Abstract

The farmer–pastoralist conflict (FPC) has been discussed and given ethnic and religious appellations in some countries of West Africa, such as Ghana and Nigeria. In Nigeria, such a reading of the conflict is rampant in the media and dominant in national political discourse. However, these ethno-religious insinuations have not received serious scholarly treatment in Nigeria or been downplayed. In this paper, I examine the context in which ethnicity becomes vital to the FPCs, based on fieldwork in the Nimbo-Adani area of Uzo-Uwani municipal council of Enugu State affected most by the conflict in South-Eastern Nigeria. This area is an essential hot spot of the FPCs that has not been explored in analyzing the FPCs in Nigeria. The study is based on field observations and semi-structured in-depth interviews. The paper draws on the FPCs literature regarding the influence of ethnic identities on the conflict. It shows that the difference in ethnicity between pastoralists and farming communities is not the primary root of the conflict. At the first outbreak of violence, the difference in ethnicity was not the cause of the conflict. Ethnic identity only gets cited after the first brutal fighting between the nomads and the farming community. Non-violent conflicts often occur because of cattle destruction of farm crops and pollution of water sources. Although the herders are accused of various atrocities, such as rape and kidnapping, the first outbreak of violence was caused by retaliation for killing a herder in one of the villages. Heightening ethnic identity amplifies the construction of the herders’ identity and social status as non-indigenous and non-belonging in the villages. Thus, the villages seek the eviction of the herders based on their social status as non-indigenes. The paper argues that ethnic faultlines matter to the FPCs but only after other factors have initiated the conflict. Therefore, we should pay attention to the primary root of conflicts and how they get the basis for social exclusion activated.

Keywords: farmer–pastoralist conflict; ethnicity; land struggles; Nigeria; ethnic faultline; identity

Introduction

Across West Africa, the conflict between pastoralist and farming groups has intensified in the last decade and has had economic, social and political implications in the region. In Nigeria, the fighting had become recurrent in Central and Southern Regions compared with the 1970s–1990s when the conflict was prevalent in the Northern Region and has claimed the lives of more than 2,500 people from 2012 to 2015 (IEP, 2016). The FPC has often been explained as the product of the struggle for scarce environmental resources such as land and waterholes (Homer-Dixon, 1999; Herrero, 2006; Obioha 2008; Cabot 2017). Environmental security theory contends that the conflict is a result of the struggles between farmers and herders because of the scarcity of ecological resources such as grazing lands and waterholes due to population growth, environmental degradation, and climate change (e.g., Onuoha, 2008; Tamou et al., DOI:10.13169/jglobfaul.9.1.0044
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Political ecologists have also explained the FPCs as products of the battle for access and control over resources between farming and herding groups. Earlier studies that follow the political ecology analysis blend it with the political economy analysis emphasizing the intersection of the economy and power relations among formations such as capitalist’s farmers and pastoralists and the peasant economy’s farmers and herders (e.g., Bassett, 1988). More recently, political ecologists challenged the environmental security tradition as inadequate in its explanation because, as they argued, there are places where scarcity of resources exists without conflict and there are areas of resource abundance which have conflict. Political ecologists have argued that the common property management and environmental security approach to explaining the resource-related conflicts as scarcity-driven are inadequate (e.g., Blaikie & Brookfield, 1987; Turner, 2004; O’Loughlin et al., 2012; Okoli & Atelhe, 2014). Political ecology’s motivations on the conflicts emphasize the impact of local and national land tenure and land use policies on the environment and development (Turner, 2004).

Thus, political ecologists contend that the crisis is a product of the struggle over access to and control over resources among farming and herding groups. Pastoralists have limited access to and control over resources because national and local land tenure and land use policies ignored herders’ prerogatives (e.g., Benjaminsen et al., 2009; Benjaminsen & Ba, 2009, 2019). They contend that states’ policies favour farming interests and neglect pastoralists (e.g., Blaikie & Brookfield, 1987; Turner, 2004; Okoli & Atelhe, 2014; Benjaminsen & Ba, 2009, 2019). Hence, national land tenure policies and legislation, as well as local land use and local politics, are vital to understanding FPC. Essentially, political ecologists argue that resources scarcity and ethnicity do not offer explanations of the FPCs. They contend that access to land is central to the conflict between nomadic herders and local communities, who are often crop growers across West Africa. Other political ecologists have argued that moral wrongs by the actors in the conflicts are vital to understanding the root of the conflicts (Turner, 2004; Nwankwo & Okafor, 2021a). In Nimbo and Awgu areas in South-Eastern Nigeria, Nwankwo and Okafor (2021a) argue that moral wrongs are the genesis of the conflicts and the heightened identity constructions that enacted the exclusion of the pastoralists in land tenure by the indigenous farming communities. The role of discourses and identities has also been highlighted (Chukwuma, 2020; Igwebuike, 2021; Nwankwo et al., 2020; Nwankwo, 2021), plus the geopolitical dimensions (Nwankwo, 2020, 2022).

Nonetheless, recently, there has been a discourse of ethnicity and religion in connection with the FPCs in Nigeria and also in Ghana. In Nigeria, however, these insinuations have not received scholarly treatment. This paper will examine the extent to which the ethnic characterization of the FPC influences local land struggles between pastoralists’ and their host communities in South-Eastern Nigeria. Specifically, it explores the context in which ethnicity plays a role in the FPCs in South-Eastern Nigeria. The study is vital as it will further deepen our knowledge of the FPCs from the perspective of an area that is scarcely represented in the conflict literature in Nigeria. Also, it will provide new data that help gain another insight into the role of ethnicity in the FPCs. The paper is organized as follows: the next section reviews the existing studies on the role of ethnicity in the FPCs and articulates how we approached the role of ethnicity in the case study. Following this section is methods and after that the results which are presented thematically. First, we discuss the land tenure politics in the study area and then present the empirical data regarding the context in which ethnicity plays a role in the FPCs. We argue that ethnicity and indigenous belonging only get enrolled after the conflict has shifted from non-violent disagreements to brutal fights. The last section presents the discussion and conclusion.
Ethnicity and the FPCs

This paper considers how ethnicity plays a role in the FPC in the Adani-Nimbo area in South-Eastern Nigeria. Theoretically, the paper draws on Claude Ake’s thoughts on the nexus of ethnicity, development, and conflict in Africa. Ake’s (2001) thought sheds light on the power struggle between ethnic groups in postcolonial African states. He argued that leaders of post-colonial African states did not seek development as a priority but the sustenance of their hold on power. Essentially, Ake argued that, shortly after independence, African leaders departed from anti-colonial narratives to build on ethnic, religious, and class rhetoric to sustain their grip on state power and resources, which divided their people along these faultlines, especially ethnicity, generating various tensions and conflicts. This tension also gets to the local level, leading to the exclusion of minorities or people thought to be different in some ways, primarily ethnically. However, Arowosegbe (2019) made us understand the temporality of a minority or ethnic identity, especially in Nigeria. He indicated that, while diverse migrant ethnic groups lived in several parts of precolonial Nigeria and whose populations are far less than the original precolonial ethnic groups in that land, the immigrant position of these groups was not a yardstick for classifying “them as minorities in relation to their host populations” (p. 1160).

Arowosegbe indicates that their status as immigrants emanated from colonial practices, which administratively classified, retribalized, and segregated “members of different population groups according to ethnolinguistic criteria” (p. 1160). These practices characterized population groups as “majorities and natives as well as migrants and minorities” according to immigrant position and enduringly side-lined the migrants; this got infused into defining access to land and local government participation and the dispute resolution based on tribal identity heightened existing ethnic divisions and strengthened the competitive struggles over land (p. 1160). Thus, from this context, we may begin to see the role of ethnic discrimination in the FPCs as a product of the colonial idea of social faultline, which has been infused in present global power structuring that colonial powers and capitalist hegemon have dictated. Ake’s idea is thus on how colonial-amplified identities have come to shape power struggles between these social group formations after colonialism ended in African states.

This idea has also been highlighted by Maiangwa (2017), who argues that the FPCs in Nigeria and several parts of West Africa exemplify cases for exploring how identity-related concerns “instigate intercommunal conflicts in postcolonial African states” (p. 282). Maiangwa notes that postcolonial wars and conflicts in Africa have primarily congregated around identity issues. They are evident in instances of “ethnic mobilization, cultural othering, and internal oppression of people simply seen as being [distinct]” (p. 282). Maiangwa drew on the ideas of Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, who argues that, following the independence of African societies, several Africans shifted attention from “fighting anti-colonial wars” to internal manipulation and persecution of groups who are deemed to be alien and not belonging. This contention is similar to Claude Ake’s theorization of state-building, development, and conflicts in Africa.

The thoughts of Ake, Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, and Maiangwa call for exploring how ethnicity plays a role in the FPCs in West Africa. Debate on the role of ethnicity in the FPC is still ongoing, with many studies, especially in Ghana, championing the ethnic narrative, while other studies, especially those who identify as political ecologists, argue that ethnicity is not the root cause of the conflict (Benjaminsen & Ba, 2021). The question then is that in what way(s) does ethnicity become essential to the manifestation of the FPCs? It may be argued that ethnic differences between farmers and herders can engender ethnic-based solidarity, which then gets enrolled into mobilization for conflict. Ahmadu and Ayuba (2018) show that, although “group-solidarity is reminiscent of longstanding socio-cultural ties as well as a source of collective action and unity of purpose that binds people in most societies,
it engenders the ground for launching offensive or defence against possible threats or violent attacks as the case with Fulani pastoralists and farmers in Northern Nigeria” (p. 33). Ahmadu and Ayuba (2018: 33) argue “that the use of group-solidarity” by both farmers and herdsmen contributed to expanding the FPCs into a broader dimension that turns into communal conflicts. Akov studied the FPCs in Nigeria’s North Central region and argued that “elite land grabbing, ethno-religious identity construction, weak state capabilities, the citizenship question, corrupt traditional institutions, the lack of an effective land tenure system and a widespread culture of impunity” explains the conflict better (2017: 288). Akov argues that ethno-religious identity, which has birthed the citizenship problem in Nigeria, is useful in comprehending livelihood conflicts in Nigeria. Frequently, parties in FPCs are seen to resort to ethno-religious sentiments in the brutal tussle for land rights. He argues that, while Christians generally support farmers, Muslims back the pastoralists, who like them are primarily Muslims, just as Higazi (2016) also found in Jos Plateaus.

Studies have pointed at how stereotypes and prejudice against pastoralists based on their ethnicity have been grounds for the exclusion of pastoralists in land tenure, resulting in FPCs. In Ghana, Bukari and Schareika (2015) demonstrate that “stereotypes and prejudices of Fulani pastoralists” have imperceptibly caused the exclusion of and prejudice against Fulani and structured community-pastoralist relations. Consequently, the Fulani pastoralists have been denied settlements in communities and the use of and access to resources through national (e.g., Operation Cow Leg) and local policies of the expulsion of Fulani and confiscations of Fulani-acquired lands. However, this policy of eviction of the pastoralists has been argued to be unsuccessful in resolving the conflict (Paalo, 2021). Based on a study in the Kwahu North District of Ghana, Alhassan (2017) argued that FPC there is a contest over “access to land resources and an exercise of indigenous power over local lands and assertion of identity” (p. 127). Alhassan indicated that the FPC in Kwahu is not essentially about landownership but competing drives for preferential recognition to have better access to land for productive purposes. In this sense, farmers do not claim ownership of lands but want to be treated better than herdsmen because they consider the pastoralists as non-indigenes or visitors. Pastoralists, on the other hand, demand better treatment because they have valid contracts with landowners, which grants them unlimited access to land that had been rented out to them. In a study in Ibarapa, Oyo State, Nigeria, Ogundairo and Ijimakinwa (2021) show that the host communities think the Fulani pastoralists are not eligible for the dividends of democracy given their settler status and hence should go back to their native land. This discrimination of the Fulani has created division and tension between the settlers and the Ibarapa communities. This feeds back to the idea of identity construction and the exclusion of specific groups in resources that dominate the political ecology of FPCs literature.

Despite this ethnic-based discrimination and conflictive relations between herder and farmers, it has been argued that farmer-herders also have peaceful relations and coexistence. Bukari et al. (2018) explore particular case studies of FPCs in Northern and Southern Ghana. They demonstrate the “enactment of cooperation” between farmers and pastoralists in areas of violent FPCs (p. 78). Bukari et al. (2018) note that, although dissimilar culturally and ethnically, farmers and pastoralists dwell in the same geographical space or community and have non-violent relations, including trade, although sometimes involving rivalry and disputes (p. 80). Bukari et al. argue that, regardless of the recurring violent FPCs in several parts of Ghana, cooperation between the herder and farmer remains strong because they are “cultural neighbours.” They cooperate both in periods of violent dispute and in times of no conflict. Cooperation between them is enacted via their everyday exchanges, interactions, visitations, friendship, communal labour, resource sharing, cattle entrustment, trade, intermarriages, and social solidarity (Bukari et al., 2018: 78). They argue that, in many settings, the pastoralist and sedentary cultivators can be seen as cultural neighbours because they dwell together in the same communities and participate in various kinds of social and
economic exchanges despite their social, ethnic, and cultural variances, plus violent battles. Bukari et al. argue that, despite the cultural and ethnic disparities and conflicts, Fulani pastoralists “are friends and allies within their host communities and cooperate in peaceful ways with local farmers” (p. 88). The communities and pastoralists “know and respect each other for their strength and virility, engaging ineffective modes of communication in conflict resolution and mediation” (p. 88). The question that arises is thus: does ethnicity matter at all? If it matters, in what way(s) does ethnicity contribute to the FPCs? We show that ethnicity (be it ethnic fears or ethnic discrimination) did not cause the conflict and was not an element in the farmer-herder relations in the past. Other issues caused the violent conflicts between the farmers and the herders, after which ethnicity then became a matter on which discrimination of the pastoralists in land tenure was based.

Methodology

The project uses a qualitative method that involves in-depth data gathering and rigorous analysis of non-numerical data to better comprehend the issues around us (Lamont, 2015). To ask questions about how we talk about, see, and write about the events around us, we make inquiries that can be treated via qualitative techniques (Vromen, 2010). Thus, the qualitative approach is considered fitting for this research because the aim is to appreciate how political parties’ characterization of the FPC in Nigeria as imbued with ethno-religious agenda comes to bear on pastoralists’ access to and control over resources in South-Eastern Nigeria. Qualitative methods have been critiqued for being too descriptive. Still, they are suitable for this study because the goal is not to quantify but to qualify the political, social, and economic dimensions of the struggle over access to and control over resources between herders and farmers. Moreover, qualitative approaches have an analytic framework and are not merely descriptive (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

The project gathered data from two primary sources, namely, in-depth semi-structured interviews and field observations. Relevant documentary materials were also reviewed. The study involved interviewing members of local communities, farmers, herders, and Hausa-Fulani communities within and around the sites selected for research. Key informant interviews with party members and leaders, the Ado (the herders’ head), village heads, traditional rulers, and village land dispute committees, leaders among others. The material data this research will study are opinions, statements from the interviews. Before conducting the interviews, some ethical considerations for the discussion needed to be made. Participation in the meetings was strictly voluntary. Written or verbal consent (for those unable to read and write) was sought from the participants regarding willingness and preparedness to participate and preferred recording technique (audiotape recording and/or note-taking). Participants were given a prior explanation of the research’s aim, scope, and duration before the interviews were conducted and were made to understand that they could leave at any point and could decline to answer any questions they are not happy to talk about. The personal and identifying information of the participant would not be directly referred to in the research report.

The participants were engaged in the discussion of the subject using semi-structured interviews. Using semi-structured interviews bridges the gap between open-ended and structured interviews. The former, employed in research involving ethnography, is like an unplanned discussion, while the latter is akin to surveys and opinion polls (Bryman, 2017). Using semi-structured interviews ensures no unnecessary deviations from the study’s objectives, being open-ended interviews while allowing the flexibility to respond to the unanticipated meandering of the conversation and take the new perspectives that emerge (Bryman, 2017).

South-Eastern Nigeria is a region that encapsulates the old Eastern Region of the country. It is the area that attempted to secede from Nigeria in 1967 to form the Republic of
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Biafra. The major ethnic groups in the region are Igbo and Ijaw, and there are many other groups such as the Effik, Itsekiri, Urhobo, among others. The area is located within longitude 6º30’ and 8º30’ east of the Greenwich meridian and latitude 4º45’ and 7º15’ north of the Equator. There are two geopolitical zones (GPZ) in the region, the Southeast and South-South GPZs. The Southeast GPZ has five states inhabited by the Igbo, while the South-South contains many ethnic groups of varying sizes. The South-Eastern region has guinea savanna in the northern fringes and tropical rainforest vegetation as we go southwards. Conducting interviews in the entire South-Eastern Nigeria will be involved. All meetings will be held in South-Eastern Nigeria in a hot spot of the FPCs. The study site is an area with a substantial presence of the Fulani community and where there has been fighting or substantial disagreements between herders and farmers. The area is the Nimbo-Adani area in the Uzo-Uwani local government area (LGA) of Enugu State. The study was conducted between June 2016, July 2017, December 2018, and a follow-up in June 2021. The researcher visited these areas repeatedly during the study periods to collect data.

In qualitative data analysis, the focus is on recognizing, assessing, and interpreting collected data by recognizing and assessing themes and patterns and determining how these themes and patterns help answer the research questions at hand (Vromen, 2010). The analysis of the collected data will involve the continuous comparison of previously collected data with new data collected to see divergences, convergences, and cross-connections. This approach is called the constant comparative technique. This technique will enable the researcher to weigh the reliability of the data being collected and make necessary adjustments where necessary. The next step will involve sorting the data in both documents and interviews and then code them into meaningful assemblages. Themes and patterns from these assemblages are later identified in relation to the research questions to see if they help explain the questions consistently or there are any deviations from these patterns.

Explaining the FPCs in the Adani-Nimbo area

Land tenure politics in the study area

Since access to land and resource is central to the FPCs, we begin with detailing the land tenure politics in the study area. Existing accounts of land tenure regimes in Africa indicate that land tenure is dictated by ethnic belonging (Boone, 2009; Boone & Nyeme, 2015; Mamdani, 1996). However, the essentialist argument indicates that land is not sold but is allocated based on a system of status, seniority, and gender (Lund, 2000). There can only be a temporary transfer of the land to non-indigenes with specific clauses. In this sense, the village is the central socio-political unit directing the land tenure regime. Other vital units within villages (individuals and families) and those cutting across villages, such as the state, churches, political parties, and ethnic groupings, have secondary standing. Hence, land tenure is an essential cultural element of the communities that determines the belongingness of later immigrants regardless of common language and culture. Thus, entitlement to land is primarily directed by indigenous belonging regardless of shared ethnicity and religion or party affiliation. The study finds this essentialist reading of land tenure in the study area.

In the precolonial era, villages struggled over accumulating land, and sometimes mighty warriors established a claim on lands. The study area has many villages. Although these communities are closely linked historically and traditionally, they have separate lands fought over in ancient times. The extent of village lands or territory was dictated by how powerful villages were in fending off intruders. Boundaries are often blurred and sometimes cause conflict and tensions among the villages because the boundaries were not documented. This form of dispute was rampant in the precolonial era and colonial era but occurred less frequently post-independence. Conflict over ownership of water resources
such as springs and streams also happen, mostly regarding the pollution of streams by villagers living on the upper course of the streams.

Land allocation is done at the village level among families and later at the family level. Communities share their lands among the indigenous “recognized families.” Families considered not to be indigenes are not allocated lands. This can result in conflict, especially if the excluded families are powerful and such families may be expelled from the community if the dispute persists. At the family level, access to land is dictated by being a member (especially a male) of a family. Only male members are entitled to land, but males born out of wedlock have no entitlements unless certain rites are performed by their fathers to integrate them into the family. Females are not allocated land because it is believed they will use their husbands’ land once married. Lands are highly fragmented as the population has multiplied in recent times and families can be huge. This primary system of land tenure still exists but is increasingly being eroded by the commercialization of land. Wealthy families and individuals, including commercial agents, are now buying up lands of significantly more impoverished families for resale at high prices. So, access to land and ownership is no longer dictated solely by being an indigene; it is also dictated by economic power-boosting private entitlement.

It is often claimed that private property is intrinsically un-African, and private property is a condition for investment and development. These two claims are deployed to clarify the less development of agriculture in Sub-Saharan Africa based on productivity and sustainability. It is argued that the absence of private property engenders inadequate tenure security and inhibits investment (Shipton & Goheen, 1992). On the contrary, I find that privatization processes are ongoing in the study area. As Lund argues, the connection between the security of tenure and private property is incidental and not as simple as suggested (Lund, 2000). Indeed, privatization appears to hinder rather than boost land tenure security. As we shall see later, the privatization of land is expanding as wealthy individuals and commercial interests are buying up a large expanse of lands previously administered under the purview of the village tenure institutions. Also, powerful political agents use their position to acquire communal land and sell it to commercial interests. Sometimes this can lead to a prolonged legal battle between the community and families whose lands were seized and the commercial agents. However, land disputes are significantly resolved using the traditional system in which the traditional leaders, chiefs, and elders play vital roles. Although the commercialization of land is reducing the land available to subsistence farmers and pastoralists, it is not the driver of the conflict. The reduction in agricultural lands has not significantly impacted grazing or farming.

Explaining the conflict: how does ethnic faultline matter in the FPCs in the Adani-Nimbo area?

The farmer–herder relations in the Adani-Nimbo area were primarily peaceful since the herdsmen began to make inroads into the area after the Nigeria-Biafra War that began in 1967 and ended in 1970. The communities welcomed the herdsmen, and they had exchanges of food items, such as meat for food crops. The herdsmen did not seek the communities’ permission before moving into camp in the villages’ forests. The non-pastoralists Hausa people that first arrived in Adani before the war built a mosque in Adani – the largest community among the villages. The mosque has connected the Fulani herdsmen and the Hausa community in Nimbo and its surrounding villages. The presence of the Hausa-Fulani community in the Adani area is the primary element attracting the Fulani herdsmen to the Adani-Nimbo area. The availability of grasses in the dry season and because the river Obinna in the area is non-seasonal meant that the area is ideal for cattle grazing. However, since the herdsmen were peaceful and not destroying crops, the villagers allowed the herdsmen to graze freely. Figure 1 shows herdsmen and pastoralists grazing near Adani and Nimbo. From the 1990s, the herdsmen began to have
verbal confrontations with the villagers regarding the pollution of streams and rivers and the destruction of crops and economic trees by herds. Compensation for the damage of the crops was not paid, and efforts to make the herders pay are often resisted. From the 2000s, the herders expanded their grazing areas and increased in numbers and started bearing arms and ammunition. This makes them more dangerous and it is challenging to redress any crop damage. The herders indicated that the migration has become deadly, and they need to protect themselves and their herds from rustlers.

In April 2016, the Fulani herders and villagers in the Adani-Nimbo area engaged in a fierce fight in which there were casualties and injuries. This was the first time the communities had a brutal conflict with the Fulani pastoralists who have dwelled in their forest since the early 1970s. The conflict attracted national attention because of the severity of the casualties. The traditional ruler of Adani indicated that the Fulani herders only started to live in the bushes around Adani, Ogurugu, Nimbo, Opanda, and nearby villages after the Nigerian Civil War (1967–70). Later they started having families and increased in number over the years. According to the leader of the Hausa-Fulani community in Nimbo, popularly known as Seriki Hassan, the 2016 fight was triggered because a herder was used as a human sacrifice by a village near Nimbo. Official reports, however, indicate that the battle was over land,

Figure 1  Herders grazing near the Adani-Nimbo area.
which herders and the community contested. The land served as grazing routes linking many grazing networks across Kogi, Ebonyi, and Anambra. Apart from the 2016 violent conflicts, the relations between Fulani herders and villagers in Nimbo and environs have not been violently conflictive until 2021. In 2021, unknown shooters attacked the Hausa-Fulani community in Adani and the police station in the community. The mosque and their rented apartments were destroyed and razed (see Figure 2).

Until the 2021 re-escalation of the conflict, there had been occasional disagreements between herders and farming groups. Still, such instances do not result in violent events compared with other areas such as Benue, Taraba, and Nassarawa. Nonetheless, there is mutual suspicion and distrust between the herders and locals. In April 2021, after disagreement between farmers and herders arising from the destruction of crops by herds, the villagers evicted the herders. The herders fought back, killing a community member and seizing his corpse. This led to the intervention of the Eastern Security Network and the death of some herders and cattle. In July 2021, the herders struck back, killing scores of villagers and injuring some others. Thus, the conflict has become a case of attack and counter-attack to avenge the killing of either herders or village farmers.

As we have seen, the conflict did not result from ethnic identity in the first instance. Although the damage of crops and pollution of water sources was typical, they did not result in violent and brutal conflict. The conflict became brutal after the allegation that a herder was used as a sacrifice by a village, and the herders sought revenge. Subsequently, the killing of over 20 villagers by the herders in April 2016 would then heighten the idea of indigenous belonging and also ethnic belonging which prompted hostilities between the villagers and herders. The study found that the FPC in the study area is not significantly influenced by the ethno-religious narratives surrounding conflict and voiced by political actors on the national scene. However, following the first violent conflict, these ethno-religious narratives then got enrolled in interpreting the violence by the local communities. This has created a feeling of dislike for the Fulani

![Figure 2](Deserted residences of Hausa-Fulani in Adani after unknown shooters attacked and destroyed the residences [second author in a green shirt].)
herders. The conception of Fulani herders as not belonging in the communities and as having killed indigenes have led to the resistance against the herders’ use of the forests and lands in the communities. The herders mounted resistance against efforts to evict them until unknown shooters struck to destroy the Hausa-Fulani residences in Adani (see Figure 2). However, the herders have remained in the forest, avoiding residential areas.

Discussion and conclusion

The study has focused on how ethnicity shapes the FPCs in South-Eastern Nigeria. It found that ethnicity is not the primary cause of the conflict. At the start of the conflict in the study area, issues other than ethnicity played critical roles. The avenging of the death of a herder at the hands of villagers triggered the first outbreak of violence. The killing of over 20 villagers as revenge for the death of a herder by pastoralists heightened the idea that the herders are not indigenes and of different ethnic origin than the natives, who then deploy the land tenure code to try to evict the herders. Since land tenure and access are guided by indigenous belonging, the herders’ eviction was made using this rationale. However, the herders have been resistant to the villagers’ quest to remove them from the lands. This has created a situation of attacks and counter-attacks. The study thus shows that ethnicity only becomes vital when other factors have triggered the conflict.

Essentially, we agree with the idea that the issue of resource scarcity does not manifest (Benjaminsen & Ba, 2009, 2019) here and cannot be supported by this study. Also, the struggle to have access and control over land and other resources (Benjaminsen & Ba, 2009, 2021) does not seem to be a primary factor in this case study. The issue of struggle over access to resources only became vital after the conflict had started and the villagers attempted to exclude or evict the herders based on the latter’s indigenous and ethnic standings. This finding hence comes in tandem with Akov’s (2017) argument that ethno-religious identity, which birthed the belonging idea in Nigeria, is useful in comprehending the FPCs. He noted that frequently parties in FPCs are seen to resort to ethno-religious sentiments in the brutal tussle for land rights. This position of Akov aligns with Ahmadu and Ayuba’s (2018) contention that “group-solidarity” engenders the ground for launching offensive or defence against possible threats or violent attacks, as in the case with Fulani pastoralists and farmers in Northern Nigeria (p. 33). Ahmadu and Ayuba (2018) argue “that the use of group-solidarity” by both farmers and herders contributed to expanding the FPCs (p. 33). The study agrees that ethnicity is not the driver of the FPCs (Benjaminsen & Ba, 2021) but argues that, while ethnicity is not the primary root of the conflict, it should not be side-lined completely. In conclusion, thus, the paper argues the need to put ethnicity in context in the analysis of the FPCs, to avoid ethnic-deterministic trappings that have typified earlier explanations of African conflicts which have faced criticism in the scholarly domain. Thus, our case is that it is not that ethnic faultline does not matter in African conflicts, but that it matters in context.

Notes

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2 Interviews with the traditional ruler in Adani in August 2016.

3 See previous note.

4 Based on my observations and interactions with the key informants in the study areas. Also, the author is a native of one of the studied communities and has been a witness to various land allocations in the community. Usually, witnesses are invited during land allocations by families. The practices I witnessed are same across the study areas.

5 Interviews with the traditional ruler in Adani in August 2016.
Interview with the traditional ruler of Adani, July 2016.

Interview with the leader of the Hausa-Fulani community in Adani, July 2016.

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