



The phenomenon of farmer- herder conflict in Sabon Birni district of Sokoto State, Nigeria

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Abstract

Farmers-herders conflict, cattle rustling and rural banditry constitutes teething challenges in contemporary Nigeria. These security threats have been inherent in the history of the country, but are now taking a new approach and dimension. The nature and gravity of farmer-herder conflict varies from place to place, depending on the historical circumstances and relationship between the major actors in the conflict. Thus, the annal of Sokoto Province was filled up with history and story about such violent bloodsheds in Sabon Birni District of present Sokoto State. The record shows the contours and persistent of such crises over time, without detail analysis of the factors and actors responsible for its prolongation. This paper discovers that the historical dialectical relationship with the Fulani herdsmen sometimes account for the reoccurrence of this conflict. The main preoccupation of this article is to study the historical trajectories of farmer-herder conflict in the frontline villages of Sabon Birni district of Sokoto State, Nigeria.

Keywords: farmer, herder, frontier, conflict and conflict management

Introduction

Farming on one hand and herding on the other are partially divided along ethnic lines in Sabon Birni District. The sedentary population mostly Hausa (Gobirawa) formed up the farmers, while pastoralists are basically the Fulani. This division has been a source of conflict between the two groups over time. The struggle for land and its resources was intensified following the increase in both human population and livestock in the contemporary periods (Blench, 1994) ^[6]. This Malthusian thesis has an impact human settlement, sources of water, farmlands and other needs associated with land use (Bradburd, 1996).

Thus, the excessive pressure on land explains the genesis of the conflict in most parts of Africa (Patrick, Engel and Maria, 2005). The situation became aggravated with the actions and inactions of the sedentary population in relations to land use. In fact, bush burning, blockage of grazing routes, encroachment, distortion of grazing reserves as well as restriction in the use of water resources were some of the factors influencing the conflict, (Ofouku and Isife, 2010). These are more often than not, at the detriment of pastoralism.

Therefore, this article attempts to study the nature and dynamics of farmer-herder conflict in Sabon Birni District. The area is deliberately chosen, due to the perennial and peculiar nature of the conflict, as well as its longest history of anti-Fulani sentiments (Arnett, 1922, Adeleye, 1971 & Johnson, 1976) ^[5, 1]. Furthermore, the district stands as the most viable agricultural and pastoralist zone in Sokoto State. Hence, the paper is divided into five sections. Abstract and introduction forms the first part, background to the study falls within the second section, the third segment details with the nature and dynamics of farmer-herder conflict in the area, while section five constitutes Bangi Fulani and Gobirawa conflicts, the last section concludes the paper.

Background of the Study Area

Sabon Birni District of Sokoto State is the main homeland of the Gobir people of Nigeria. The district was created during the colonial period to integrate all the Gobirawa villages within the eastern part of Sokoto State. At present, it is divided into two Local Government Areas (Sabon-Birni and Isa) located, along Nigeria-Niger border areas. The Gobirawa people have a history of anti-Fulani sentiments, which could be traced to the famous Sokoto Jihad of 1804 (Augi, 1988) ^[4].

Gobir kingdom was the epicenter of the Jihad, an Islamic revolution led by Sheikh Usmanu bin Fodiyo. It was from Gobir that the movement radiates to other parts of Hausaland (Bunza, 2017) ^[8]. The ousted Gobirawa were famous fighters with different war and military attributes, according to Augi, 'Warfare seems to have acquired the role of state ideology in Gobir (Augi, 1988) ^[4]. Similarly, scholars used different phrases to depicts the level of militarism in Gobir, (Hogben and Kirk-Green, 1966) ^[10] stated that the Gobirawa are characterized by 'nomadic restless and have pugnacity in their blood', while (Adeleye 1971) ^[1], called them the 'warmongers of western Hausaland. To (Last 1967) ^[12], the Gobirawa are 'jungle fighters.' In the same token, (Johnston 1976) ^[11] described them as 'lawlessness of the desert'. In the final analysis, war-likeness is an inborn characteristic of Gobirawa, (Augi, 1984) ^[3].

In spite of this inherent military attributes, the Gobirawa were defeat by the Jihad forces in all of the battles fought. Although, there were contending views and arguments by scholars on how this was done, which shouldn't delay us here, but an average Bagobiri (someone from Gobir) viewed the Jihad as nothing but a 'Fulani struggle' against the Gobir hegemony rather than Jihad in the actual sense of the word (Abubakar, Bango, 2018). Some western historians also see the Jihad with ethnic coloration, as 'Fulani Jihad' (Johnston, 1976) ^[11].

However, in-depth analysis of the ethnic formation of the movement shows completely the opposite. There was a mixture of several ethnic and cultural groups such as the Gobirawa, Tauregs, Baroro and even Fulani on both sides of the forces, (Bunza, 1997) ^[7], this debunks completely the ethnic perspective of the movement.

Moreover, the remote cause of the Jihad demonstrates that the Fulani elements in Gobir before the Jihad suffered deprivation and exploitation in the hands of the Gobir rulers. Since they (Fulani) constituted the bulk of the herdsmen and controlled a lot of wealth, the manner of cattle tax collection was often hastily and harshly done. This according to (Johnston, 1976) ^[11]:

BawaJangwarzo (C. 1771 to C. 1789) was considered a tyrant by the Fulani because of the severity with which he ordered Jangali, the tax on cattle to be assessed and collected. Those who tried to evade it, as to a greater or lesser extent the (pastoral Fulani) have always tried to do, have their cattle seized. As a result, there was friction and animosity.

Besides, the Fulani were denied certain fundamental rights of owning slaves, freedom of grazing, and in an event of conflict with the sedentary population their right to justice was often denied. Thus, in case of conflict between them (Fulani) and the Gobirawa were even forbidden to carry arms for defense. Moreover, during the reign of Jangwarzo, citizens were burdened with taxation and other levies in an effort to sustain the state and prosecute its wars. Moreover, his opponents were imprisoned or subjected to other forms of punishments and forced conscription into the army. (Last, 1964) ^[12]. In pursuit of his policies, however, Jangwarzo only succeeded in building up opposition against the Gobir State. These challenges and a lot more were articulated by Sheikh Usman bin Fodiyo as justification for the outbreak of the Jihad in Gobir (Al-Hajj, 1979) ^[2].

Hence, the Fulani herdsmen were also not left behind in terms of military prowess and restlessness (Smaldon, 1977) ^[16]. Their life is cattle-centered and like the Gobirawa, they could sacrifice their blood for the prosperity of their herds (Rufa'i, 2018) ^[14]. Therefore, two basic factors came to play in Sabon-Birni District; the historical animosity between the Gobirawa and Fulani related to the Jihad and the clash in economic interest between farming and pastoralism. In fact, this two contending factors continue to influence the rate and spate of farmer-herder conflicts in the district.

It is worthy of noting that not all Fulani in the district were involved in the conflict. The Fulanin-Gobir, as they are often called in Sabon Birni are basically law-abiding and peaceful herdsmen. Their origin and relationship with Gobir authority is historic. This category of Fulani has been with the Gobirawa right from the onset. They fought on the side of the Gobirawa during the Jihad. The name Fulanin-Gobir is associated with the long relationship that made them lose their identity, (Bello Laginge, 2018).

Moreover, this Fulani were often appointed as leaders of the entire Fulani by Sabon Birni authorities, (Bamgo, 2019). While other category, especially the late migrants have little regard and respect for these leaders because according to them, they had lost their Fulani identity (IsahBuba, 2019). Thus, by identity here we mean the language and cattle, which constitutes the basic parameter of differentiating *Fulbe* and *Kado*, (Rufa'i, 2019) ^[13]. This identity crisis between the two groups formed the basis for social conflict amongst the two groups of Fulani, and also

another bottleneck in resolving the conflict.

The Bamgi Herdsmen

The main theater of farmer-herder conflict in Sabon Birni Districts is the frontline villages of Makuwana, Laginge, UnguwarLalle and Tsamaye. The conflict was exacerbated by their location along the eastern part of Nigeria-Niger borders. In fact, the cross-border herdsmen particularly from Bamgi area of Madawa Division in the present Niger Republic were the major actors in the conflict, (WJHCBS/172/1956). The presence of thick throne-scrub and large forest along these borders provided admirable hiding place for the herdsmen. The forestland is about 50km, it cut-across all the frontier villages and some parts of Madawa Division, (WJHCBS/127/195). The area is called *Fakon Allah* (No man's land) in Sabon Birni (Bamgo, 2019). Thus, available records show that the forest hosted large number of criminals from both countries, (Rufai, 2018) ^[15]. This is not common to Sabon Birni alone, Nigerian forestlands have been a veritable hiding space for criminal activities over the years. Sokoto State has about 602.631 hectares of such ungovernable space. According to Okoli and Fidelis (2016) Forests provide a veritable operational base or hideout for a variety of criminal activities. A typical forest consists of a cluster of trees, plant and undergrowth vegetation. It is usually isolated from the frontiers of human settlement and often alienated from community and state Police.

Therefore, some of the Fulani from Bamgi who crossed the border with their flock to this forest did so for the purpose of tax evasion. There were about 5000 to 7000 heads of cattle that annually moved into Sabon Birni District from this division in the 1950s(WJHCBS/152/48/1954).The challenges confronted by the pastoralist in Madawa Division of Niger Republic has limited pasture and water during dry season. Therefore, most of the pastoral community settled or spend most of their dry season in Sabon BirniDistrict, (WJHCBS/152/48/1954).

Thus, some of the Fulani went to the extent of establishing permanent grazing camps along the frontier villages on the Nigerian side. Heads of Bamgi Fulani camps, like Maitaguwa from Maradi, had his camp at Tara in 1953, Maje settled at western part of Anguwar Lalle in 1954, Buda Garkara stayed at Gatawa in 1955 and Sarkin Fulanin-Shamadara was at Gangara in 1955. These clans were related to Sarkin Rafi of Bamgi. The settlement of these pastoral communities in the area further encouraged seasonal movements of other Fulani across the border into the District in1950 (WJHCBS/152/60/1955).

It is also worthy to note that the Bamgi Fulani were not only threat to the frontline farmers of Sabon Birni, they also constituted nuisance to the farming communities in Madawa Division of the Niger Republic. Thus, even back home (Niger Republic), this pastoral group were tagged violent and destructive (WJHCBS/150/42/1955). Their location along the border posed a major threat to the Gobirawa who had a long history of anti-Fulani sentiments in Nigeria. The District Officer of Sokoto best described the relationship in the following words;

This situation, in the frontier north of Sabon Birni, is made peculiarly difficult by the nature of the people concerned and by the nature of the country; the Fulani of Bamgi are particularly wild and undisciplined and the Gobirawa are well known for their stubborn, uncompromising, and crafty

character...the situation requires tactful handling, (WJHCBS/140/45/1944). Therefore, the last decade of colonial rule was characterized by violent farmers-herders conflicts in Sabon Birni District. The discord became more entrenched during droughts and famines of 1913, 1942, and 1952 that affected crops and animals in the area. As a coping strategy, the herdsmen ventured into night raiding of farmlands. Crop damage was deliberately done, as shown by the District Officer Report of 1952; that the ‘Fulani have neither respect nor regard for the law of the land. They often intentionally drive the herds into standing crops of the Gobirawa’(WJHCBS/120/25/1952).

Another report, it is confirmed that ‘the Bamgi Fulani are particularly wild and uncontrolled, they drive the cattle deliberately into the farms and open fire on the farm owners (Gobirawa) who objects’, (WJHCBS/150/42/1955). These herdsmen were threat to the farmers and even the law enforcement agencies like the Police. On 28th January, 1952 some Fulani from Bamgi by names Anderu, Gubul, Attahiru, Kiru and Ali, inflicted severe injuries on the Native Authority Police (N.A Police) who went to arrest them for the charges of farm destruction. The table below show some selected incidents of farmer-herder conflict at the frontier villages, (WJHCBS/152/60/1952).

Table 1: Selected Incidents of Farmer-Herder Conflict in the District

S/N	Date	Incidents
1	15th Feb, 1951	Suspected Herdsmen from Bamgi carried out an attack against farmers of Malam Buzu that led to the death of two people
2	11th Nov, 1952	Suspected Herdsmen killed one farmer at China Barka near Sabon-Birni
3	31 st January, 1952	Some herdsmen had a clash with the N.A. Police that led to the death of two people and several injured.
4	6th June, 1955	Suspected Herdsmen killed Abdu Sarkin Kara of Tsamaye in his farm.
5	4th June, 1955	Major farm destruction by Suspected Herdsmen in Sabon Birni
6	9 th March, 1956	Cattle belong to Bamgi Fulani destroyed 9 farms in Yarbulutu
7	10 th March, 1956	Livestock belong to Bamgi Fulani (Anderu, Bere, Ibro, Kiro and Ali) Damaged farms that led to fight in Sabon Birni and two people sustained severe injuries.
8	9th Nov, 1956	One person killed by herdsmen in Aremu village in Isa town
9	30th Dec, 1957	Suspected Herdsmen murdered GagunKaturu in his farm and farm products destroyed
10	30th Dec, 1957	Suspected Herdsmen killed two farmers in Galadi village due to due to Farmer-Herder conflict
11	27th Nov, 1960	Suspected herdsmen killed one farmer in BarayarZaki.
12	21st Dec, 1960	Suspected Herdsmen killed Kanne a farmer from Mashaya village AnguwarLalle.
13	26th January, 1962	Alh. Dodo’s farm was destroyed by suspected herdsmen
14	28th April, 1964	DankaneBagobiri killed Yakubu Tsamaye because of farm dispute in AnguwarLalle
15	28th April, 1964	Suspected Herdsmen starved one Abdu Dan MammanTagirke due to farm dispute.
16	8th Nov, 1967	Two people were injured as a result of the Farmer-Herder conflict in Sabon-Birni town.
17	12th Nov, 1967	Suspected Herdsmen killed a farmer in Sabon-Birni and ran away to Niger Republic.
18	29 March, 1971	Massive anti-Fulani protest was jointly organized by Isa and Sabon Birni Areas.

Source: Compiled from many archival materials on the district.

Therefore, most of the conflicts and what the Gobirawa termed as ‘war against the Fulanin-Bamgi’ often take place at night. The reason is that the acts of farm and crop destructions were done at night. Farmers were readily available to guard their crops in the day. To further curtailed or avert night raiding, some of the farmers settled permanently in their respective farms throughout the rainy season. This reduced the damages to a considerable extent. Even with that, there were recorded incidents of forceful intrusion into the farmlands by the herdsmen (Musa Salihu, 2019).

The crisis reached its apex when the farmers in both Isa and Sabon Birni decided to unite and take a common position about the herdsmen in 1971. They henceforth resolved to cut-off all forms of relationships with the herdsmen. The farmers concluded that nobody should buy or sell anything to the herders. Whoever relates with the herdsmen would be considered as a saboteur and treated like them (Fulani). Some farmers were openly seen harassing and intimidating Fulani women in the market across different parts of the District. Fulani people deserted most of the weekly markets for the fear of the unknown, (WJHCBS/PCJ/981/S1/1971). To further achieve their objectives, the farmers created two vigilante groups, *Yan-Karma* and *Yan-Banga*, who conducted their operations with high level of impunity. They often moved in bands hunting and harassing the herders. Accused persons were mostly beaten in some cases even killed extra-judicially. The vigilantes never hesitate to shoot cattle found on farmlands. Members of this militant group were applauded by the farmers and seen as freedom

fighters. Thus, even when the leader of the vigilante group (one Yusuf Kantu), was arrested on 29th March, 1971, about 200 Gobirawa farmers stormed Isa Police station and freed him,(WJHCBS/PCJ/981/S1/1971).

Thus, some Gobirawa took the law into their hands after filing up series of petitions at Gusau Area Court about the unfortunate incidents. The farmers believed that justice could not be had from the Alkali whom they considered as ‘Fulani accomplice’ (Ibrahim Usman, 2019) ^[2]. This accusation is partly associated with delay in the dispensation of justice. Furthermore, prior to these draconian measures taken by the farmers, officials from both Nigeria and Niger had met to arrest the situation. On 6th December 1972 a meeting was held in Niger Republic with Mr. Guilbot the Chief in charge of Madawa Division, Dan Galadiman Waziri, SarkinGobir of Madawa, SarkinGobir of Sabon Birni, SarkinRafinBamgi amongst several others, (WJHCBS/PCJ/28/S2/1970).Thus, the outcome of the meeting saw the formation of Joint Task Force (JTF) on border patrol. The JTF reduces the level of cross-border disturbance. There were also reported cases farm damages. Moreover, SarkinGobir Umaru, made several appeals to the Sokoto authority, but in spite of their intervention, the security situation remained deteriorated. This is partly due wide range of factors and actors involved.

Factors and Actors in the Conflict

Local historians in Sabon Birni spoke extensively on repeated cases of farm destruction by the pastoral Fulani, (Umar Sani, 2019). It is neither an exaggeration nor an

overstatement to state that one of the difficult challenges faced by the Gobirawa aristocrats came from the herdsmen. This could be accepted because of the fertility of the frontier villages in terms of agriculture and pasture. (Watts, 1983)^[17] called the area 'pastoral zone'. The viability of the land and its reach resources set the ball of the conflict rolling. According to Okpeh- Okpeh (2018)

Both the farmer and the pastoralist naturally disagree over access to natural resources. Sometimes these disagreements are amicably resolved, but at other times they are left to fester and degenerate into bloody conflicts, as has been witnessed in some parts of the country in recent years.

Some herdsmen in Sabon Birni district have a traditional and superstition belief that for their livestock to remain strong and healthy all year, farm incursion and stubble grazing are necessary. Thus, the stubble and young growing dry season crops are essential in giving their cattle a prosperous start to the dry season. Hence, the herdsmen could do everything possible to ensure prosperity of their cattle during the dry season (WJHCBS/1526/128/1956). Therefore, this partly explains why the conflict is more pervasive during harvest which is a transitional period from rainy to dry season. This view was further verified and confirmed amongst both the farmers and herders alike, (Sani Bello, 2019). To the Gobirawa farmers, this is the major source of their conflict with the Bamgi Fulani who staunchly held this view (Abdullahi Bello, 2019).

Furthermore, the failure on the part of the traditional authorities also kept the tension high. In a confidential report written by the District Officer of Sokoto Division in 1955, the District Head of Sabon Birni was accused for increasing the rate of the conflict. According to the report he was weak, corrupt and incompetent. This inherent weakness contributed in the conflict, some of the farming communities even accused him of allegedly collecting gifts from the herders which most people regarded as bribe (WJHCBS/S52/104/1955). This was reputed in Sabon Birni by an informant who claimed that the District Head was weak due to old-age, which negatively affected his administration. Therefore, the age factor created an opportunity for the conflict to thrive (Bamgo, 2019).

Moreover, some traditional political authorities like Wakili and Galadima were also accused of either making anti-Fulani remarks or collecting bribe from the herdsmen. Galadiman Sabon Birni for instance was allegedly making inflammatory remarks in public places, such as '*kill the Fulani (herder) and bring me the head, I will see that you are protected from the consequences*' (WJHCBS/152/104/25/I/55). By extension, this was mostly considered as the official position of the 'Gobir palace'. This is because the hate speech was made by an important personality. Similarly, a strong rumor was circulating during this period that the farmers of UnguwarLalle were about to launched decisive attack against the pastoralist. Such hate speeches and rumors had significant impact on increasing tension in the district (WJHCBS/152/104/25/I/55).

Moreover, most of the lands officially allocated to the pastoralists as either grazing reserve or grazing routes were converted to either settlements or farmlands. Some pastoral communities lamented bitterly on how the grazing reserves around Tsamaye, Sabon Sara, Malam Buzu and Fakon Allah were turned into farmlands in 1954 (WJHCBS/153/1955). This single act could also explain the reason behind the

unending conflict between the Gobirawa and Bamgi Fulani around Malam Buzu in the 1950s and 1960s as demonstrated in the above table.

According to the late Sarkin Gobir of Sabon Birni, the genesis of farmers-herders conflicts in the area could be associated with farmer's encroachment into the grazing reserves. All efforts to stop this illegal practice by his administration proved abortive (WJHCBS/163/1954). The Fulani ascribed the conflict to the traditional rulers who shared the reserves amongst themselves and their cronies. While on the side of the traditional rulers they accused the Fulani for disposing land without the consent of the constituted authority, which is an infringement into the prerogatives of the Village Head (WJHCBS: 168/126/1954). Moreover, the major sources of water for pastoralist around Anguwar Lalle, BarayarZaki, Gatawa and Tsamare, Tabkin Kanu, among several others were blocked through the act of the sedentary farmers (Bello Sani, 2019) Since the cattle could not access sources of dry season water and Fadama grassland, then conflict is inevitable. This situation promotes farm encroachment and crop destruction on a large scale. The reality is that encroachment and destruction of the grazing reserves, corruption on part of the traditional institutions as well as climate change in an ever-increasing population growth, seems to be the overriding factors behind the conflict.

Conclusion

Sabon Birni District has a long history of farmer-herder conflict compared to other areas in northern Nigeria. Whenever and wherever such conflict occurred the Gobirawa often recalled the old acrimony associated with the Sokoto Jihad. Most of the farmer-herder conflicts in the area were either called Jihad or Fulani war. In this case, war drums were often bitten in an attempt to mobilize people for the war. Gobirawa hunters, vigilante groups and other military formations assumed another important position during this period. Although, there is inadequate data on the level of destructions and loss of lives, but some informants comments that within the period of twenty years, 1950-1970 over five hundred (500) people were killed across both parties of the war. This could be accepted when corroborated with recorded cases related to farm destructions in the various courts in the district and beyond. In 1950 103 cases were reported, the number reached 132 in 1951 and 210 in 1953. These figures continue increasing overtime demonstrating the prevalence of the conflict. The conflict was mitigated during the reign of Sarkin Gobir Muhammadu Bawa who engaged the Fulani in dialogue and came out with new grazing policies in the district.

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