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Farmer-Herder Conflicts as a Clash of Ontologies in North-Central Nigeria

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Abstract

Farmer–herder conflicts have become endemic in Nigeria, particularly its north–central region, since 2017. While various disciplines in the humanities, social sciences and even the sciences have given this problem attention, this paper is an attempt to philosophically understand the issues involved in the crisis. Given the role of the cattle and the farmland to the material survival of the herder and the farmer respectively, discourses on these clashes have been dominated by the perception that they are struggles for material survival couched in religious terms. That is, these clashes have been largely interpreted in materialist terms. However, the distinct philosophical argument this

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paper makes is that, the clashes are not just motivated by the inevitability of material survival. Using the social ontological method of conceptual analysis based on the appeal to what can be coherently conceived, the article shows that: (i) the ontology of the Muslim Fulani herder is fundamentally different from that of the rural farmers in North–Central Nigeria (ii) a major area where this clash of ontology operates is in the centrality of land among the communities of North–Central Nigeria; and (iii) the clash is further exacerbated by the fact that both ontologies are seemingly incommensurable. In line with these points, the key finding of the study is that, the farmer–herder conflicts in North–Central Nigeria can also be fundamentally described as a clash of ontologies (worldviews).

Keywords: Commensurability, Complementarity, Ethno–Religious Conflict, Metaphysics, North–Central Nigeria, Ontology

Résumé

Le travail perçois les affrontements des agriculteurs autochtones et les bergers d' ethnique peul au Nord–Central du Nigéria comme un type de conflit ethno–religieux. Compte tenu de benefice du bétail et des terres agricoles à la survie matérielle du berger et de l'agriculteur, les discours sur ces affrontements ont été dominés par une perception du point de vue religieuse. C'est–à–dire que ces affrontements ont été interprétés, en grande partie, comme une lutte pour la survie. Cependant, le point distinct que cet essai met en évidence est que les affrontements ne sont pas

seulement motivés par l'inévitabilité de la survie matérielle mais plutôt et fondamentalement un choc d'ontologie (visuelles). Pour expliquer correctement ce point, l'essai montrera que: (i) l'ontologie du berger musulman d'ethnique peul est fondamentalement différent de celle des agriculteurs ruraux du nord-central du Nigéria (II) un domaine majeur où cet affrontement de l'ontologie opère est dans la centralité de terre dans le nord-central du Nigeria et (iii) l'affrontement est en outre exacerbé par le fait que les deux ontologies sont apparemment incommensurables. Le travail adopte l'herméneutique et la phénoménologie en tant que cadres d'interprétation. C'est-à-dire que l'essai interprète les pratiques culturelles et la tradition orale dans d'autres pour décrire l'essence de conflits entre les deux groupes.

Mots-clés: Commençabilité, complémentarité, conflit ethno-religieux, métaphysique, nord-central du Nigeria, Ontologie

Introduction

Farmer-herder conflicts have become endemic in Nigeria, particularly its north-central region since 2017. There have been various disciplinary forays in the humanities, social sciences and even the sciences to understand the problem and proffer solutions. Given the role of the cattle and the farmland to the material survival of the herder and the farmer respectively, discourses on these clashes have been dominated by the perception that they are struggles for material survival clothed in religious garb. That is, these clashes have been largely interpreted in materialist terms. However, this paper is an attempt to philosophically understand the issues involved in the crisis. Taking a social

ontological stance, it argues that the clashes are not just motivated by the inevitability of material survival.

In philosophy, ontology is a sub-field of metaphysics, the major branch of philosophy understood as 'First Philosophy,' or the science which studies 'being *qua* being,' (Aristotle, 1991, pp. 84-85) the study of the most general and distinctive features of anything that is. As its sub-field, ontology is concerned with the study of being and the various categories associated with it. In ontology, the primary focus is to identify the structure of being and the various elements that demarcate one existent from another (Smith, 2003). Though quite speculative, a study of this kind is vital for a proper understanding of the being of human beings and of their society at large. In undertaking this kind of study, particular attention is paid to how the being of one set of human beings as well as their society is structured and how these are distinct from other human beings and their society. By extension, a study of this kind also raises concerns about the commensurability of the fundamental structure of the being of persons and groups within a social setting. Questions relating to the structure of the being of the Fulani herder and North-Central farmer as well as the extent of commensurability of such structural schemes and how these form part of the triggers for their almost ceaseless confrontations have not been given proper attention in the various discourses of clashes between these two. On the question of the structures of being and its components as they relate to these crises, opinions are largely reductive, insisting that such issues harbour emotional potency (Brottem, 2021, p. 1).

Bearing in mind some of these gaps in the discourses on Fulani herder and North-Central farmer clashes, this paper attempts to establish that: (i) the ontology (structure of being) of the Fulani herder is fundamentally different from that of the

rural farmer in North–Central Nigeria; (ii) a major area where this difference operates is in the centrality of land among the communities of North–Central Nigeria; (iii) the difference is further exacerbated by the fact that both ontologies are seemingly incommensurable. Before getting to the core of the discussion, it is necessary to establish its method and scope.

On the Methodology and Scope of the Discourse

Basically philosophical in its orientation, the discussion is an exercise in social metaphysics, precisely social ontology. While the paper itself is not a fieldwork study, it depends on secondary sources for its data and derives its philosophical analyses from qualitative and quantitative studies that originate from fieldwork. In this regard, it combines the philosophical, quantitative and qualitative approaches to determine its findings. The paper uses the metaphysical method of conceptual analysis based on what one can coherently conceive from the data available in both the qualitative and quantitative studies on the Muslim Fulani herder and North–Central farmer, as well as studies on the nature of the clashes that have ensued between them. The broad scope for the study is the North–Central zone of Nigeria, but the scope is further limited to three states within the zone, namely Benue, Kogi and Nasarawa states (as shown on the map below). Part of the reason for this narrow focus is the fact that Benue State represents a kind of epicentre in all of these clashes (Ukase and Jato, 2020, p. 9), spreading across twelve local government areas of the state and resulting in monumental devastation and fatalities. Furthermore, Benue was one of the first states to promulgate the anti–open gazing law in Nigeria. Nasarawa and Kogi states are its immediate neighbouring states.

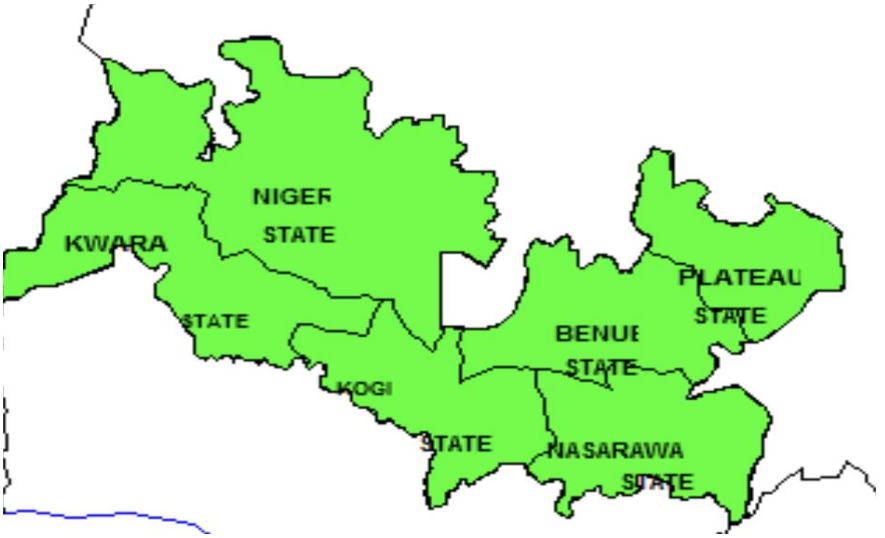

Figure 1 Map of North Central Nigeria

Understanding the Fulani Herder and Settled-Farmer

The progress of humanity started with people as hunters and gatherers, a significant proportion of their early existence being in pursuit of these two activities. At this stage of human existence, humans operated at the same level with nature, more like "an animal of significance" (Harari, 2014, p. 1). The development of the skill to domesticate animals and to cultivate crops ushered humans into a new era of their existence. The skills to domesticate and to cultivate demonstrated the superiority of humans over other creatures and segments of nature. Agriculture thus became the single most effective accomplishment of humans in their existence. This is often referred to as the Neolithic Revolution. The onset of the Neolithic Age saw man move from being a wanderer and gatherer to becoming a farmer and a settler. While the progress from being a hunter–gather to a settled–

farmer took effect, nomadism was still prevalent. Nomadism refers to a kind of animal agriculture in which there is no fixed location, but the herder and the flock or herd rotate in search of suitable pasture. Thus, from the onset of the Neolithic Age, some had the propensity to settle and others chose to practice a wandering form of agriculture.

By virtue of the preoccupation of herders and farmers, the structure of their being as well as their accounts of what reality is are bound to be radically different. Thus, there are some implicit differences in their ontology which accounts for how they see reality and how they understand themselves. As a result of these differences in ontology, certain conflicts have trailed the relationship between these segments of human agricultural endeavours, with some scholars understanding the confrontation between Cain and Abel in the Old Testament as an illustration that these conflicts are as old as the human species. Due to the favourable manner in which God accepted the gift of Abel is presented, some of these scholars even suggest that the writer of that portion of scripture may have been a tender of sheep (Isbouts, 2019). Putting aside any need to consider the adequacy of these suggestions, the point to note is in the fact that the clash between herders and farmers have been long entrenched in human history. In Europe, "pastoral people routinely prevented famers from occupying the rich steppes of South–Eastern Europe that are now the main grain producing regions of Hungary, Russia and the Ukraine" (Richerson, Borgerhoff and Vila, 2001, p. 76). Part of the intricacies of the Cowboy phenomenon in the late 19th century North America also has elements of the cowman–farmer clash and signals another experience of the farmer–herder clashes.

For the current purpose, the farming ethnic groups of North–Central Nigeria are considered as a type of the settled–farmer or sedentary agriculturalist from the Neolithic Age. It considers the Fulani–Herder as typifying the pastoralist from

the Neolithic Age of human existence. On the one hand, sedentary farming is understood as an agricultural practice of raising plants. In this kind of practice, humans settle on large expanse of lands and cultivate these lands for their survival and sustenance. On the other hand, pastoralism is practice of the nomadic form of agriculture and those who practice this are called pastoralists. This is a form of agriculture aimed mainly at raising livestock of all forms which are used for milk, meat, wool, hides, transport and trade (Ikeya and Fratkin, 2005, p. 2). In the raising of livestock, herd mobility is quite fundamental, and "two forms of mobile pastoralism are generally distinguished: nomadic and transhumant" (Liechti and Biber, 2016, p. 561). Transhumant pastoralism is a patterned way of moving livestock seasonally from highlands in winter to lowlands in summer or vice versa. Nomadic pastoralism, on the other hand, is an irregular way of moving livestock and such pastoralists do not have fixed living locations, but are constantly living on the move. While nomadic pastoralism has been quite common in Africa, transhumant pastoralism is more prevalent across Europe and remains very important from both socio–economic and ecological perspectives (Liechti and Biber, 2016). The Fulani herder (also referred to as Fulbe) belongs to the class of nomadic pastoralists. It is also important to underscore the fact that "among the major Fulbe social groups are Fulbe Jaawambe (powerful), Fulbe Ladde (nomadic) and Fulbe Wuro (urban)" (Asante and Mazama, 2009, p. 276). By this categorisation, this paper's primary attention is on the Fulbe Ladde. These are the set of the Fulani ethnic group involved in the actual practice of herding.

Diverse drivers have been identified for the continued clashes between farmers and herders especially in the post–2017 era when fatalities from farmer–herder clashes surpassed those from insurgency in Nigeria (Ajala, 2019; Ogu, 2020: 109).

In fact, according to the Crisis Group Report (2018, p. 1), "since September 2017, at least 1,500 people have been killed, over 1300 of them from January to June 2018, roughly six times the number of civilians killed by Boko Haram over the same period." As Nwankwo (2021, p. 136) notes, "studies on the crisis have been approached commonly through political ecology, political economy and environmental security frameworks and a combination of these approaches". From these approaches, a number of drivers have also been identified as responsible for the conflicts. Iduma (2021, pp. 30–37) categorises some of these factors as follows: climate factors, structural violence factors, psychological and cultural factors, agro–capitalism factors. In furthering the conversations, climate factors have been developed along the line of eco–violence (Bello and Abdullahi, 2021; Olumba, 2022; Olumba et al, 2022 and Olumba, 2023). The framework of eco–violence as developed by Homer–Dixon and Blitt (1998) argues that conflicts of the farmer–herder kind ensue when groups clash over water and other renewable agricultural resources. Also, the agro–capitalism factor has been developed through the lens of neo–pastoralism (Ajala, 2019 and 2020). In contrast to the traditional portrait of the pastoralist by Smith (2005) "which conjures up images of dusty herd moving across landscape and of the herder with his stick across his shoulders or standing on one leg leaning on his spear and gazing into the distance," neo–pastoralism proposes that trends in pastoral farming have shifted to the point where it is no longer traditional herders that are now involved in the business of stockpiling livestock, particularly cattle. Elites from the North–Central region and other regions of Nigeria are also involved in the business and have contributed to exacerbating the crises in the region. Ajala (2020, p. 6) considers neo–pastoralism as a tool for money laundering, suggesting that most of the funds invested in the cattle business are ill–gotten wealth from government looting and crime. Notwithstanding the points of

these considerations, they do not give serious thought to the possibility of difference at the ontological level as a potent driver or framework for analysing the clashes between farmers and herders. This is what has been termed 'clash of ontologies' and the focus of this paper is to analyse the nuances of this difference as a driver for these clashes.

Mapping the Ontology of the Fulani-Herder

Following from the basic understanding of the nomadic herder and the farmer, certain features can be identified that run through all of these groups as a whole and specifically through the group of the Fulani herder and the farmer of North–Central Nigeria. From an occupational standpoint, the Fulani herder deals primarily in raising cattle. Sheep and goats are only subsidiary livestock engagements. But, beyond the occupational level, the relationship to cattle is deeper. The Fulani herder considers his being as intricately tied to that of the cattle. The relationship with the cow is often considered as one of 'equality and reciprocity'. This conceptualisation is reflected in the statement by a WoDaaBe herder as recorded by Loftsdóttir (2001, p. 289) in the following words:

> My people are *musabe* (slaves) of cow, all you do is for your cows. If it is the dry season, you want to go and get water for your cows. Your cows only wait, observing you working. You have to do all the work, you have to think about how to get the water.

The Fulani myth of origin further reinforces their relationship to the cow. The tradition has it that "two children came out of the water and they made a grass house (*suurel*). Later, some cows came out of the water and stayed with the children. When the children migrated, the cows followed

because the children had made fire" (Loftsdóttir, 2002, p. 283). By this myth, the origin of how the Fulani came to be is closely intertwined with the origin of the cow. The myth also highlight the importance of water and fire to the existence of man and cattle (Adebayo, 1991).[1] This close connection between man and cattle in origin, can be considered as the grounds for the

[1] Other versions of the origin of the Fulani people exist outside the myth of origin highlighted in this context. But they all contain the salient elements of water, cattle and fire. The following is a long extract form Kristín Loftsdóttir on these various versions. One version is the view that the Bororo descended from an incestuous marriage between a Fulani woman and her son, and that the Bororo descended from a woman of Arab descent called Bajomagu. Another version tells of a woman called Bajemongo giving birth to a daughter and a son who spoke a new language, Fulfulde. Later, Bajemongo had two additional children with a water spirit, who became the ancestors of the Bororo. Adebayo reports a narrative gathered by the Resident of Sokoto, which also states that the Fulani originated from a union of a woman and a water spirit. The narrative, however, argues that cattle were created out of fire, but given to the Fulani child by the water spirit.

Another version states that Fulani legends always see their origin as being from the east, speaking of an Arab connection. This version additionally points out that their cattle are usually seen as originating from a river, even though some stories argue that the Beriberi first had cattle and the Fulani gained cattle from them. This version retells a story containing the elements of fire and the water spirit and a birth of a Fulfulde speaking child (the story also does not distinguish between Fulani and WoDaaBe). The second story of this version addresses the origin of the nomadic Fulani, telling of a Fulani child that became lost and grew up in the bush, latter acquiring cattle from a water spirit. Some refer to this version of the story, and a version given by a German ethnologist written in 1912, identifying these accounts as representing the way in which the first Fulani who owned cattle was expelled from a Fulani settlement. This first Fulani wanders around the settlement, but encounters a water spirit who tells him that he will acquire great wealth by obeying his orders. The first Fulani then obtains the cattle from this water spirit, who tells him that he should not fail to light a fire for the cattle or they will return to their wild state. A more recent research, presents an origin story containing themes similar to those reported earlier, seeing water spirit as the father of Fulani and WoDaaBe.

cultural practice of reciprocity and equality between man and cattle in Fulani ontology.

At another level, the submission that, "key to the cultural core of pastoralism is the mobility made possible by herders" (Richerson, Borgerhoff and Vila, 2001, p. 77; Agrawal, 1999) is another vital aspect of the structure of the being of the Fulani herder. By this submission, mobility makes the Fulani herder. Thus, a ranched livestock farmer cannot be considered a herder. At best, a ranch is a subsidiary of sedentary farming within the Fulani ontological view. It is as a result of the mobility of the herder that their identity can also be considered as fluid. Like the water from which their traditions assert that they emerged, fluidity is integral to their identity. Fluidity, as used here, is to underscore the fact that Fulani identity is not necessarily tied to place. As recorded by Loftsdóttir (2004, p. 55) about the WoDaaBe Fulani group in Niger,

> When God created WoDaaBe, God gave them migration movement (*gonsul*) as their tradition. Thus, when WoDaaBe came into existence they had migration movement... We are WoDaaBe because of migration. All of us migrate. WoDaaBe leave a place, we find grass, call our cows, take them there.

In a study conducted by Ikeya and Fratkin on understanding pastoralists and their neighbours, they state,

> current changes including rapid commoditisation, competition for grazing reserves, human insecurity, will continue to threaten pastoralist and their wellbeing and security. To this end, pastoralists will continue to maintain, develop, and protect relations with

> their neighbours, who are indispensable component of the world the pastoralist inhabit (Ikeya & Fratkin, 2005, p. 12).

Extrapolating from this to the Fulani herder in particular, the neighbours refer to the various communities the migrant groups come in contact with in their movements. Continued contact affects the sustained identity of the Fulani herder, even though efforts are made to retain the pure essence of what it is to be a Fulani herder. In this migration process, this group of people do not desire to live in cities. In fact, some refer to themselves as "bird of the bush (*solli ladde*) or as people of the bush (*toguu ladde*)" (Loftsdóttir, 2001, p. 281). These describe the town as "smelling (*kassedum*), having people crowded together, unlike the bush where conditions are seen as sanitary. Agriculture is characterised as drudgery…" (Loftsdóttir, 2001, p. 284). Even when the quest for alternative source of livelihood propels migration to the city, "the stay in the city is not considered as an aspect of sedentation, of abandoning mobility and fixity in one place, they view it as the opposite, i.e. as an ongoing journey that will eventually lead them back to the bush" (Loftsdóttir, 2004, p. 69).

Consequent to the ontological imperative of migration is an aversion to accumulation of wealth in the form of material surplus. The signal of wealth possession among this group is possession of the cattle: "Generally Muslim, the Fulani are proud of owning many herd, which is a sign of wealth prestige rather than a source of income" (Nakou, Dakpo, Messan et al., 2012, p. 51). Among the group there is a popular saying that,"a Fulani without an ox is not a Fulani. This means that without owning that ox, he loses his Fulani identity" (Nakou, Dakpo, Messan et al., 2012, p. 51). Possessing the ox is also the reason for the mobility of this group of persons. Thus, the rationale for this aversion to material accumulation is premised largely on the mobile nature of the group. As a result of this

mobility, Fulani herders always live in makeshift camps that would not constitute encumbrances to their easy mobility. It is important to underscore the fact that wealth as used in this context carries first the sense of 'fullness of identity', before it is 'adequacy for material sustenance'. Wealth as fullness of identity indicates the cow as what comprehensively marks one out as a Fulani. In this context, owning cattle is the ontological mark. Thus, whether as a Fulbe Jaawambe (powerful), Fulbe Ladde (nomadic) and Fulbe Wuro (urban), the possession of cattle is vital. There are even insinuations that a vast majority of the cattle herded by the Fulbe Ladde are owned by the Fulbe Jaawmbe and Fulbe Wuro. Incidental upon wealth as fullness of identity, is wealth as 'adequacy for sustenance'. Here, the cattle also serves as a factor of production. From the milk, the meat, hide and other products, the Fulani is able to raise means to sustain his survival and existence. By these understandings of wealth, it becomes clear that the possession of cattle is first for identity marking and sufficiency, that is, for ontological demarcation, before it is for survival. It is cultural before it is economic.

Given the close affinity between the Fulani and his cattle, another key feature of his ontological map is a form of socialisation into aggression. This is a practice typical among the male folk of this group. The male cattle is very aggressive and from a tender age Fulani boys are already exposed to these animals. For their own survival, it becomes necessary to internalise the art of dominating these creatures. The best way this is done among the Fulani folks is to infuse aggression into the Fulani boy in a measure that outweighs the aggression of the bull. One way the bull expresses aggression is the broadside threat. This is a situation whereby "the bull threatens other male cattle or people by turning at right angles to their opponents and bellowing" (Lott and Hart, 2009, p. 180).

Fulani boys are trained to exhibit a higher level of aggression in order to deal with such kinds of behaviour among his herd. The socialisation process in all these lies in the fact that, "failure to make the bull subordinate is not criticised as poor husbandry, but as cowardice" (Lott and Hart, 2009, p. 182). In this regard, Fulani boys are expected to demonstrate sufficient courage in handling the bull. While doing this, it is observed that, "it is the courage revealed in this interaction with cattle that is fostered not success with handling the cattle per se" (Lott and Hart, 2009, p. 182). The show of courage exhibited in this relationship with the cattle is expected to manifest at the level of relationship among themselves, as young boys. *Pulaku*, as a code of social expectation, which prohibits physical attack against another, except in the case of provocation, is what restricts the exhibition of aggression among Fulani boys. But when provoked, physical attack is required and when it is not given, "older brothers, cousins or parents may beat the insulted boy for his cowardice. The *Pulaku* prescribes attacks for many offenses that would be minor in other cultures. The result is that fighting is fairly common among men up to the age of about thirty" (Lott and Hart, 2009, p. 182). This socialisation into aggression is further entrenched through the practice of the *Sharo*. Other Fulani groups refer to it as *Godja* or Soro. It is ritualised beating contest or flogging. It can also be described as ritual violence. This can be organised at various events in a year and boys between the ages of 15 and 25 challenge themselves to a flogging contest. The aim it to show the level of endurance of the boys. At a deeper level, the flogging ceremony "provides an opportunity for the various social units which are usually distant from one another as far as geographical location is concerned to get closer for a moment in order to consolidate and strengthen the social ties which link them together" (Nakou, Dakpo, Messan et al., 2012, p. 51). In this flogging contest, the boys beat themselves with

quite heavy sticks and all their strength. The socialising factor in this is the fact that,

> The boys are taught from a very early age to expect this contest, to meet its challenge, and to cherish the honour and the scars it brings. The traditional sanction for failure to participate include: social disgrace, humiliation from relatives, and a distinct disadvantage in obtaining wives (Lott and Hart, 2009, p. 183).

On this ground, the boys take the ceremony seriously and by so doing, also internalise value sets of aggressiveness which marks them out from other ethnic groups. It can be summarised that four primary elements of the ontology of the Fulani–herder include: relationship of equality and reciprocity with the cattle, identity as constituted by mobility, aversion to accumulation of material wealth and socialisation into aggression.

The Structure of Being (Ontology) of the North Central Farmer

As is the case with the Fulani herder, there are certain unique structural features of the being of the farmer of North–Central Nigeria. The North–Central farmer, as noted earlier, is a type of the sedentary farmer from the Neolithic Age. Despite the variegated nature of the ethnicities in this region, they can be considered together because, "these societies have similar cultures, tradition, history, language orientation and social values" (Ngharen, 2021, p. 13). Following from the close resemblance of these societies with regards to the listed variables, their ontological outlook also bears similar features. In the first instance, the ethnicities of this region bear close affinity with land. The perspective of Sogolo on the position of

Senghor that, "traditional man does not differentiate between the organic and the inorganic, between the subject and the object, between himself and the land he inhibits" (Sogolo, 1998, p. 289) can be used to describe the affinity of the North–Central framer with the land. The farmer in North–Central Nigeria, considers himself as one with his land. On the basis of this oneness, there is a special reverence for land and it is even elevated to the status of the sacred (Mbiti, 1969, p. 74). As with the Akan community of Ghana, the ethnicities of North–Central Nigeria consider land as belonging to the whole community or lineage. The community or lineage here includes the ancestors, living members and those yet to be born (Wiredu, 1998: 374). In fact, among the Igala people of Kogi State, land is referred to as *Ane* (meaning ground or land). At Idah, which is the ancestral capital of the Igala Kingdom, a particular period and place is designate for *Erane*, a festival in reverence to the land. Similarly, the Tiv people in the Benue valley consider land as freighted with symbolic meaning. It is sacred and considered as an ancestral and historical sphere of influence (Tenuche and Ifatimehin, 2009, pp. 360–364). In fact, the Tiv people do not have designated burial locations; deceased family members are buried on family lands within the immediate vicinity where family members live and farm. For the Mada people of Nasarawa State, land is something "more than what it means to the modern mind. Land was seen as a great and valuable possession bequeathed on the living by the dead and held sacredly in trust for future generations. Land could be leased out but not sold" (Ngharen, 2018, p. 62). The Idoma people of Benue state have the *Eje–Aje* festival to celebrate the earth (land) and "is associated generally and essentially with hunting and for the appeasement of the ancestors, for taboos against the land, which attract sanctions" (Apenda, 2015, p. 11).

Even though communities in North–Central Nigeria are farming communities, the value of the land is not just

restricted to its agricultural worth. Beyond being a means of sustenance, in terms of food, the land and its adjourning environment carries the complete weight of what makes a person, a person. The land and its adjourning environment creates the complete community for the person; the land above the soil is his living space, the land beneath the soil is the place for his ancestors, the unused land is the inheritance of those yet unborn. For communities in North-Central Nigeria, the ancestral land is home; it is the source of identity. Identity is rootedness in this land.

It is thus evident that, as a corollary to the centrality of land in North-Central Nigeria, the identity of the people of this region derives directly from their land. That is, the average indigene of North-Central Nigeria identifies him/herself with his or her land. The first implication in this regard is that everybody within this region is entitled to a plot of land. By virtue of this entitlement, one defines himself or herself. Within the context of land as basis for identification in African cultures, Ramose (1998, p. 541) stresses the point that,

> History is replete with examples showing that human beings have used ownership or occupancy of land as part of the definition of their identity. This is hardly surprising if one considers the intricate and indissoluble connection between land and life. It is precisely because of this vital connection that some human beings chose death to the loss of their land. For them to be landless is to be dead, since loss of land is equal to being cut off from the means to stay alive. This reasoning has become the basis for the assertion of the right to land.

Beyond the connection stressed by Ramose in the above, there is also the way in which the communities of North–Central Nigeria categorise the entirety of the environment in which they live. Just like most African cultures, the communities of North–Central Nigeria also consider the land as a deity that is responsible for fertility and, in some communities, for the enforcement of morality (Apenda, 2015, pp. 11ff). This explains the co–existence of two worlds within African metaphysics as well as the fact that the world of the ancestors is co–extensive with the world of the living. In specific terms, the relationship of identity that emerges from land in this regard carries the sense of rootedness. The land refers to the roots of a person, the point from which a community and even persons emerge. This land also represents the place where such persons will rest at the end of all the toils in this life and such a person becomes an ancestor. Land "takes" the man after death. Across the North–Central region of Nigeria, the practice of burying the dead on ancestral lands is replete; not even the influence of Christianity and Islam has affected this practice which gives further credence to the idea of rootedness.

Land is also the means by which material wealth is accumulated. The position that "Africans place high value on wealth, both private and family" (Awoniyi, 2015, p. 9) is quite true of the ethnicities of North–Central Nigeria in particular. The size of one's land is an approximation of the size of one's farm. The more the portion of the land that is cultivated, the higher the likelihood of having large barns and granaries. This large reserve of food is often harnessed for wealth accumulation. Accomplishing the demands of large farming is, most of the times, the basis for having large families and network of friends. This is because, "friends and relatives would come and assist during farm work not because they will be paid, but so that if it happens they need such assistance in the near future, they will be sure to find it. Children were seen

to provide the main labour force. That is why a man takes pride in having many of them, especially males" (Idang, 2015, pp. 105-06). Perhaps, this was one of the main reasons for polygamy among the traditional people of North-Central Nigeria. Polygamy was one of the sure ways to produce the number of children that could man large farms. In addition to the pragmatic value of having family and a network of friends, the presence of kinship support, relations, family network is integral to the understanding of wealth (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2012, p. 60). A person is not regarded as poor as long as the kinship system with its coterie of extended family remains functional (Kalu, 2008, pp. 62-63). Thus, the life of community is vital in understanding wealth among the societies of North-Central Nigeria. Beyond all of these, another vital element in the wealth dimension of these communities is the extra advantage which the sedentary nature of these communities bestow on their fortunes in terms of wealth. Quoting Elman, Aluko (2020, p. 5) highlights this fact in the following words,

> The farming community ... has little mobility which results in the upgrading of acquired skills for material development such as weaving, metalworking, pottery, substantial housing and furniture, and, of course, variety in the diets.

In this context, being stable is conducive to the accumulation of wealth. Stability breeds wealth. On the contrary, wealth accumulation is a burden for mobility. As such, it is integral to nomadic communities to abhor wealth in terms of material accumulation, but this not an issue for settled communities.

The ontological outlook of the ethnicities of North-Central also emphasizes socialisation. In this case, children are

socialised into learning the values and cultural commitments of the group. By this is meant, the child learns "the culture, tradition, customs, norms, values, philosophy, occupation etc., of his/her people" (Robert and Dibie, 2017, p. 33). As members of a group of people who are involved in crop agriculture as their basic means of sustenance, children are taught the rudiments of crop production. The specific skills for effective crop production are vital here. The Eggon people of Nasarawa State, for example, have developed the skills of farming on mountains, using a "sophisticated terraced agriculture which has evolved to meet the demands of the ecosystem of the hills [and is] extremely efficient in terms of land and labour input…" (Ayuba, 2017, p. 78). This skill–set of hill farming is part of the specific skill of effective crop production into which the younger generation are to be socialised. Besides unique skill–sets such as hill farming, socialisation processes also involve teaching children the value of stability and to do all it takes to guard such. Farming communities do understand that the demands of farming requires living in a cordial manner with neighbours so as to avoid a situation of forced relocation. While livestock, particularly cattle, are easy to move around, neither crops cultivated on farms nor accumulated wealth that has accrued from successful farming can be moved easily. For these reasons, farming communities prioritize peaceful and cordial relations with their neighbours. This is the basis for the often touted idea about hospitality among the ethnicities of North–Central Nigeria. Such specific cultural values are part of the package to be transferred through socialisation in these groups.

Establishing the Points of Clash and Incommensurability in Both Ontologies

A summary of all the foregoing discussions on the ontologies of the North–Central farmer and the Fulani herder brings the following to the fore:

i. While the Fulani herder holds a relationship of reciprocity and equality with his cattle, the North–Central farmer holds his land in similar esteem
ii. The identity of the Fulani herder is tied to his mobility, suggesting its fluid nature; that of the North–Central farmer is tied to his land and is consequently fixed
iii. As a consequence of mobility, there is a strong aversion to accumulation of material surplus among Fulani herders; however, the North–Central farmer has a penchant for material accumulation as a result of their sedentary nature
iv. While the Fulani herder is socialised into an aggressive personality, the North–Central farmer is socialised into valuing hospitality and cordiality with his or her neighbours.

From this summary, it is clear that the defining element of these ontologies (structures of being) are cattle and land. This means that the worldviews of both the North–Central farmer and the Fulani herder are tied to land and cattle, respectively. A good number of the literature on farmer–herder clashes in North–Central Nigeria point to land as the centrepiece of the dispute (Adisa, 2017, pp. 99–118; Aluko, 2021, pp.1–21; Centre of Development and Democracy, 2021). However, most of these literature point to land as a resource or factor of production and cattle as a means of sustenance.

From the ontological discussion above, land symbolizes something far more than just a factor of production.

Given the place of land in the ontology of the ethnicities of North–Central Nigeria and the centrality of the cattle in the identity and existence of the Fulani herder, one begins to understand that the clash of the Fulani herder and the North–Central farmer runs deeper than just a struggle for a scarce resource –– in this case, land. It is a struggle of ontologies and a clash of worldviews or, in other words, a struggle between the civilizational trajectories of the farmer and that of the herder. The Fulani herder is averse to ranching because mobility is core to the structure of his being and moving around with his herds of cattle is not just as a result of the exigencies of survival; it is core to his existential essence. On the other hand, the North–Central farmer is unwilling to let go of land because the land carries the full weight of his/her being. This fact forms the basis for the psychological trauma of displaced persons in North–Central Nigeria. Beyond the trauma of the violence they have suffered, dislocation from their land and special space in place is a deeper level of trauma. Homelessness in this context is not merely lacking a roof over one's head, but being uprooted from one's existential place, to be left rootless. This is tantamount to degrading their being. North–Central communities seem to have suffered more in the ensuing clashes. This is because of the special military advantage which the nomadic life bestows: "[t]rade and war are both favoured by the efficient transportation technology that is in the hand of pastoralists. Pastoralist tend to engage quite freely in commercial trade and war" (Richerson, Borgerhoff and Vila, 2001, p. 76). Aluko (2020, p. 5) buttresses this point further in the following words: "if military power is important to survival, it will increase commitment to the herding specialisation, mainly because of the advantage conferred by mobility." Along with the advantage of mobility for military expertise, "the value set to aggressiveness and to

physical violence coupled with verbal violence which can be noticed among the Fulani" (Nakou, Dakpo, Messan et al., 2012, p. 55) and their aversion to material accumulation motivates them more; they have nothing to lose in terms of material wealth in the fight and the socialisation into aggression makes them feel like cowards when they do not fight.

At a deeper philosophical level, the dynamics of *complementarity* and *commensurability* also points in the direction of the clash of ontologies that this paper seeks to establish. In the efforts to understand the relationship between the Fulani herder and the North–Central farmer, some have insisted that these group of people have lived quite peacefully and for a long time. They have been considered as "cultural neighbours" (Ikpanor, 2020, p. 37). In this context, their relationship is considered as *complementary*. Each of the group supplies what the other does not have. That is, while the Fulani herder supplies meat and other forms of diary product to the indigenes of North–Central Nigeria, the indigenes of North–Central Nigeria supply the herder grains and other crop products from their farms. Moreover, the cattle graze on the farms after harvest and their dung manure the land (Yikwabs, Kayode, Yashua and Dongnaan, 2020, pp. 25–6). What is often not highlighted is the fact that complementary relationships of this kind do not mean (or translate to) compatibilities at the level of worldviews and their ontologies. It is within the context of compatibilities among worldviews (ideologies) and their ontologies that the question of commensurability and incommensurability arises. Two things are quite important to commensurability as far as life–visions are concerned – the internal consistency of a life–vision and the horizon of consistency of such a life–vision. Both taken together are referred to as the radius of consistency of such a life–vision. Internal consistency refers to how reasonable and properly

formed a life–vision is within itself, while horizon of consistency refers to the amount of reality such a life–vision captures or can capture. When the amount of reality it captures is restricted, such a life–vision is partial or particular. When the amount of reality it captures is wide, such a life–vision is impartial, universal or universalisable. It should equally be noted that life visons that are easily universalisable have the capacity of subsuming other life visions because they are impartial and non–restrictive in their basic approach (Agbakoba, 2003; Agbakoba, 2005). When Christianity says 'love your neighbour as yourself' and insists that your neighbour is anybody but you – not minding the sex, race, religion etc. of such a person – it is espousing a life–vision with a maximally wide horizon of consistency.

From the ontologies that have been discussed, one can begin to have a handle on the question of the radius of consistency of the life visions of the groups at stake. To define the self on the basis of ontological affinities to cattle and land already places restriction on the amount of reality that the life–visions which depend on these can capture. For the Fulani herder, owning an ox and being able to move around freely with such is the core of their ontology and worldview. This life vision is so engrained that ranching or cattle colonies are resisted on the grounds that it is a form of sedentation which violates the fundamental essence of migration. By this disposition, there is an attitude of exclusion with regard to those who do not share such life vision. Given the socialisation into aggression and the military/trade advantage which mobility brings to the header, the Fulani herder is almost always predisposed to violence and to attack those who are seen to be at variance with their life vision. In a similar vein, the life vision of the North–Central farmer is partial and restrictive on the basis of indigeneity based on affiliation to land. That is, the 'the Son of the Soil' as a factor for self–identification. For this group, even to have bought a piece of land in their midst does

not translate to being an indigene. Ancestral connections to land acquisition is what makes one an indigene. Ancestral acquisition in this context carries the sense of the Lockean disposition to private property. Ancestors did not buy lands; these lands were rather acquired when migrating ancestors settled on vast of virgin lands. Overtime, divinatory and ancestral links are built with such lands and they become the basis for indigeneity and self-identification. An individual, to whom any portion of this land is sold, does not share this level of affinity with the indigenes of the land. On a larger spectrum, one who does not share ancestral affinity with the land is almost always excluded. Cordiality is extended to them as long as they remain within their place on such lands. Cordiality is extended to the immediate neighbours because it would allow for the peaceful enjoyment of the farming potentials of the land. To others, who may pose any threat to the use of their land, cordiality is not a mandatory disposition. Furthermore, a neighbour who demonstrates tendencies of inhibiting the optimal use of the land could become a victim of hostility. Thus, the structure of cordiality is not unconditional. There is a horizon of expectation attached to cordiality of groups in North-Central Nigeria. Cordiality happens primarily among indigenes (those who share the same ancestral affinity with the land), then with the neighbour who does not inhibit the use of the land and then to others. The extent of inclusion is also along these lines as well. Thus, there is partiality in the fundamental mode of operation of the North-Central Farmer, a narrow and exclusive horizon of consistency as well.

The incompatibility between these life visions does not even allow for any one subsuming the other. Their horizons of consistency are so restricted. This is the basis for their incommensurability – they are incompatible and none can subsume the other. What largely ensues in this situation is a

clash whenever there is a little frication. This is why the Fulani herder is prone to strike in a violent manner and why the North–Central Farmer is unrelenting. The life vision and civilizational trajectories of both groups are partial and mutually excluding. The horizons of consistency which they muster are quite narrow. The resultant effects are the clashes which have become rampant between farmers and herders in North–Central Nigeria. The clash at this fundamental ontological level is one of the key reasons for the instabilities in North–Central Nigeria which have been read only within the narrow context of material survival

Conclusion

The central philosophical point of this paper has been that the farmer–herder clash in North–Central Nigeria is *first* a clash of ontologies before it is anything else. By clash of ontologies was meant the incommensurability in the structure of being and reality which issues in a struggle of civilizational trajectories, rather than just a struggle for material survival. It is *first* not in the sense of being prior in the order of occurrence, but it is so in the sense that it is a fundamental background motivation for the clashes. Two other philosophical points have been significant in establishing this central point. The first is the ontology of land in the African metaphysical purview. Here, the attachment to land is scared, non–negotiable and can require giving one's life. The second is that even though cultures complement one another, such complementary relationships do not necessarily translate to commensurability of ideologies. Thus, while farmer–herder relations could have been said to be complementary, upon unpacking the ontological outlook of these communities and the ideologies therein, the ideological incommensurability of these ontologies are opened up. The conclusion is that, as long as these points of incommensurability remain, the conflicts are bound to continue.

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