeko but also across Agatu LGA in a manner never witnessed before:

The Agatu farmers and the Fulani herder have been living together for decades. Some Fulanis were born here; their forefathers were with us; we lived happily with them. But unfortunately, as time went on in 2012, these people came, and when they meet us on the farm or in our absence, they began to damage our farm products. We normally keep our farm products on our farm, like yam seedlings. They will come there and remove those seeds covered, allow their cattle to begin to eat it, and they will beat you if you are not fortunate when you meet them. That was how this thing started. (Interview A41, farmer).

Following this soured relationship, many herders refused to pay compensation for cattle-damaged crops. Thus, refusal to pay compensation negates the moral principle of their relations. At other times, “they will refuse. We too will not force them to pay because if we force them, the crisis will start” (Interview B24, farmer). Farmers often get emotional when narrating the experience of *barna* because of the loss of their labour that takes months of hard work without any profit to reap. They hold that the change in herders’ original belief in *barna* is significantly the cause of cattle destruction on their farms. They see it as something the herders apprise. “They like it”, a farmer stated:

We call it *barna* because when they enter, your farm is not something they will eat and leave some portion for you. No, they will finish everything. That is why it is called *barna* because nothing is left for you. Destruction is the English word; they will destroy everything. They do not even border how you plant this thing, the suffering you had suffered, they do not bother about the whole thing, their own is to finish the whole thing, and it is very wrong (Interview B10, farmer).

This situation collapsed the cordial relationship between the farmers and pastoralists in Agatu. In 2013, the herders mobilized themselves from Nasarawa State to avenge the chief's death and conducted two sets of attacks, burning houses and killing people. The herders' attack was not limited to the village that killed their chief, leading other Agatu communities to perceive it as an unjust attack (Interview A50, a chief in Agatu). In response, the youth in Agatu villages armed themselves to defend their communities with Dane guns, spears, and machetes (Interview A50, a chief in Agatu). The conflict continued into 2014, and in 2016 the herders launched a massive attack that sacked nearly all the communities in Agatu, known as the Agatu "Massacre". Despite the war and broken social relations, the herders still want to return to Agatu because the fertile fadama grasses are good for their cattle.

Post-2016 Crisis: Political and Legal Dimensions

In Agatu, the reterritorialization of the moral economy of farmers and herders resulted in a breakdown of social relations between them. This influenced the political and legal actions taken by actors after the 2016 "massacre", and several peace and reconciliation efforts by Nasarawa and Benue State governments were unsuccessful because the youths of Agatu rejected the return of the herders due to the moral burden of living with their kin's killers. While there were changes in the economic terms defining access to land, pastoralists were only denied access after the Agatu "Massacre", which resulted from deviations from established traditional mechanisms of addressing crop damage caused by cattle. These deviations were due to changes in the moral economy of farmers and herders. The breakdown in traditional institutions mediating farmer-herder relations due to changes in the moral economy led to adoption of political and legal mechanisms to address the Agatu crisis. The government's slow response to the 2016 attack led to protests in Abuja and Makurdi, and the federal government deployed the Nigerian army to the area. While the army's presence reduced open fighting, tension remained as attacks were conducted clandestinely at night.

In response to the farmer-herder conflicts in Benue State, the government enacted the Open Grazing Prohibition and Ranches Establishment Law, 2017, also known as the anti-open grazing law. The law established the Benue State Livestock Guard (BSLG) to enforce the law alongside other security agencies. Farmers support the law because it protects their status as the nation's food basket. They indicated they were not "able to grow their crops because of the violence, leading to the lost status of the food basket of the nation" (Interview

A21, farmer). An official of the BSLG indicated that the law had saved the lives of the people in Agatu: "We thank God for even this law that the state government established. If not what is coming up is unbearable because those people [herders] the way they killed our people" affected us greatly (Interview A51). However, the herders rejected the law indicating that it was targeted at marginalizing pastoralists in Benue State and a violation of their fundamental human right and right to free movement enshrined in the Nigerian constitution challenging the legislation in court. The Nigerian High Court ruled that the law does not infringe on pastoralists' right to move but that of cattle, which is not guaranteed in the constitution (Premium Times 2021). The governor of Benue State, Mr Samuel Ortom, clarified that enacting the anti-open grazing law was to find a solution to insecurity caused by unprovoked attacks on Benue communities (Olufemi, 2021). Several herders fled Agatu and other parts of Benue State because of the law: "We lived in Agatu for many years rearing cattle before the governor did the anti-grazing law", says a herder (Interview B34, herder, interpreted from Hausa).

However, the BSLG official explained, some herders did not comply fully with the law, and those arrested were charged to court, which often provoked the herders because they disliked the court process because of the time and money for the lawsuit. Such herders often return to attack villages as revenge for the litigation leading to further tensions with farmers and clashes with the BSLG and security agents (Interview A51). These clashes with security agents and farmers have led to deaths but at a much lower scale. Thus, after 2016, the herders deployed a hit-and-run strategy: "Fulani men kill Agatu people sometimes, and after the killing, some of them will run away and this often occur from December until the rainy season approaches" (Interview A51). The non-compliance with the law by some herders necessitated the amendment of the law in 2022, which provides a fine of ₦500 000 for open grazing of livestock. The effect of this amendment on the crisis remains to be seen.

Discussion

This paper has explored the Agatu crisis. The various issues that culminated in the violent episode of the farmer-herder conflict have a moral dimension. The use of violence as a political action in farmer-herder relations is thus to address perceived injustice occasioned by moral transgressions rather than resources scarcity or exclusion in land tenure that many recently published papers argue the cause of farmer-herder conflicts in Nigeria (Bello & Kazibwe, 2022; Lenshie et al., 2022). Scott (1976) argued that peasants do not always rebel in the face of material deprivation because they had a shared moral code which dictated when it was acceptable to revolt — when their subsistence rights were infringed. In the case

of Agatu, violence became an option for the herders after the *Hardo* was killed and for other Agatu villages after the herders attacked them despite not participating in the killing of the *Hardo* in Akpeko. Thus, the findings support “political ecologists” claim that material conditions alone do not trigger farmer-herder conflicts. It requires an ideological commitment violation to manifest breaching traditions of utilizing resources (Turner et al., 2011) and other issues unrelated to seeking redress for uncompensated crop damage, such as killing herder for sacrifice (Nwankwo & Okafor, 2021, 2022).

While the Agatu violence developed from deviations from established traditional mechanisms of addressing mischievous crop damage by pastoralists’ cattle, the deviation is a product of changes in the moral economy of farmers and herders driven by the desire for profits instead of subsistence herder-farmer relations. Thus, farmers’ and herders’ moral economies are being re-evaluated and reterritorialized in the face of changing economic values and conditions. Farmers and herders can reassess their roles in agro-pastoral relations in light of economic conditions and take steps to secure their status by employing certain social practices that negate established systems. The incongruence between the new practices and the norm informs how moral economies engender conflicts in Agatu. Therefore, moral economies are related to moral claims about resource use and expected behaviour patterns and practices. Conflict may occur when the particulars of a moral economy stand in opposition to the established practice. However, violence is the last resort, especially when the transgression carries the weight of human life.

Conclusion

Overall, the paper has demonstrated that the conflicts between farmers and herders in Agatu developed from deviations from mechanisms of relations that define access to land because of changes in moral economies driven by a desire for profits instead of agro-pastoral production for subsistence. While agreeing with Turner (2004) that farmer-herder conflict is socially produced through moral transgressions, it differs in that it demonstrates the role of moral economy reterritorialization. For Turner (2004), moral wrongs that lead to conflicts are unequal wealth accumulation within farming communities and the wage or livestock entrustment contract breach because of field encroachment. For this current study, the reterritorialization of the moral economy of farmers-herders relations from subsistence to a more profit-driven and monetarized system and side-lining traditional dispute management practices engendered violent conflict. While Turner (2004) de-emphasized the role of resource access at the root of the development of the conflict, this paper shows that the monetarization of the resource access mechanism is at the root of the conflict.

Therefore, the result is that the reterritorialization of the farmer-herder moral economy that engendered collapsed social relations led to the outright exclusion of pastoralists in resource access, as seen in the Agatu youth’s refusal of the pastoralists’ return and the state government’s refusal to sanction the youths enacting the anti-open grazing law instead. This decision must be seen from the politics of power relations perspective because the herders have no representative in the Benue State government. Political ecologists have emphasized how state policies seeking to modernize agriculture marginalize pastoralists leading to farmer-herder conflict (e.g., Benjaminsen & Ba, 2009; Benjaminsen et al., 2009; Walwa, 2020) without offering how the changes in moral economies of farmers and herders contribute to the development of such policies. This paper argues that the reterritorialization of the farmer-herder moral economy can disrupt their social relations leading to conflicts and, subsequently, the outright exclusion of pastoralists from resource access through policy and legislation sanctioned by more powerful actor-government backing farmers. Therefore, political ecologists and other scholars must pay attention to how changes in moral economies produce the conflict that engenders the exclusion of pastoralists in land tenure. The paper concludes that changes in moral economies can disrupt social relations and lead to conflicts, leading to the exclusion of pastoralists from resource access through policy and legislation.

Recommendations

Strengthening security measures is imperative. More security forces must be sent to Agatu to preserve law and order and ensure peace, as only a few security personnel operate there. A sustainable solution to the conflict in Agatu would involve negotiation and discussion between those involved, particularly pacifying the Agatu youths to accept the return of the herders. Nevertheless, due to the enforcement of the anti-open grazing law, it would be unfeasible for herders to return to Agatu to dwell and openly graze without being apprehended or harassed by security agents. Therefore, the herders may have to practice ranching while negotiating with the Benue State government to repeal or relax the law. Repairing the deteriorated social relations between farmers and herders by reinstating the customary system that involves non-financial mechanisms for agro-pastoral relations is critical. Security agencies should be encouraged to allow the customary authorities to address issues concerning the loss and damage of crops or cattle through the established traditional mechanism. The kidnapping and killing of the prominent herders by the Militia group provoked the violence even though the farmer-herder relations had been strained significantly over the years. Thus, the proliferation

of small arms and light weapons exacerbated the crisis and contributed to the high death toll. The government should work with local communities to recover these weapons and ensure that those responsible for the Agatu massacre are held accountable for their actions. This will convey that impunity will not be tolerated and help deter future violence.

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Data Availability The data are available upon reasonable request.

Declarations

Ethical Approval The research was part of a larger study looking into the farmer-herder conflicts in Central Nigeria, which had been given ethical approval from the appropriate Ethics Committee at the University of Leicester, UK (approval number: 31980). The committee members are Dr. Elizabeth Hurren and Professor Martin Phillips.

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