

# Communal Conflicts in Nasarawa State, North Central Nigeria: A Socio-Contextual Rethink

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## Abstract

Nasarawa State in North Central Nigeria has been notorious for communal conflicts. Such conflicts have often assumed complicated dimensions reflective of the social dynamics of the state. Oftentimes, the conflicts are framed in terms of identitarian differences and contestations, whilst the underlying drivers derive essentially from the socio-structural dynamics of the conflict context. By way of mixed research that is predicated on a combination of field and desk sources, this article interrogates the contemporary manifestations of communal conflicts in Nasarawa State through the combined lenses of liberal political ecology and conflict analysis. The article observes that the ethno-primordial cleavages of the focal state have provided veritable pretexts for the prevalence of communal conflicts, making such conflicts problematic to understand as well as resolve. The outcome of the analysis indicates that communal conflicts in the focal state have been both dynamic and opportunistic, often feeding into the existing primordial and structural fault-lines to assume multiple complications. There is therefore a need to understand the peculiar nature and dynamics of such conflicts in order to know how best to interpret, analyse and mitigate them.

**Keywords:** communal conflict, conflict analysis, farmer-herder conflict, political ecology, Nasarawa State, North Central Nigeria

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## 1. Introduction

The history of Nigeria has been punctuated by a spate of communal conflicts. Such conflicts have manifested variously as ethnic, religious, sectarian, clannish, as well as allied incidents of ethno-religious configuration. Cases in point include the various episodes of Kano and Kaduna religious riots, the perennial Jos crisis, the internecine Jukun-Tiv crisis, the Ife-Modakeke crisis, the Bassa-Egbura crisis, to mention but a few (Gyuse and Ajene 2006; Alimba 2014). These crises have not only brought about instability in the affected areas; they have equally engendered dire social outcomes that threaten harmonious intergroup relations as well as sustainable national unity in Nigeria.

North Central Nigeria is situated within the critical hotbed of Nigeria's communal conflicts' (henceforth also referred to as communal crises) axis. The region has, over the years, witnessed varying degrees and dimensions of ethno-communal incidents, often resulting in widespread violence and instability. Nasarawa State, since its creation in 1996, has had to grapple with virulent incidences of communal conflict, especially in the various parts of its vast and isolated hinterlands (Ajodo-Adebanjoko et al. 2015; Okoli and Nnabuihe 2019). Expectedly, there exists a gamut of literature on communal conflict in North Central Nigeria in general and the Nasarawa State in particular (Best 2004; Gyuse and Ajene 2006; Blench and Dendo 2014; Adamu and Ben 2016; Alozieuwa 2016; Okoli and Nnabuine 2019). Whilst the existing studies have variously emphasised some crucial aspects of communal conflict in Nasarawa State, especially its general causes and impacts, there has not been much attempt to systematically account for the socio-contextual dynamics of such conflicts, particularly their opportunistic dialectics in the contemporary period.

This article therefore interrogates the prevailing narratives of communal conflict in Nasarawa State with a view to leveraging a perspective that highlights its contemporary socio-contextual complexities. Adopting a mixed methodology that appropriates field, desk and documentary evidence, the article argues that communal conflicts in Nasarawa state occur in a dynamic context wherein the existing primordial cleavages form the fault-lines of inter-group contestations, often leading to combustible outcomes. In addition to the foregoing introductory section, the article is broadly divided into five sections as follows: conceptual and methodological thrust, nature of communal conflict in Nigeria, overview of communal conflict in

Nasarawa State, rethinking communal conflict in Nasarawa State, conclusion and recommendations.

## 2. A Note on Conceptual and Methodological Thrusts

Communal conflict refers to low intensity conflict that occurs between or among groups of people who are bound by communal ties. It thrives in primordial societies where groups are differentiated along the parochial lines of clan, religion, ethnicity, and caste (Okoli and Nnabuihe 2019). This article adopts a socio-contextual approach whose point of departure is that conflict occurrence and dynamics are determined by the forces of its socio-organic context (UNDP 2016). The socio-contextual conflict analysis approach combines elements of liberal political ecology and a contemporary conflict analysis paradigm in an attempt to proffer a holistic analysis of a conflict – laying emphasis on both proximate and structural factors underlying the occurrence of a conflict. A UNDP Report maintains that this approach entails ‘a macro-micro analysis’ of conflict. The Report elucidates:

Common to inter-group conflicts in many ill-defined federal states with plural identity groups is the skewed distribution of socio-economic and political resources, which breeds inequalities amongst culturally and sometimes religiously different groups. Such practices constitute the structure within which certain groups perceive injustice and marginalisation, leading to the construction of enemy images of the government and other groups who appear to be favored by it. Without recognition of such structures, which differ from place to place, responding to conflicts will only be like addressing the symptoms while neglecting the causes. This is why the structural analysis of the cause of conflict must cover the social, economic and political spheres, intending to identify the grievances that might make taking to violence inevitable for groups that feel maligned. This helps to understand how socio-economic and political needs intersect with ethnic or/ and religious identities – providing a shared narrative of exclusion and marginalisation that might provide self-justifying rationalisation for violence. (UNDP 2015:52).

Alongside the underlying structures and contexts of conflict is the factor of subjective agency, which mobilises social energies around existing grievances and fault-lines in a manner that complicates or escalates conflicts. Conflict occurrence is thus a complex social process whose dynamics are often

opportunistic and dialectical (Okoli and Nnabuihe 2019). This has been the character of major communal conflicts in Nigeria and more importantly, in North Central Nigeria.

The article focuses on Nasarawa State, which is a microcosm of North Central Nigeria in terms of the pattern of conflict being engaged herewith. North Central Nigeria in this context designates the six States of Benue, Plateau, Kwara, Kogi, Niger, and Nasarawa States, in addition to Abuja (the Federal Capital Territory – FCT). The region bears some striking socio-demographical peculiarities. In addition to its marked geo-political and socio-cultural diversity, the region is characterised by marked religious and cultural pluralism. It hosts an avalanche of ethno-linguistic and religious groups, which makes it prone to inter-group contestations and conflicts, often exacerbated by its highly polarised political elites.

The article is a mixed research that combines elements of field, desk and documentary sources. The field component was piloted in 2019 and refers to empirical and anecdotal insights from personal observations and in-depth interviews arising from an ongoing study in the focal area. This is complemented by documented evidences elicited from relevant library sources. Data generated from the aforementioned sources were qualitatively harnessed and thematically presented under the various sections that make up the article.

### 3. Nature of Communal Conflicts in Nigeria

Communal conflicts have been a recurring social phenomenon in Nigeria. According to Abada (2004:234), ‘in spite of the level of social, political and economic development of Nigeria, cases of intra-communal or intra-ethnic feuds have been recurring’ Abada (2004:24) adds that:

Since the end of the Nigerian Civil War, many communities have fought each other either over a piece of land, the site of a market, protest against sitting of local government headquarters or police station, or inclusion in a state or local government area they do not like. In some cases, as well, communities have fought each other because of mere hatred ... especially in some semi-cosmopolitan societies.

Communal conflict in Nigeria has been precipitated by struggles for competitive advantage by contiguous communities. The objects of these struggles have varied from cultural, economic, political, to socio-ecological

factors (Alimba 2014). These factors have been variously implicated in different instances of communal conflict in Nigeria by scholars. In a relevant study, Ikurekong, Udo and Essin (2012:98) attribute the cause of communal conflict to 'aggressive resource competition' in the context of ethno-identity struggles. This implies that communal conflict is often informed by inter-communal struggles for competitive advantage in relation to ownership, control or access to an economic or political resource.

One of the veritable material sources of communal conflicts in Nigeria is the factor of land. In a study on 'Causes and Effects of Communal and Ethnic Conflicts in Tiv-land', Oravee (2015:10) identifies struggle for farmlands as a principal and critical conflict determinant. The significance of land as a crucial factor in communal conflict in Nigeria must be understood beyond economic consideration. Apart from being a veritable economic resource, land is seen as an important socio-political and cultural asset (Egwu 2015). Hence, land-based communal conflicts are not always motivated by economic or livelihood concerns, such as quests for farmlands or grazing fields (Ayokhai 2013; Okoli and Atelhe 2014; Okoli and Ogayi 2018; Okoli and Lenshie 2018). They have oftentimes been motivated by real or misplaced political or cultural concerns. For instance, the Aguleri-Umuleri-Umuoba Anam crisis in Anambra State was land-related. Nonetheless, the land in question was being contested not as a means of livelihood (economic asset), but rather as an aspect of ancestral heritage as well as a symbol of socio-political prominence (Abada 2004:234).

More often than not, communal conflicts in Nigeria have been caused by an articulation of identity-based, livelihood-related and political (partisan) considerations. In this regard, Uzuegbunam and Nwobia (2014:1404) argue that communal conflict could be a consequence of an admixture of cultural differences, struggles for access for resources or livelihood opportunities, as well as issues relating to political participation or representation. In most instances of communal conflict in Nigeria, these factors have often reinforced one another in bringing about critical outcomes.

There are instances where ethno-cultural differences and prejudices have informed communal conflict in Nigeria. A case in point is the Sagamu crisis between the Yoruba and the settler-Hausa communities in late 1990s. In this respect, Olobomehin (2011) notes that the conflict was rooted in cultural intolerance, groomed and matured in a context of competitive inter-group socio-economic relations. Cultural differences or prejudices have also

featured prominently in some instances of communal conflict where indigene/ settler contestations are at issue (Asiyanbola 2007:10). A case in point is the Ife-Modakeke crisis, where ethno-cultural prejudices played a prominent role in aggravating inter-communal animosities.

Contemporary trajectories of communal conflicts in Nigeria have borne out elements of politicisation and elite manipulation (Okoli and Uhembe 2014:13). Hence, communal conflicts have often resulted from the contradictions of elite's politicking and competition (Egwu 2006:406). According to Adetoye and Omilusi:

The political class (elites), in collaboration with their religious counterparts has exploited ethnicity and religion as symbols of mobilization and instruments or negotiation for patronages and sharing of national resource. (Adeyote and Omilusi 2015:51)

The implication of the above is that the political elites have often provoked communal conflict by their desperate opportunistic penchant for political power. This was the case with respect to the Ombatse crisis in Nasarawa State (Alozieuwa 2016).

The recent episodes of communal conflict in Taraba State (2011-date) have also borne out critical trappings and traits of politico-elite manipulation. Viewing the Wukari crises, Nwanebo, Odigbo and Ochanna (2014:8) opine that the crises were '... as a result of accumulated grievances, anger and frustration arising from suspicion, mutual distrust and manipulative indigenship and citizenship status in the struggle for power and scarce communal resources'. The instrumentalisation of communal conflict by the political elites has added a dangerous twist to the problem (Egwu, 2006). It has raised the stakes of hostility and accentuated the contours of crisis. This explains the apparent intractability of communal conflict in contemporary Nigeria. As observed by Nwagwu (2016:218), 'The problems of communal and ethnic rivalries seem to have overwhelmed the government as they are (merely) being managed rather than being resolved'. Amidst the rising incidence of communal conflict in Nigeria, the nation pays so dearly in terms of human security and sustainable development (Asiyanbola 2007:1).

The phenomenon of communal conflict in Nigeria can be explained with reference to its 'sources', 'fault-lines', and allied 'catalysts' (Okoli and Nnabuihe 2019:123). The 'sources' are the root-causes of communal conflict,

such as land, boundary, and chieftaincy disputes. These factors have persistently played the role of primary precipitators in most instances of communal conflict in Nigeria (Alimba 2014). 'Fault-lines' in this context refer to the opportunistic socio-cultural and political variables that have often given communal conflict its virulent character. These variables include ethnicity, religion, identity politics and cultural prejudices. It is under the influence of these primordial factors that communal conflict often assumes its critical salience (Egwu 2006). The rest of the factors are designated allied 'catalysts' or 'enablers'; they include sundry socio-ecological, demographic, socio-economic, and governance issues that complicate communal conflict. Examples include climate change (Blench and Dendo 2005), urbanisation and population explosion (Asiyanbola 2007:61), and governance-related issues such as insecurity and socio-economic crises (Okoli and Ayokhai 2016). The significance of 'fault-lines' in relation to communal conflict in Nigeria has been succinctly captured thus:

Violent communal conflicts have been a recurrent phenomenon during the last two decades of Nigeria's history. In Africa's most populous country, the fault-lines along which conflicts can arise are manifold: ethnicity, religion, politics, distribution of riches, and modes of economic production (Schuab 2014:49).

Consequently, in keeping with the existing socio-cultural and political fault-lines, communal conflicts in Nigeria have often been framed along the dividing lines of native (indigene)-settler, Christian-Muslim, farmer-herder, and inter-clannish closures (Gyuse and Ajene 2006). This has, to a reasonable extent, been the case in Nasarawa State, which forms the immediate locus of the present discourse.

#### **4. Historical Overview of Communal Conflict in Nasarawa State**

The political history of Nasarawa State has been punctuated by varying patterns and dimensions of communal conflict. From the creation of the State in 1996 to date (2021), various patterns and dimensions of communal conflict have been witnessed in different parts of the state. The history of communal conflict in Nasarawa State has followed a dynamic pattern whose contours are highlighted in Table 1.

**Table 1: Historical Trends and Dynamics of Communal Conflict in Nasarawa State**

Period	Feature	Instance(s)	Outcome(s)
Pre-2000	Varying intensity contestations over land, boundary, and rangelands/ farmlands in isolated rural localities	Localised farmer-herder, chieftaincy, land-related, and clannish skirmishes; the onset of Bassa-Egbura crisis in 1986	Isolated skirmishes, often mediated through localised community agency; the Bassa-Egbura crisis escalated in 1990s
2001-2005	Onset of active inter-communal hostilities, especially between ethnic Tiv and others in the Southern Senatorial District	The Azara incident of 2001 where the killing of the community's paramount ruler by suspected Tiv assassins led to violent backlashes	Inter-communal suspicion and antipathies; anti-Tiv resentment
2006-2010	Emergence of communal self-help vigilantes and local militias	The rise of Sojan Patari (for Tiv) as well as bands of localised Fulani fighters	Increased inter-communal tension and animosity
2011-2012	Rise of organised ethnic militancy and arms bearing	The Ombatse onslaught on various communities; increased externalised herdsmen (Fulani) violence against settled native communities	Increased inter-communal tension and animosity
2013-2014	Militarisation of conflict and conflict mitigation	Prevalence of scorched-earth raids on rural communities by Fulani assailants; massacre of dozens of police personnel by Ombatse; spate of cattle rustling and rural violence; militarised state operations to arrest the situation	Complex emergency, leading to mass human displacements, fatalities and morbidities
2015-2020	Incremental stabilisation	Gradual de-escalation of conflict	Relative peace and stability

Source: Authors, Pilot Study, 2019.



## 5. Perspectives on Communal Conflict in Nasarawa State

The origins and sources of communal conflict in Nasarawa State must be understood from a multi-causal perspective. This is in view of the fact that 'conflicts and their causes are usually rooted in a complex set of political and historical factors' (Ibenu, Garuba and Ibrahim 2009: xiii). Historical antecedents to communal conflict in Nasarawa State could be traced to land, boundary, and chieftaincy-related matters in the defunct Lower Plateau, some of which had colonial origins (Onwurah 2016:65). Onwurah observes that the Toto-Umaisha conflict of 1986, which culminated in the Bassa-Egbura crisis, was the flagship of communal crisis in the State. It was also noted that the crises were rooted in the politics of colonial penetration and indirect rule wherein the dominance of the Bassa people by the Egbura and Hausa-Fulani extraction was entrenched, partly as a consequence of the former's 'resistance to colonial administration' (Onwurah 2016:77).

The Bassa-Egbura crisis is significant because it represents the foremost instance of communal disturbances in Nasarawa State (Best 2004). More importantly, it has been one of the most protracted cases of communal conflicts in Nasarawa State since its creation (Best 2004). Although this conflict is said to be 'a colonial creation' (Onwurah 2016:77), the substantive issues at stake were land and chieftaincy politics. To be sure, colonialism created the material basis for the conflict by creating the enabling conditions under which land and chieftaincy matters would become both disputable and politicised.

Essentially, the issues of land (including boundary) and chieftaincy, as well as the competitive entitlements thereof, have been the principal drivers of communal conflict in the state. This position has been affirmed by Ajo and Upav (2017) who opine that the roots of communal crisis in the state 'revolves around such issue as the issue of indigeneship, the issue of ownership and usage of land as well as chieftaincy matters'. Contemporary manifestations of communal conflict in Nasarawa State, however, point to the fact that new conflict drivers are emerging. In this respect, Onwurah (2016:73) rightly posits that contemporary 'sources of (communal) conflict in the present day Nasarawa State could also be traced to religion, sectionalism, politics, socio-economic and personal disagreements'.

Literature on the sources and causes of communal conflict in Nasarawa State can be categorised into three broad narratives, namely: farmer-herder perspective, ethno-hegemony perspective, and Islamic agenda perspective. The farmer-herder narrative is by far the most dominant perspective on communal conflict in Nasarawa State. It emphasises the ecological contestations between the crop farmers and nomadic herders in the context of climate-change-induced environmental (resource) scarcities (Okoli and Atelhe 2014:76). Representing this viewpoint, Ayih (2003:20) opines:

Some farmers sometimes attack and kill stray cows for meat. This often leads to bitter conflicts between the farmers and the Fulani (herders). The most frequent causes of conflict are farmers farming across herdsman's migration routes known as *labi*. There are also *labis* to sources of drinking water. Farmers sometimes farm on these *labis* deliberately. When the Fulani come across such farms, they would have no alternative but to drive their animals across them, causing damage to crops. Farmers have small farms scattered about that the Fulani cannot easily identify. During the dry season, farmers often engage in fishing and hunting. They sometimes fish by using chemicals to poison the water, rendering it dangerous for cows to drink. This is another source of conflict.

The farmer-herder perspective on communal conflict in Nasarawa State is best understood within the epistemological framework of 'environment and conflict' (Ibeanu 2009:1). In this regard, the conflict is seen as one of the consequences of the adversities of climate change. The impact of climate change has accentuated the problems of desertification and drought in the far north, leading to a southward drift of herding activities, with Nasarawa State as a critical locus of activity. This has rather intensified resource and livelihood competitions between the migrant herders and settled farmers on that common ecological corridor, often resulting in violent confrontations (Okoli and Atelhe 2014:76). The 'climate change' or 'climate variability' narrative of communal conflict in Nasarawa State resonates with the theories of 'eco-violence', 'eco-survivalism', and 'ecological existentialism' (Okoli and Atelhe 2014:78). The common underlying assumption in these hypotheses is that the imperative for survival in a context of stiff environmental scarcity and insecurity, largely occasioned by the adversities of climate change, is the major driver of communal conflict in the focal state and the environs (Ajodo-Adebanjoko et al. 2015:243).

Another important perspective to communal conflict in Nasarawa State is the ethno-hegemonic narrative. This associates communal conflicts in the state to struggle for ethnic supremacy and dominance (Okoli and Uhembe 2014:13). This is to be understood within the context of the prevailing identity politics and volatile inter-group relations in the state over the years (Okoli and Iortyer 2016:1). With reference to the *Ombatse* crisis of 2012–2014, Alozieuwa (2016:16) notes:

Within its identity politics framework, the *Ombatse* crisis espouses Eggon outrage over their feeling of marginalization and oppression by the Hausa-Fulani hegemony and subsequent resistance hinged on a claim of earlier arrival in Nasarawa area by the former over the latter.

The ethno-hegemonic perspective is of limited analytical utility for explaining the phenomenon of communal conflict in Nasarawa State. It could be reasonably plausible in explicating the political dimensions of the multifarious instances of ethno-clannish flare-ups in the state (Ayuba 2014). Nonetheless, it would be grossly inappropriate in explaining other patterns of communal conflict in the state where ethnic identity is not at issue. It suffices to note that the ethno-hegemonic perspective only offers a reductionist explanation of communal conflict in Nasarawa State.

Another important perspective on communal conflict in Nasarawa State is the Islamic agenda hypothesis. This holds that the contemporary incidence of communal conflict in the state is largely a part of the sinister grand-design by the neo-jihadists to Islamise the non-Muslim population of the State (Adamu and Ben 2016). The Islamic agenda narrative assumes that the various attacks by herdsmen militants against native Christian-dominated communalities in Nasarawa State, but also elsewhere in North Central Nigeria, are borne out of the jihadist machinations geared towards forceful Islamic proselytisation. This viewpoint has been supported by the prevailing popular anecdotes that the Fulani herdsmen have been carrying out selective but systematic attacks on native communities that do not subscribe to Islam (Adamu and Ben 2016). This perspective appears to be gaining ground against the rising tendency of communal conflict towards ‘exploring and exploiting’ the fault-lines of religion and sectionalism (Okoli and Nnabuihe 2019). However, it must be pointed out that the bulk of the literature canvassing the Islamic ‘conspiracy theory’ is merely advocacy write-ups that are inherently subjective and value-laden.

The next relevant perspective on communal conflict is the rural banditry narrative. This perspective stresses the interplay of criminality and violence in driving communal conflicts in the hinterlands/countrysides of Nigeria (Okoli 2015; Egwu 2015; Okoli and Ochim 2016:43). The perspective implicates occurrences, such as cattle rustling, armed robbery, and ethnic militancy as critical predicators of communal conflict (Olaniyan and Yahaya 2016:93).

Communal conflict has been prevalent in Nasarawa State since its creation. Whereas the phenomenon has been witnessed in all local government areas of the state, it has been most pervasive, endemic and intractable in the Southern Senatorial Zone (Adjodo-Adebanjoko et al. 2015). In effect, apart from the Bassa-Egbura conflict in Toto Local Government Area already mentioned elsewhere, most of the violent communal conflicts in the state have occurred in the southern axis, the foremost of which was recorded in early 2000s. Of this conflict-situation, Ayuba (2014:126) avers:

Communal conflict occurred between Tiv and Kwala ethnic groups in Azara of Awe Local Government Area in 2000. The Fulani herdsmen were blaming the Tiv for harassing them and killing their cattle and therefore engaged the services mercenaries (sic) to help protect them and their cattle. The crises eventually led to the murder of the then Sarikin Azara, Alhaji Musa Ibrahim Azara, in June 2001 by unidentified persons. This tragic incident aggravated the situation by setting the Tiv against other ethnic groups in the entire Nasarawa South Senatorial Zone.

Insights from extant studies and narratives indicate that patterns of communal conflicts in Nasarawa State have been varied and dynamic. For the purposes of analytical illustration, Table 2 provides some useful information in that regard.

**Table 2: Patterns of Communal Conflicts in Nasarawa State**

Pattern of conflict	Parties/Belligerents	Issue(s) at stake
Land conflict	Native communities and clans	Land ownership; boundary issues; loyalties and tributes
Entitlement conflict	Native communities and clans	Chieftaincy title; customary rights and entitlements; communal inheritances
Indigene-settler conflict	‘Original natives’ (indigenes) and settlers (second-class natives)	Political and economic competition; autochthony; identity politics
Farmer-herder conflict	Settled farming communities and migrant pastoralists	Land-based resource use; farmland-rangeland contestations
Ethno-sectarian conflict	Ethnic communities and clans	Political and economic competition; clannishness; primordial differences and antipathies
Religious strife	Christians, Muslims, and Traditional worshippers	Faith-based differences, prejudices and antipathies; politicisation of religion
Criminal and political violence	Criminal gangs, militias, vigilantes, politicians and their cohorts	Militancy, brigandage, mercenarism, thuggery, etc.

Source: Authors, Pilot Study, 2019.

## 6. Rethinking Communal Conflicts in Nasarawa State through a Socio-Contextual Prism

To begin with, let it be reiterated that conflict is a dynamic process within a dialectical socio-existential context. Every instance of conflict has its own history, trends, dynamics, and dialectics. These characteristics define the process of conflict. Conflict context encompasses the structural and circumstantial social forces that underlie the occurrence of conflict. This embodies variables such as ambience, causes, actors, interests, and faultiness associated with a particular instance of conflict. Understanding the organic and dialectical relations underlying the processes and

contexts of conflict constitutes the crux of the social ecology of communal conflict as espoused herewith.

So, to what extent have the communal conflict situations in Nasarawa State been reflective of the socio-contextual logic in occurrence? This question forms our major concern in the remaining sub-section. To begin with, it is pertinent to restate that communal conflict has been a dominant feature of Nasarawa State since its creation in 1996. The foremost and most primitive pattern of communal conflict in the State is ethno-communal crisis. Cases in point include the Bassa-Egbura conflict of the 1990s; the Tiv versus 'native/ autochthons' crisis of early 2000s; the perennial Tiv-Fulani conflicts; the Eggon-Fulani conflicts, the Eggon-Alago disturbances; the Eggon-Kambari, etc.<sup>1</sup> The aforementioned crises have been simplistically described as ethnic-based on their manifest appearances. Beneath their apparent ethnic appearances lie deeper political, economic and ecological stakes and interests. The material foundations of the crises have had to do with ownership of land, entitlement to landed resources (rangeland, farmland, freshwater), local power struggles, and civic entitlements (employment, scholarship, elections, etc).

The struggles for competitive advantage within a highly circumscribed political, economic and ecological space have been one of the most critical objective drivers of the crises. For instance, the anti-Tiv violence of the early 2000s was geared towards checking the rising dominance of the Tiv in the state's public service, against the backdrop of the evolving politics of autochthony. On the other hand, the virulent conflict between the Eggon and the Alago was primarily based on land ownership and land holding contestations. Land in this context is not to be understood merely as means of production. It is to be more appropriately understood as a premium of ancestral heritage.<sup>2</sup>

Even the perennial farmer-herder conundrum in the state has equally demonstrated similar tendencies. This has been between the nomadic/migrant Fulani and the settled/ native farming communities. The conflict has its roots in the age-long land-use cum livelihood struggles within an ever shrinking ecological space; an ecological space that has been

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1 Pilot Study, 2019.

2 Ibid.

endangered by the adversities of climate change, modernity, and urbanisation (Okoli 2015; Ajodo-Adebanjoko et al. 2015). Contemporary realities, however, indicate that the conflict has often assumed ethno-religious complications. Nearly all the herders are Fulani. Also, most of the herders are Muslim, or at least non-Christians, while most of the native farmers are Christian, or non-Muslim. This scenario has presented ample pretexts for the framing of a hitherto ecological/economic struggles in ethno-religious and identitarian terms. Consequently, any aggression carried out by the herders on a native farming community is saliently interpreted as either ethnic or religious violence. The reverse is also the case. This tendency has provided impetus for the seeming intractability of farmer-herder clashes in Nasarawa State and neighbouring states within the north-central belt (see Adamu and Ben 2016).

The indigene-settler conflict is also one of the crucial dimensions of communal crisis in Nasarawa State. The crisis has often arisen from claims and counter-claims of indigeneity within the wider remit of politics of identity and autochthony in the state. Some salient contours of this mix can be found in many cases of communal conflicts in the state. For instance, the anti-Tiv violence of early 2000s was to a large extent premised on the perception that the Tiv are not 'originally' indigenous to the state. Similarly, the conflicts between the Eggon and other ethnic entities in the State (Alago, Kambari, Hausa/Fulani) have been, to a significant level, occasioned by the what some locals perceive as the Eggon's hegemonic quest as well as their exclusionary claim to indigeneity (Okoli and Uhembe 2014).

Essentially, on the surface of communal crises in Nasarawa State lies the issue of ethno-identitarian cleavages. However, what have made such crises salient are the underlying complex material foundations: contestations for power, resources, livelihoods, civic entitlements, etc. The socio-cultural attributes of the State (its ethnic, religious and primordial composition and diversities) have merely provided handy fault-lines for the prevalent worsening dynamics of such crises. The situation has been mediated and complicated by the sundry structural anomalies of the Nigerian governance system, exemplified by the unresolved indigeneship question, ambiguous land tenure/holding regime, resource cum security governance debacle, and lack of efficient conflict management mechanism.

The point being established in the foregoing is to the effect that communal conflicts in the focal area have been characteristically dynamic and opportunistic, often reflecting a tendency to trans-mutate. In effect, such conflicts have more often than not been associated with narratives and dynamics that are more incidental than fundamental to their real essences. To further buttress this viewpoint, a review of the socio-contextual ancillaries of relevant instances of communal conflict in the area would suffice.

In the case of the *Ombatse* crisis (see Table 2), the original precipitating factor was the quest for cultural revival by a segment of the indigenous Eggon people. Soon afterwards, the organising movement – *Ombatse* – evolved a militant youth vanguard that was committed to the protection and propagation of the cultural identity and heritage of the Eggon (Alozieuwa 2016). In the run-up to the 2015 general elections, the movement transformed into an ethno-political interest group (with mass and cult-like youth following) that sought to ‘restore’ the ‘lost’ political hegemony of the Eggon in the politics and governance of Nasarawa State.<sup>3</sup> In that context, the movement assumed a partisan motivation and inclination, and was patronised by prominent politicians of Eggon origin, who were involved in the electioneering of that period. It was under such circumstances that the movement became both ethnicised and politicised.

Subsequently, the *Ombatse* was significantly involved in the partisan contestations that foregrounded and attended the 2015 elections in Nasarawa State. Galvanising primordial patronage and solidarity for the emergence of an Eggon candidate as the governor of the state (with the slogan: Time has come!), the movement got embroiled in an ethno-sectionalist agenda that pitted it against other ethnic groups in the state. Part of the outcome of this was a widespread Eggon political militancy as well as a resultant anti-Eggon resentment which accentuated the hitherto volatile inter-group relations in the state, with the Eggon as a major adversary or aggressor.

The various episodes of farmer-herder conflict in the focal state have also reflected the tendency to contextual transmutation and transubstantiation. Nearly in all instances, the conflicts have been

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3 Pilot study, 2019.



precipitated by isolated local skirmishes over farmland/rangeland trespassing (Okoli and Atelhe 2014). However, in view of the combustible social dialectics of such occurrences already highlighted elsewhere in this article, primordial narratives are often (mis)appropriated in interpreting and framing the disputes. In this regard, possible framing options would include narratives such as: ‘nomads against natives’; ‘jihadists invasion of nativeland’; and ‘fulanisation agenda’.<sup>4</sup> The cynical interpretation of herders’ aggression as religious and/ or ethnic agenda is common in Central Nigeria, where indigenous Christians and traditional worshippers tend to be imbued with the palpable fear of forced islamisation (Okoli and Nnabuihe 2019). The salience of such fear derives from the fact that most herders are non-Christians, although all of them are not necessarily Muslim. Narratives like that feeds dangerously into the existing conflicts faultlines to engender outcomes that complicate inter-group antipathies and animosities.

## 7. Conclusion

Communal conflicts have been perennial and prevalent in Nigeria, particularly in the North Central region. In most instances, such occurrences have been opportunistic, manifesting a tendency to feed into existing primordial cleavages. By way of a mixed research design that is predicated on a combination of field and desk insights, this paper uses the example of Nasarawa State to illustrate the character and dynamics of communal conflict in the North Central Nigeria. The article probes the organic socio-contextual forces that underpin the occurrence of communal conflicts in the area, recognising such conflict as a phenomenon that begins, becomes and transforms within a dynamic socio-organic context that embodies divergent and dialectical interests.

The outcome of the analysis reveals that in most instances, what are at stake are a mosaic of deep-seated socio-structural, economic, ecological and political interests. The fact that these interests are vested in groups with divergent primordial affinities presupposes that conflicts arising can therefore readily assume an identity-based (socio-cultural) character. Hence, ecological, economic or political contestations among communal groupings have, more often than not, exploited the existing faultlines of ethnicity, religion, clan, and sect. This tendency has been accentuated by

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4 Pilot study, 2019.

the other structural anomalies of the Nigerian polity which make communal conflict not only possible but inevitable. The article thus submits that the prevalence of communal conflicts in Nasarawa State, but also elsewhere in North Central Nigeria, needs to be understood from the standpoint that recognises its nuanced, dynamic and complex social contexts. Essentially, too, any meaningful attempt to mitigate such conflicts must necessarily address their ramifying socio-contextual undercurrents and dynamics. Hence, it is recommended that:

- i) Conflict analysts and practitioners as well as policy makers working in the focal area should seek to understand the dynamic and opportunistic dialectics of communal conflict in that context in order to be able to understand, interpret and diagnose them.
- ii) Mitigating communal conflict in the focal area will require paying attention to the complex and multifaceted variables that intersect to determine and define conflict dynamics in that context.
- iii) A dynamic conflict analysis and remediation approach that is capable of identifying and assuaging the multiplicity of structural and primordial drivers of conflict in the focal area is a desideratum.

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## Communal Conflicts in North Central Nigeria: A Socio-Contextual Rethink

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