

Interrogating Farmer-Herder Crisis and its Impact on Women in Ahmed Yerima's *Hendu*

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Abstract

*The North East and North Central of Nigeria has become almost synonymous with violent conflicts. These crises range from ethnic insurgency to religious conflict, and farmers-pastoralist crises. Scholars have traced the emerging crises to ecological factors such as the desertification of the Sahel, paucity of land and water sources for farmers and livestock. In a fast-changing world struggling with the effect of climate change and increasing global warming, the struggle for resources pitches the nomadic lifestyle of the Fulani Herdsmen with that of their sedentary agrarian neighbours. This struggle for limited resources and for survival erupts into a violent conflict that greatly affects the vulnerable group of women and children. This study takes a look at the impact of conflict and displacement on women as captured in Ahmed Yerima's *Hendu*. The study adopts the Psychoanalytic theory and Galtung's Structural Conflict Theory in its analysis of violence and offers an interpretation of the social structures that entrenches and enables violent conflict. Yerima's *Hendu* offers insights into the lingering traumatizing effects of violence on women, noting that in the war against humanity, there are no victors or vanquished only victims.*

Introduction

The North Central geographical zone also known as the Middle Belt of Nigeria is home to a number of minority groups wedged in the middle of a majorly Muslim North and a predominately Christian South. The middle belt is no stranger to violent conflicts as the mixture of small ethnic groups with diverse cultures and religious beliefs make it a volatile melting pot with conflicting interests. One of such crises is the reoccurring violent conflict between nomadic herders and sedentary farmers which is tied to land resources. However, due to structural complexities in the North Central such crises often reveal ethnic,

or religious colorations. The Middle Belt region consists of over 250 ethnic groups that inhabit the six states which are: Plateau, Benue, Niger, Kogi, Nassarawa and Kwara.

The Land crises in the middle belt has a long history. Scholars, (Majekodunmi et al 1, Blench i Higazi 2, Convoy 6, Krause 9) generally agree that several factors are responsible for the land crises. The issues are complex and fraught with tensions. The history of the unrest is often traced to structural changes brought about by colonialism which led to the social, political and cultural reconstruction of the territory. After merging the Northern and Southern protectorates, the promotion of three major tribes around which the regions were divided and political affiliations formed, put a number of smaller ethnic groups at a relative disadvantage. The colonialist blurred tribal lines and established political leadership over the autonomous groups to aid indirect rule. Thus, traditionally autonomous minority groups were placed and forced under the leadership of the Hausa/Fulani Muslim North despite being mostly Christians with ethnic-linguistic diversity. In the midst of seething disagreement and resentment, ecological factors emerging from population explosion, increased urbanization, and globalization led to conflict. Krause (9) inferring from the protracted conflict in the Plateau region states that "tensions between ethnic groups rooted in the allocation of resources, electoral competition, fears of religious domination and contested land rights have amalgamated into an explosive mix. Generally, the crises in the Middle Belt is traced to several factors which include;

- I. Indigenes and settlers' distinction
- II. Ethnic and Religious crises
- III. Political power tussle
- IV. Natural resource access – land and water sources disputes

This paper focus on the impact of the struggle for limited natural resources which has worsened in the last decade especially in places like Plateau, Jos and Benue. The UNOWAS study on Security and Pastoralism states that the farmers-herders crises has claimed more lives in Nigeria than the whole of West Africa combined (67). The study adds that, such crises are entrenched in the pressure caused by scarce resources such as land and water sources for farmers and livestock. The migration of herdsmen with their cattle into the South and Middle Belt

regions as against the Upper North where they were traditionally positioned is occasioned by climate change and globalization. The Sahel region is facing rapid desertification and the Lake Chad basin shrinking. Apart from that, rapid urbanization has led to transhumance grazing routes being blocked and used for housing, mining and other such development projects. Farmers have also expanded farmlands into fields formerly reserved for grazing thus causing pressure on limited lands. The pursuit of incompatible interest by the pastoralist and the farmers leads to conflict. The conflict is further exacerbated by the proliferation of small arms, thereby encouraging resort to violence in the resolution of conflict. Conroy (6) posits that, land issues are the most difficult and complex conflict to resolve as land is directly tied to economic empowerment and growth.

Understanding the Intricacies of the Land Issues in the Middle Belt

The origin of the Pastoral/Farmers clash is entrenched in structures that permeate the history of the emergence of the Fulani ethnic group in Nigeria. The Fulani also called Fulbe, Peul or Fula people are regarded as the major pastoralist in Nigeria. They also form the largest pastoral group in the world and are spread all over Africa, as far as North Africa to Central Africa where they are mostly a minority group. (David 9, Babagana 1, UNOWAS study 74). The Fulanis are basically Islamic and contributed actively to the Jihads that have occurred in Africa, most notable is the Jihad of Usman Dan Fodio (1804-1810). (Encyclopedia Britannica). The Fulanis resent being ruled by non-Muslims or imperfect Muslims. The success of the Jihad in 1810, saw the traditional Hausa rulers in Northern Nigeria being overthrown and the Fulanis who were originally treated as second class citizens being minority and foreigners, took over political power (Oloasebikan 9). The Fulanis soon came to be known as an imperialist tribe as they spread their reach all over Northern Nigeria. This heralded the start of the Hausa/Fulani hegemony. Apart from establishing Fulani caliphate and the emirates, non-Muslims were marginalized and poached on for the slave trade as Muslims were forbidden to be used for slaves. This history created an uneasy peace between the Fulanis and the people of the middle belt (Olaosebikan 10).

The Fulanis soon established as a dominant social and economic force in West Africa. They are organized primarily around nomadic herding of cattle, sheep and goats. However, a good number live in urban areas and hold influential political positions. Despite this, a strong connection remains between the nomadic Fulanis, the urban ones and other Fulanis spread all over Africa. This cohesion among the Fula people arose from their former disadvantaged position as foreigners and second-class citizens.

Culturally, the Fulanis have a unique view of land ownership. The Fulani have been pastoral nomads long before the arrival of the colonialist (Babagana 3). For the Fulanis, land is a free gift like every other naturally occurring phenomenon such as air, water, the oceans e.t.c. Hence, ownership cannot be attached to it. It is in their worldview that land should be free to use and assessable to all, including the farmer, the hunter, the pastoral or the fisherman (Babagana 2). As stated earlier, the Fulanis are nomads and were already engaging in open grazing in uncharted lands before the arrival of the colonialist and the subsequent creation of political states. By the time political regions were created and boundaries mapped out, the Fulanis had established cattle routes which were already in use for generations. The appearance of farmlands on grazing routes and water sources, angered the Fulanis who claimed to have been using the land for seasonal grazing. Inability to resolve the conflict of interest amicably led to herders herding their cows on farmlands and farmers slaughtering cattle in retaliation for destroyed crops.

The indigenous groups of the middle belts, such as the Birom, the Tivs, and the Jukuns place premium value on ancestral land which they use for farming. Land is one of their most valuable resources and certain rules guide usage. Land ownership goes beyond economic significance, it holds socio-political significance to the people. For example, among the Birom ethnic group, the community owns the land and not the individual. Cultivated farmland or fallow land belonged to the community and was held under customary land tenure (Ezeomah 3). Encroachment on another community land results to violence. The difference in land ownership and usage between the nomad Fula people and the sedentary land cultivators did not generate dispute until the forced migration down south caused by desertification and climate change began to put pressure on

arable land. The land dispute between the nomadic herders and the sedentary farmers soon led to conflict. The proliferation of small arms and weapons escalated the violence into killing, maiming and destruction of properties. Despite the underlying structural issues, the crises in modern times is worsen by forced migration and the Boko Haram insurgency. The encroaching desertification of the Sahel region and increased insecurity from cattle rustlers, is pushing more herdsmen southwards to regions that are already over populated and land pressed. All these coupled with the fear of religion and cultural hegemony, indigene and non-indigene disparity often reflects in the farmer-herder's crises, many times blurring the lines of conflict.

Theoretical Framework

This paper adopts Galtung's Structural conflict Theory which is based on the conflict triangle. Johan Galtung developed a "three-pronged typology of violence that represents a confluence of malleable factors which merge in a particular cultural/historical moment to shape the conditions for the promotion of violence" (Galtung 295). The Conflict Triangle comprises Direct violence, Structural violence and Cultural violence. These three factors merge in a unique way that poses a threat to security.

Direct violence is physical or psychological violence. It is behaviours that threaten life itself and is reflected in acts such as maiming, killing, emotional abuse or rape. Structural violence are deliberate structures and policies ingrained in a society that cause human suffering, death or harm (Bakut 236). Examples of structural violence are classism, racism, ethnic rivalry, and sexism.

Cultural violence can be defined as the practice of prominent social norms that justify and make direct and structural violence appear "natural" or "right". It creates discrimination and injustice. Cultural and Structural violence enable direct violence which on the other hand reinforces the former. Galtung's typology offers great insights into the violence erupting in the middle belt. Although, structural and cultural violence cannot be seen they influence direct violence, by affecting the way people think and act and providing justification for such

behaviours. This in turn causes direct violence which is reflected in forms such as murder, maiming and arson.

The study also adopts psychoanalytic criticism. Psychoanalysis offers insights into the workings of the minds of humans. Human productions such as literature and art are outgrowth of human experiences and therefore reflect human potentials, conflicts and desires. From these productions we can learn about our human nature and our society. By psychoanalyzing literary characters, we are able to reveal the psychological experiences of humans which they represent. Psychoanalysis emerged from the works of Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), who developed it as a method of therapy for neurosis. The theory soon evolved with the contributions of other theorist such as Carl Jung (1875-1961) and Jacques Lacan (1901-1981). Psychoanalysis is a useful tool to explain characters behaviours and motivations. Psychoanalysis is hinged on the concept of the unconscious which is a dynamic entity that engages all humans at the deepest level of being (Tyson 13).

A Synoptic analysis of Hendu

Yerima's *Hendu* is a play based on various farmer-herders crises in North-Central Nigeria. The playwright tells his story from the viewpoint of Wabiti—a Fulani woman who has been made desolate by the crises. The repeated clashes between Fulani herdsmen and the Birom farmers has had negative impact on the people. Since 2001, thousands of lives have been lost to the crises, approximately 300,000 persons displaced and properties worth billions of naira have been destroyed. The Crises Group report of 2018 (*Stopping Nigeria Spiraling Farmers-Herders Violence*) terms the farmer-herder crises as six times deadlier than the Boko Haram insurgency. This has caused displacement and forced migration for many to safer areas.

Wabiti, distressed and displaced by the crises tries to rebuild a home for her children in the village of her benefactor—Garga, who has taken her in after the death of her husband. Wabiti tries to keep her family together but the violence soon overwhelms her. Wabiti's daughter Kingi is engaged to Jock a young Birom farmer. At the formal introduction of Kingi to Jock's family, Ruk—a woman tormented by the magnitude of her loss to the Fulani marauders appears and threatens to mar the joyful occasion but she is subdued. Through Ruk and Wabiti, we

witness the devastation that the farmers-herder's crises bring to families. Yerima successfully presents a play that portrays the negative effects of the violence on all, especially women and children.

Images of Displacement in Yerima *Hendu*

In *Hendu*, the impact of ecological crises is translated into real terms and its effect on human lives is portrayed. The two major female characters we see have suffered loss and hardship due to the crises. Wabiti and Ruk are both widows having lost their husbands to the violence. Ruk's husband, a Birom farmer was cut down by avenging Fulani herders over land crises. As Ruk states:

RUK: Kun di! All my husband said was no to a request
of land to graze. Land he inherited from his late father.
And in that one word...he provoked the wild hands of
common slaughterers (29).

Ruk loses not only are husband but her children as well. The violence does not differentiate between belligerents or unharmed civilians. Wabiti on the other hand loses her husband to a gang of avenging cattle rustlers. Cattle rustling and armed banditry is another security threat in the North apart from the Boko Haram insurgency. Cattle rustling was previously a cultural and traditional practice to show bravery and prowess among the Fulanis (Hamman 19). However, it has transformed into violent organized crime that involves killing, maiming and destruction of lives and properties. Wabiti's husband Hamajam, is accused of betraying the cattle rustlers to the police. He is killed in vengeance in the presence of his wife, Wabiti. Unable to bear the trauma of the death of her husband, Wabiti seeks solace and migrates to Gashish, the village of Garga. Both Wabiti and Ruk are wrecked by the bitter memories of their loss and adapt different coping mechanism.

Wabiti creates a home with Garga and makes plans to settle her three children with her. Despite the fact that they are nomadic pastoralist, she is all too happy to settle down in a place and create a new life with her children. She believes with them anchored in one place, they would be out of harm's way. This

highlights the forced modernity and multiculturalism that the Fula people have to cope with in this modern age. Another instance of forced modernity, is the giving away of Wabiti's daughter Kingi to Jock. Although the Fulani's marry only within their tribe and ideally Muslims, Kingi's brothers give her out in marriage to a Birom Christian albeit unwillingly. The inter-tribal marriage is a step towards the acceptance of the culture of the other and the reality of the times. As Chafe says it is "the taste of our new reality" (30). Barely 24 hours after Kingi goes to Kuru Karama the village of her Christian in-laws, the village is attacked by herdsmen and burnt down. Kingi loses her life in the massacre. Like the proverbial grass that suffers when the Elephants fight, Kingi has her life cut short at the point of her joy for no just cause. Although she is Fulani, she loses her life with the other Birom people.

Displacement in the text occurs at two levels—the physical and psychological. Physical displacement is that caused by conflict. Conflict induced displacement describes situations in which people leave their homes to escape violence. It may arise due to dispute over natural resources such as arable land or fresh water sources. Such crisis force Wabiti to flee and settle in with Garga, a crippled old man. The arrangement is all too convenient but Wabiti lets down her guard and gives in. She is a woman and a widow, not accustomed to providing for herself nor making decisions for herself. Kingi, her daughter is hurriedly given out for marriage to ensure that she is settled and accounted for. Even though the Fulanis do not marry outside their tribe, her brothers give her out to her Christian fiancée because that is the only way they can be free of her responsibility. The crisis is forcing Wabiti's family to migrate and disperse. Even though Wabiti has created a place for them in Garga's home, her sons refuse to stay. As nomad Fulani, they have chosen to migrate down south where it is safer to continue herding cattle. However, the deeper South they go, the more the crisis worsens as the South is more urban, densely populated with limited land for open grazing. Most available land has either been cultivated or used for housing.

Psychological displacement is the transfer of anger with one person onto another person, normally a weaker person who cannot hurt us or fight us back as the person with whom we are really angry. Garga offers Wabiti and her children a place in his

house not out of selfless love but as vengeance against Hamajam, whom he believes rattled to the police and caused the loss of his limb. Garga displaces his anger, pain and humiliation by projecting it onto Wabiti and her children. Not satisfied with the death of Hamajam at his hand, Garga is bent on destroying Wabiti and her children. Garga transforms from a good and friendly cattle buyer to a selfless benefactor to Wabiti and her children. Garga is a Wadaabe man- a sub group of the Fulani ethnic group that take great pride in their physical appearance. His pride is hurt deeply by his physical deformity which he believes limits him in having a wife and family of his own. As a Wadaabe man, Garga is more traditional and less open to compromise. The Wadaabe are recognized as “the ones who respect taboos”. They are more conservative and basically pastoral herders. Garga intends to steal Hamajam’s wife in a way similar to the Wife stealing culture of the Wadaabe people. Although, he is sinister and unscrupulous in his plans. He claims he is acting out of revenge against Hamajam, he knows within himself that with the exit of Wabiti’s three children she would be fully his. As Shagu says in page 34 “what Wabiti loses you shall compensate with the love and kindness”.

It is the farmer-herders crisis that leads Wabiti into the arms of Garga. Desperate for a new life and to put the painful memories behind, she gives in to Garga and settles down with him, unknown to her that he is the source of all her pains. Wabiti’s anxiety comes forth through dream symbols. Even though she knows all is not well and can feel it she chooses to repress the feelings rather than explore them because they carry too much hurt and pains than she is willing to acknowledge. Wabiti applies selective perception and chooses to interpret the feeling of foreboding to one of joy. She is happy to have found the ideal place to settle down and bring an end to their cultural practice of roaming. Wabiti holds on to the past of Hamajam’s painful death by applying selective memory. She chooses to remember that one of the killers of her husband bore the name “Kada” meaning crocodile, but she is unable to draw the connection between the sudden goodness of Garga and her nightmares of him. Even when she dreams and sees in her dream symbols, Garga reaping the souls of her three children, Wabiti remains naïve and unalert, unwilling to admit to herself that she

had walked into a death trap. Wabiti's trauma reflect in continuous dream symbols of her children being taken away from her. In her unconscious dream state, she sees Garga as a snake, sly and conniving. He wouldn't stop until he has destroyed all in its path. The effect of the ecological crises is internalized by the victims. For Ruk, all Fula people are snakes and murderers. For Chafe, the larger society does not value the lowly herdsmen treating them poorly as second-class citizens, useful only for producing beef.

Yerima offers a complex mix of factors that worsens the crises in the middle belt. Apart from the conflict over limited natural resources, cattle rustlers and armed bandits contribute to the violence by stealing cattle and ransacking farming villages. These armed bandits employ the use of small firearms and light weapons in their attack. They soon become pawns in the hands of politicians who use them to cause political instability. Garga is one of such bandits. At the end, he destroys himself in the quest for more powers. The playwright through the character of Wabiti posits that although the crises is profound and complex the inability or unwillingness of the authorities to bring the killers to justice will continue to worsen the crises. At both sides of the divide are perpetrators and victims. Depending on the circumstances and context one can be both a victim and a perpetrator of violence. At the end of the day, it becomes a vicious cycle, where they are no victor or vanquished, only victims.

Conclusion

In *Hendu*, the playwright attempts to dramatize the core issues of the crises occurring in the Middle Belt region of Nigeria. He presents the devastating effect of the crises upon women, children and old people. The play presents the crises through the eyes of the Fulani people who are often believed to be wandering nomads without purpose or organization. The playwright succeeds in putting a human angle to the ecological crises, presenting characters with dreams being cut short. Kingi, loses her life even before the marriage ceremony is carried out. Chafe loses his life in a raid by the Bachama warriors who are predominantly Christians and farmers. The Bachamas have a long history of rivalry with the Fula people that continues even to the present day. Ruk loses her husband and children to the swords of the herdsmen and Wabiti loses her husband to the

politics of cattle rustling. At the end of the day, everyone loses something and enmity soars as justice is delayed.

The researcher recommends that the government holds a parley with all aggrieved parties, taking into cognizance the cultural and religious peculiarity of each group. There is need for community-based reconciliation council as these are nearer to the grass root and have a deeper understanding of the dynamics at play. In view of the increasing pressure on land and fresh water sources, the government should establish cattle colonies and forest reserves. There is need also for re-orientation of the Fulanis and their agrarian neighbours. This can be achieved through their traditional leaders. In view of the changing times, cultural adjustment of the traditional ways of doing things is recommended. It is important that both parties understand the need to compromise and live in peace and unity. Government should also endeavour to bring all criminals element to justice. The government should adopt a firm but neutral stand in the farmers/herders'crises.

There is urgent need to deal with the proliferation of excess firearms in the Northern region. This has contributed to making recourse to violence the only way of settling grievances. Finally, all policies drafted should take into cognizance not only the views of the farmers and the herders but that of the women who are left bearing the burden of the conflict.

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