

Moral wrongs, indigeneity and the enactment of farmer-herder conflicts violence in South-Eastern Nigeria

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Abstract

Existing studies of the farmer-herder conflicts (FHCs) in Nigeria have not explored the political ecology of the conflict in South-Eastern Nigeria (SEN). Using the political ecology framework (PEF), the paper examines the nature of the FHCs in Nimbo and Awgu areas in SEN. Data were collected through field observations and in-depth interviews. The paper shows that resource scarcity or reduced farming and grazing spaces did not engender violent FHCs in the study area. Instead, actions of the actors that are perceived to be morally wrong are critical. Allegations of moral transgression such as rape, kidnapping by herders and claims that a herder was used as a sacrifice by villagers triggered the violent episode. The pastoralists are discriminated against on the ground of indigenous belonging only after being alleged to have morally transgressed by kidnapping and raping women. However, on the ground that a herder was allegedly used as a sacrifice, they felt also wronged. While the herders are discriminated against based on their non-belonging in the community because they are not indigenous, they have mount resistance by emphasising their citizenship rights and using force to maintain access to grazing spaces, thereby amplifying the farmer-herder tensions. Thus, while identity has contributed to the FHCs violence, moral wrongs enacted and amplified it. The paper contributes to the literature by arguing that while what triggers FHCs may be moral wrongs, moral transgressions can heighten identity constructions that get implicated in practices of exclusion.

Keywords

Political ecology,
Farmer-herder conflict,
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Exclusion,
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Highlights for public administration, management and planning:

- Examines the nature of the farmer-herder conflicts in Nimbo and Awgu areas in south-eastern Nigeria using a political ecology approach.
- Resource scarcity or reduced farming and grazing spaces did not engender violent farmer-herder conflicts in the study area.
- Instead, actions of the actors that are perceived to be morally wrong are critical.
- Moral transgressions by herders led to the practices of discriminating herders in access to resources based on their non-indigene status.
- Herders mount resistance using force and by emphasising their Nigerian citizenship rights.

1 Introduction

This study is about the farmer-herder conflicts (FHCs) in South-Eastern Nigeria (SEN). In April 2020, the FHC in the Nimbo area of Uzo-Uwani area of Enugu State in SEN claimed the lives of more than 20 persons with hundred displaced. Other

more minor disputes were reported in SEN, especially in the Awgu area of Enugu State. These FHCs are an exemplar of conflicts across many local communities in West Africa, recurrent over the last two decades. Traditionally, the herders were domicile in the Northern parts of West Africa, especially in the Sahelian belt. Still, since the drought of the 1970s, Fulani pastoralists have been moving southwards

to seek greener pastures for their herds (Nwankwo 2020). In addition to the drought, soil exhaustion and environmental degradation emanating from desertification and climate change have contributed to their expanding migration (Madu & Nwankwo 2020). The herders' migration has meant that they operate in places where they lack land tenure security. As a result, they often face exclusion in tenure and discrimination. Ajala (2020) submitted that in this condition of land insecurity and coupled with the changes in the dynamics of cattle ownership, termed neo-pastoralism, the FHCs have intensified as this new form of pastoralism involves larger herds and increased use of arms and ammunition. This present study sought to explain the roots of the FHCs in SEN, given that there has not been violent conflict between the herders and farmers until recently. The question we asked was, *what triggered the outbreak of violence in the farmer-herder relations in the study area recently?* Since FHCs have not been studied in SEN, making hypothetical conclusions about the cause of the violence was not possible. We thus, deployed a combination of grounded theory and constant comparative approach (CCA) to conceptualise the ways the farmer-herder relations (FHR) in the study area degenerated to a condition of violence. The former approach involved treating the data gathering and analysis as interconnected processes (Corbin and Strauss 1990 in Johnsen and Benjaminsen 2017). According to Willig (2013, p. 70), the grounded theory approach entails *the progressive identification and integration of categories of meaning from data*. We consider this a practical approach following its use by Johnsen and Benjaminsen (2017) to explore the herders' resistance to rationalising pastoral production in Norway. By deploying the grounded theory and using CCA, which involved constant comparison of the data collected to see areas of convergence and divergence and cross-linkages, we were able to conceptualise the data collected. We explored relevant theories that could explain our findings from field observations and interviews.

We found appealing with the concepts of *moral wrongs* (Turner 2004) and *indigeneity* (Maiangwa 2017), which can be found in many studies of the FHCs in Agogo, Ghana (Bukari & Schareika 2015; Bukari & Kuusaana 2018) and in South-West region especially Oyo State of Nigeria (Olaniyi 2015; Ogundairo & Ijimakinwa 2021) helpful in the analysis of the triggers of violence in the FHR in SEN. We found that enactment of the violence was influenced by the action of the actors perceived to be morally wrong, which then caused heightened emphasis on indigeneity leading to practices of exclu-

sion and discrimination in resources. A closer look at this mechanism shows the relevance of the political ecology approach to the analysis of FHCs. Thus, we framed our analysis on the political ecology framework (PEF). Interestingly, the PEF has not gained increased attention in the analysis of the FHCs in Nigeria. So, this study contributes to the literature.

A very few studies of FHCs adopting the PEF in Nigeria focused on other regions. While Okoli and Atelhe (2014), Okoli and Nnabuihe (2019) and (Vanger 2015) have examined the political ecology of the FHCs in Central Nigeria, there is no such study in the SEN. Adopting a political PEF, we show how moral wrongs interact with indigeneity to produce FHCs in SEN. The study contributes to the moral dimension of the PEF, which Matthew D Turner advanced. Also, it advances PEF by arguing that while what triggers FHCs may be moral wrongs, moral transgressions can heighten identity constructions and get imbued in practices of exclusion. This is a novel argument and dimension of the FHCs that existing studies have not identified. The section that follows discusses the political ecology literature of FHCs and how indigeneity shapes FHCs. The methods are then presented before the historical background to the FHC in the study area. Then, the subsequent sections consider the case study thematically before the discussion and the conclusion.

1.1 The political ecology of the farmer-herder conflicts

Research on the FHCs has followed diverse perspectives, from the role of environmental scarcity and climate change to issues of political ecology hinged on exclusionary politics, among others. Recently, the analysis of the representations and discourses have been made (Chukwuma 2020; Eke 2020; Nwankwo et al. 2020; Nwankwo 2021a) and critical geopolitics framing (Nwankwo 2020, 2021b). The environmental scarcity and climate change framing has dominated the discussion of the FHCs in Nigeria until recently. Other possible explanations are emerging, including the idea of how identity differentials interact with environmental and ecology factors (Olaniyi 2015; Madu & Nwankwo 2020; Ogundairo & Ijimakinwa 2021). This paper seeks to contribute to this aspect of the FHCs from the standpoint of political ecology within the broader Human Geography sub-discipline. Political ecology explanation of the FHCs in Nigeria has not been appreciated and seldom adopted despite the emerging evidence that resources scarcity

does not adequately capture violence triggers in the FHRs in Central and Southern Nigeria. These regions of Nigeria face lesser climate change impact and degradation than the north but experiences the FHCs more than the north. This situation calls for a look at other issues that may trigger violence. Recently, [Madu and Nwankwo \(2020\)](#) show that places with resource scarcity and vulnerable to climate change experience lesser FHC in Nigeria.

Political ecology diagnoses the relationship between socio-economic, political factors and environmental issues and dynamics with a critical focus on access to and control over resources ([Blaikie & Brookfield 1987](#); [Turner 2004](#); [Okoli & Atelhe 2014](#)). Essentially, PEF challenges the environmental security tradition (EST) (influenced by the Homer-Dixon Eco-violence idea), which argues that natural resource scarcity, environmental degradation, rapid population growth was the cause of the lingering, widespread and sub-national vicious crisis during the post-Cold War period ([Homer-Dixon 1999](#)). Most of the political ecology scholars of the FHC in Africa has been critical of resource scarcity narratives and local and national land tenure policies and legislation that favour farming interests and marginalise pastoralists in access to and control over resources (e.g. [Bassett 1988](#); [Benjaminson et al. 2009](#); [Benjaminson and Ba 2019, 2021](#); [Benjaminson et al. 2009](#); [Okoli and Atelhe 2014](#); [Olaniyan et al. 2015](#); [Walwa 2017, 2020](#)). They often explore the history of the conflicts and the motivations of actors in the conflicts. Another perspective in the political ecology of the FHCs is the idea that moral wrongs are critical to the FHCs and not necessarily scarcity of land or water ([Turner 2004](#)). It is this aspect of the political ecology of the FHCs that this research builds on. We asked in what way(s) has moral wrongs contributed to the FHCs in South-Eastern Nigeria (SEN)? We focused on this region of Nigeria because even though there is very little attention to the political ecology of the FHCs in Nigeria, it is scarce in the SEN.

Using a PEF, [Turner \(2004\)](#) clarifies the *complex relationships between political interests, moralities, and resource access that underlie the FHCs* in the Sahel area of West Africa (p. 880). Turner contends resources scarcity rarely explains the FHCs in the Sahel than assertions of moral abuses with a material foundation. He argued that in the Sahel, most *resource conflicts* are disputes over other things – things that are usually dearer than *the ephemeral resource in question* (p. 879). The issues can range from *failed marriages* and (p. 879), *disputes over bride price; manipulation of tensions for political gain by local village chiefs; or differences in national*

party affiliation (p. 880). Hence, he argues that political ecologists should explore *the material interests* and *the moral claims and narratives* that stimulate the FHCs. We bring this idea of moral wrongs in dialogue with the notion of indigeneity to complicate how they interact to engender exclusion of pastoralists and sustaining tensions between farmers and herders. The following section considers the issue of indigeneity in the FHRs.

1.2 Indigeneity and the FHCs

A growing strand of the FHCs literature in West Africa has emphasised the role of social factors such as ethnic origin, citizenship and belonging in the FHCs. The argument is that the exclusion of the Fulani pastoralists in especially Ghana and Nigeria in access to resources within local communities is because of the indigeneity status of the pastoralists. The herders are seen as non-indigenes who do not deserve rights to land tenure. This aspect of the FHCs reflects Maiangwa's (2017) contention that the FHCs in Nigeria and several parts of West Africa epitomise an exciting case study for exploring how identity-related concerns *instigate intercommunal conflicts in post-colonial African states* (p. 282). Maiangwa notes that post-colonial wars and conflicts in Africa have primarily congregated around identity issues. They are evident in instances of *ethnic mobilisation, cultural othering, and internal oppression of people simply seen as being [distinct]* (p. 282).

Maiangwa drew on the idea of Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, which is also akin to that of Claud Ake. Essentially, these two prominent scholars contend that following the independence of African societies, several Africans shifted attention from *fighting anti-colonial wars* to internal manipulation and persecution of groups that are deemed to be alien and not belonging. In the same vein, [Olaniyi \(2015\)](#) argues that while the FHCs in the Oke-Ogun area of Oyo State are associated with multiple elements, they manifested within the purview of power disparity in the context of indigenes and settlers/migrants' dichotomy and competition over land resources. [Bukari and Schareika \(2015\)](#) argue that Fulani pastoralists in Ghana face stereotypes, prejudices and practices of exclusion in land tenure, which emanate from the views of them as non-citizens and non-indigenous ethnic groups in Ghana. [Akov \(2017\)](#) argues that the FHCs in Nigeria's North Central region is not caused by resource scarcity but many factors and especially ethno-religious identity construction in which a group would favour their identity and attack others in the context of seek-

ing better access to land. [Bukari and Kuusaana \(2018\)](#) juxtaposed land acquisitions by herders and large-scale companies. They argued that the citizenship and belongingness elements are vital to the FHCs in Agogo Ghana because land renting by Fulani herders alone has unsuccessfully guaranteed their tenure security because of the premise of citizenship (or foreignness).

The exclusion of Fulani goes beyond access to land, which most studies have emphasised. It is also seen in other realms of society. [Setrana \(2021\)](#) argues that second-generation Fulani migrants remain at the margins of society because they have no ties with their ancestral *home countries* and are also seen as non-citizens in Ghana, the places they call home (p. 81). Sometimes the mode of livelihood can be erroneously equated with identity and belonging plus eligibility for democratic dividends. [Alhassan \(2017\)](#) argues that the FHCs in the Kwahu North District of Ghana is a contest over *access to land resources and an exercise of indigenous power over local lands and assertion of identity* (p. 127). The farmers, who are settlers, and are considered such by the indigenous Kwahu people, oddly see nomadic pastoralists on the plains as aliens who should not have land-use rights. [Ogundairo and Ijimakinwa \(2021\)](#) argue that in Ibarapa, Oyo State, Nigeria, the host communities think the Fulani are not eligible for the dividends of democracy given their settlers status and hence should go back to their native land. The Fulani feel deprived of their rights, even though they vote sensibly during elections. This discrimination of the Fulani has created division and tension between the settlers and the Ibarapa communities. In this study, we bring together these ideas from PEF, precisely the moral dimension of [Turner \(2004\)](#) and indigeneity to argue that the FHCs in Nimbo and Awgu did not result from scarcity of resources, but the perceptions of moral wrongs committed by pastoralists which led to the heightened articulations of the herders' position as non-indigenous and not belonging leading to practices of exclusion.

1.3 Moral wrongs, indigeneity and exclusion-vis-à-vis FHCs

Political ecologists have indicated that access and exclusion in land and water resources are vital to explicating the FHCs ([Benjaminsen & Ba 2009](#); [Benjaminsen et al. 2009](#); [Benjaminsen & Ba 2019, 2021](#); [Walwa 2017, 2020](#)). This idea mirrors the fact that access and exclusion as an essential part of tenure relations. [Hall et al. \(2011\)](#) persuasively demonstrate that exclusion is indispensable in land tenure, and it is essential for acquiring and retaining tenure

over land and resources. Hence, denial of access becomes essential to explicating land tenure conflicts. The idea of access, according to ([Ribot & Peluso 2003](#), p. 153), is *the ability to benefit from things*. Hence, exclusion entails how individuals and groups cannot benefit from things, especially land and water resources.

Exclusion can take three core forms: how the exclusion of other potential users maintains already-existing access to land; how people who have access lose it; and how people who lack access are prevented from getting it ([Hall et al. 2011](#), p. 18). Thus, the conception of access goes beyond the concept of property and socially recognised and supported claims or rights. It refers to not just the existence or absence of rights but to the broader sets of powers that avert people from profiting from land and other resources, enabling a focus on the people who are excluded and what powers exclude them. Thus, directing our attention more to contention and conflict, which is characteristic of the FHR, a point highlighted by the critical role of force and moral values in exclusion to land and resources. This exclusion concept directs our attention to the two sides of exclusion and the tricky challenges that follow from it. Exclusion, as already indicated, is a necessary aspect of all types of land use and tenure system. Herders would not graze their herds in a community without some assurance or at least having means of fending off competitors or marauders. Crop growers would not raise crops without confidence that they can keep hold of their farms until harvest. Commercial land ventures are contingent upon the right to prevent others from meddling with the benefits of that venture. Thus, security and insecurity in land and other resources are both products of exclusion. Either farmers or pastoralists can be in a position of security or insecurity depending on who the powers of exclusion favour at that period. Access and exclusion are related and are shaped by but not entirely connected with the state and legal tools for making the rules guiding access to land and terms of use. Exclusion from access to resources may be done through violence or the threat of violence by both state and non-state players, and the market may be deployed to restricts access via price and the formation of motivations for more individualised claims to land. Essentially, access and exclusion can be shaped by moral values that define or legitimise what is right or what should be regarded as right, which appeals to moral values. They are the moral basis for exclusive claims, and indeed politically and socially acceptable bases for exclusion ([Hall et al. 2011](#), p. 18). This idea is akin to [Turner \(2004\)](#) argument that assertions of moral

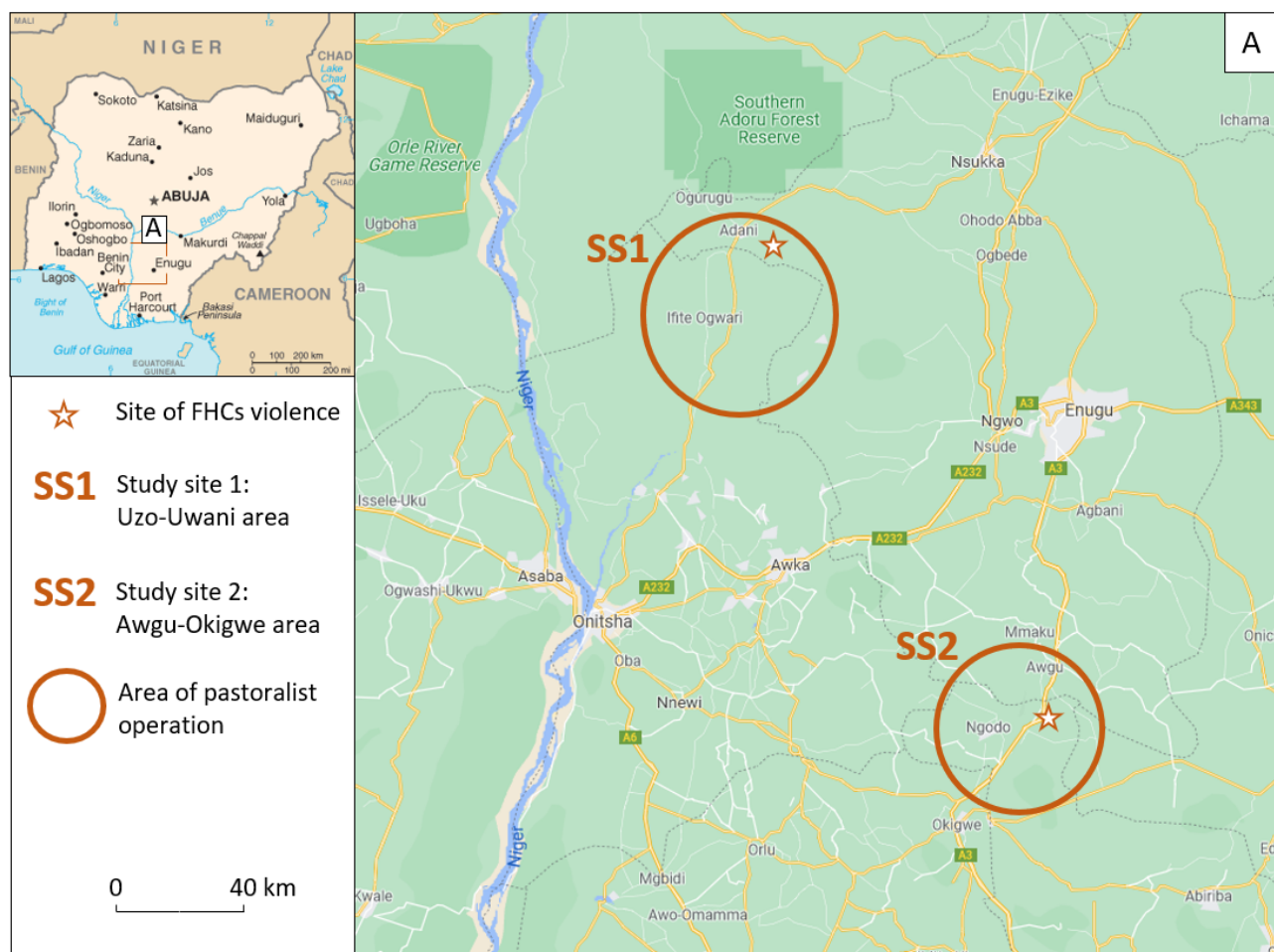


Fig. 1 Study area

abuses which have a material foundation are vital to explaining the FHCs. He argued that *the material interests* and *the moral claims and narratives* stimulate the FHCs than resources scarcity. By bringing Turner's (2004) contention in dialogue with Hall et al. (2011) and the notion of exclusion of pastoralists based on indigeneity, we enable a reading of the FHCs as emanating from resource exclusion which is produced by the heightened assertion of indigeneity- that is, a construction based on moral wrongs. In this sense, moral values interact with indigeneity to produce exclusionary practices. We will now discuss the methods.

2 Methods

This study uses qualitative approaches for data gathering and analysis. The study was conducted in parts of the South-East Geopolitical Zone of Nigeria. Sites selected are places where there is substantial existence of the Fulani pastoralists, and they have had wrangling or considerable disputes with local land users, especially cultivators. The sites meeting these criteria are the Awgu-Okigwe environs in the border between Enugu, Ebonyi and Imo States and the Nimbo-Ukpabi-Adani areas, Uzo-Uwani local government area (LGA) in Enugu State (Fig. 1). The study was conducted between October 2018 and November 2019 in Awgu-Okigwe areas. These sites were visited regularly by the researchers throughout these periods to observe farmer-herder relations and conduct interviews between June 2016 and July 2017 in Uzo-Uwani LGA and between October 2018 and November 2019 in

Table 1 Profile of research participants

Participants	Freq.	Age range	Education	Male	Female
Farmers	20	20–68	PE-BD	11	9
Herders	16	16–60	NFE-SE	16	0
Livestock and meat traders	8	25–70	PE-BD	6	2
Traditional ruler and chiefs	12	56–75	SE-BD	10	2
Hausa-Fulani leaders	5	52–66	NFE-SE	5	0
Community youth leaders	7	25–45	SE-BD	7	0
Land dispute committee members	4	52–66	NFE-BD	3	3
Land agents	5	35–70	PE-BD	5	0
Other members of the community	8	22–70	NFE-BD	4	4
Total	85			65	20

NB: NE is no formal education; PE is primary education; SE is secondary school education; BD is bachelor's degree.

Awgu-Okigwe areas. A return visit to the study area was made between June and July 2021.

The study used field observation and semi-structured interviews to gather data plus vital documentary materials. Interviews were conducted with local communities, the Hausa-Fulani communities in the study area, farmers, herders. Key informant interviews were held with traditional rulers, the Ado-the herders' head, village heads, village land dispute committees, leaders, and Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association of Nigeria (MACBAN), among others. The sampling strategy involved purposive random sampling. We began the interviews with leaders of the communities, both Hausa-Fulani leaders and the host community leaders. From there, we establish contacts with other key informants and snowball to interview more informants. Also, through cattle meat sellers and the Hausa-Fulani leader, we link up some herders and snowball

again to interview the herders. The farmers could easily be accessed for an interview. We interviewed with farmers late in the evening when they would have returned to their residents. We move across the villages and randomly interviewed willing participants. We also targeted markets, where farm produces are sold and interview farmers bringing goods for sale.

In total, we conducted 85 interviews: 44 in Nimbo and environs and 41 in the Awgu-Okigwe axis. Table 1 details the profile of the research participants, and Table 2 the interview guide. After a general introduction and explanation of the study's goal, we asked participants the questions in the interview guide. We ask additional questions to probe further issues emerging from their responses. Some ethical considerations were made before conducting the interviews. Participation was strictly voluntary, and written consent was sought from the in-

Table 2 Interview guide

Questions for farmers/members of farming communities	Questions for herders/members of pastoralists groups
Are there pastoralists in your community?	When did you arrive in this community to graze cattle?
Which part of your village are they situated in?	Where is your source of origin?
When did they arrive here?	Why did you leave your place of origin?
What have been your village relationship with the herders?	Why did you choose this community and environs?
Do you know why they have come to dwell here?	How has your relationship with the farmers in this community been since arriving?
Have you or any person in your village had any form of conflict with the herders?	Are you aware of any herder who has had a conflict with the farmers in this community or environs?
When did the conflict occur?	In what ways did the conflict or disagreement manifest?
In what ways did the conflict or disagreement manifest?	When did the conflict occur?
What do you think causes the FHCs in this community and environs?	What do you think caused the FHCs in this community and environs?
What have you heard to be the cause of the FHCs in this community and environs?	What have you heard to be the cause of the FHCs in this community and environs?
In what ways was the conflict or dispute resolved?	In what ways was the conflict or dispute resolved?

interviewees regarding willingness and readiness to take part and recording technique of choice (audio-tape recording and/or note-taking). An explanation of the research's aim, scope and duration was made before the interviews are conducted. Participants were informed that they could quit at any point and could refuse to answer any questions they are unwilling to respond to. The personal and identifying information of the participant was not directly referred to in the research's report.

Semi-structured interviews were used for the interviews. The pieces of information elicited from them are their opinions on the nature of the farmer-pastoralist relations in the study area. Semi-structured interviews enabled the research to focus on the study's objectives while permitting the flexibility to retort to the unexpected meaning of the conversation and take the new ideas that arise. In qualitative data analysis, the focus is on recognising, assessing, and interpreting collected data by identifying and evaluating themes and patterns and determining how these themes and patterns help answer the research questions at hand. The analysis of the collected data involved 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 involved sorting the data in both documents and interviews and then code them into meaningful themes and tracing their conceptual roots using the grounded theory perspective (Corbin and Strauss 1990 in Willig 2013; Johnsen and Benjaminsen 2017).

3 Case study: Farmer-herder relations in the study area

3.1 Brief historical backgrounds

Before the Nigerian Civil War (1967–70), Fulani pastoralists rarely dwell in the study area. There was livestock rearing among the natives, like goat, chicken, sheep, and Igbo cow (Efi Igbo). Livestock keeping is practised alongside crop cultivation on a complimentary basis. After the Civil War, many Fulani pastoralists began to make inroads into parts of Southern Nigeria from the Sahel belt in the north, which has been their domain for ages. However, this southward movement co-

incided with the drought of the 1970s in Northern Nigeria. Thus, the drought of the 1970s and the Nigerian Civil War are two vital factors that have brought nomadic Fulani pastoralists into the region. The civil war permitted the opening of spaces where the pastoralists have not been able to explore previously. The drought in the Northern Sahelian region of Nigeria contributed to their movement southward. Earlier, locals strongly resisted pastoralists inroads into their areas. Local warriors and strong hunters and guards fiercely fought the pastoralists' dwelling in these areas.

In Ukpabi-Nimbo-Adani environs, Fulani pastoralists will arrive shortly after the Civil War occupying the places where people have been displaced because of the war. The pastoralists set up camps in the forests from where they wander, searching for grazing spots and return after the day work. The returning natives initially rebuffed the pastoralists' arrival, but the Nigerian soldiers stationed in the area quelled the brawls. Also, since the site has a non-seasonal river-Obinna, a tributary of the Niger River providing water to feed their cattle in the dry season and which provides fresh pastures along its banks, it is ideal for pastoralism. Also, before the war, there were non-pastoralists Hausa people who lived in Adani engaging in trading and farm labour and other works. The Hausa people built a mosque in the community centre, which has served as a place of gathering for the Hausa-Fulani community in Adana-Nimbo and environs. The presence of this Hausa community also contributed to the arrival of pastoralists there. Those born in the area are taught Arabic Language and Islamic ideas by an Islamic scholar who lives among them. Teachings are conducted in the mosque and are done to make them realise their identity. The majority of non-pastoralists Hausa-Fulani in the region reside in Adani, where they have built a mosque. The Ukpabi-Nimbo-Adani area is a frontier of Enugu, Kogi and Anambra States.

In the Awgu-Okigwe area, it is not precisely clear when the Fulani pastoralists began to make inroads into the areas. Still, the head informed us that the Hausa-Fulani community in Okigwe had had a significant presence there for more than thirty years. Like the Ukpabi-Nimbo-Adani areas where the Obinna River attracted the herders, this site is ideal for pastoralism, with fresh pastures dotting the banks of many streams which drain the area. In Awgu, you can see the herders close to the lower course of the Ezie stream and Ogbuma stream. Although the streams are seasonal, the choice of this site is also because it is in the valley of the Udi-Awgu cuesta stretching onward into the Western flank

of the Cross River plain in the Ebonyi-Enugu-Imo frontier. This area is rich in alluvium that supports pastures that herds feed on. Most of the pastoralists retreat to the Okigwe area, where they have a significant population. Besides, these two study sites link many States, thus serving as a hub connecting communities to the cattle market.

As in other parts of Nigeria, attempts to expel non-natives in many parts of the country was stopped by the military regime in Nigeria, which lasted for decades. Thus, the Hausa-Fulani community in these areas will continue to grow, plus growth in pastoralists and herds over the decades. However, following the return to democratic rule, significant battles have been recorded in places, especially in the central region. The complementary relations between pastoralism and crop production remains, and albeit seldomly welcome, the crop farmers in the study area also use Fulani cattle dung and beef. In economic terms, the business of beef sales has grown in the area. Meat merchants prefer Fulani cattle because they are cheaper and have more meats from which more profit could be made.

3.2 Farmer-herder conflicts in Nimbo and Awgu

Leading political ecologists exploring the farmer-herder relations in Africa, in addition to rejecting environmental scarcity narratives, seldom considered the issue of identity and indigeneity or ethnicity as a causal factor in the FHCs. Tor Benjaminsen and his co-authors have vigorously cautioned against thinking through ethnicity in explaining the FHCs. They focus on policies and politics that define access or exclusion of pastoralists to land tenure and land resources (e.g. [Benjaminsen and Ba 2009](#); [Benjaminsen et al. 2009](#); [Walwa 2017, 2020](#)). In the study area, what we found is similar to the claims of political ecologists but from a different angle. In particular, we found the idea of moral wrongs of [Turner \(2004\)](#) interacting with the issue of indigeneity. We present these findings by first exposing the land tenure regimes in the study area to fully understand how access and exclusion operate, then present the causes of the conflict.

3.3 Land tenure in the study area: the prima of indigeneity, gender and economic power

Traditionally, land tenure in the study area is dictated by indigeneity and gender. Here indigeneity refers to being a native of the area not because you were born and raised there but because

your ancestors were recognised as natives from the past. Exclusion in land tenure is legitimated based on the reasoning that land is an ancestral gift from their forefathers to the present generation. So, access to land is only granted to those of the ancestral lineage. Exclusion based on gender is that women will be married to other families to use the lands allocated to their husbands. Communities in the study area distribute the lands among the recognised families in the community. The people in the study area are traditional believers, and many have now adopted the Christian religion, and they are of Igbo ethnicity. Non-natives of a community are not allocated property regardless of whether they are of the same ethnicity or religion as the community. Once a family is recognised as a legitimate community member, they share in the community's land. Families then do the allocation of lands to individuals, and only recognised male members are allocated property. Thus, while the land regime existing in the study area appears to be neo-customary, the existing claim that land tenure regimes in Africa are pivoted on ethnic entitlement cannot be supported by this study. The literature on land regimes and land politics in Africa nurse this idea of ethnicity as the prime factor of land entitlement in Africa ([Mamdani 1996](#); [Boone & Nyeme 2015](#)). What is obtainable in the South-East Geopolitical zone is different communities of the same Igbo ethnicity. It may be argued that people of another ethnicity than the indigenes may be treated differently, but that does not guarantee the entitlement to land by non-indigenes of the same ethnicity. In the Middle Belt of Nigeria, where the FHCs are far more violently intense, access to land and other resources may be dictated by ethnicity because that region is highly ethnically fragmented. Instead of having different communities of the same ethnicity, there are varying communities with varying ethnic origins. For this reason, ethnic identity becomes pronounced, and land tenure may be dictated by ethnic affiliation. Exclusion has always been part of land tenure relations ([Hall et al. 2011](#); [Baird 2014](#)). In an empirical sense, the exclusion is when many people do not have access to land or land is held as private property. In contrast, as a process, exclusion embodies extensive and usually violent eviction of populations from their land by powerful actors ([Hall et al. 2011](#)). Normatively, exclusion is considered something negative and opposite of positive "inclusion" suggesting that exclusion is enforced on the feeble by the strong and hence, should be opposed. The study finds that this normative notion of exclusion as something

negative is nursed by both farmers and herders in the study area. For herders, excluding non-native in resources, significantly land reduces their access to land for grazing because they are non-native. However, the traditional leaders in the study area indicate that the Fulani pastoralists are not prevented from grazing their herds because the pastoralists rarely occupy the lands permanently. Farmers decry the destruction of crops by herders, and so the herders are verbally confronted from the destruction of crops and farmlands may lead to the threat of violence by herders.

The customary land regime is, however, being eroded by the commercialisation of land. Power relations are reshaping the customary land use, and the allocation system and economical power play a significant role. Political ecologists and other workers have since identified the commercialisation of land as a factor for land tenure related conflicts in Africa (Walwa 2017). The modernisation processes—the desire to get a higher education, improve the standard of living: building better homes, starting a business or travel abroad has encouraged indigenous landlords to sell their lands to the wealthy and commercial interests. Expanding commercial interests and land investments have reduced farming spaces available to peasants and nomadic pastoralists, and the growing population of pastoralists and herds is also a problem.

The market forces are increasingly becoming powerful, eroding the indigenous control over land. Capitalists land acquisitions are transferring land ownership from impoverished indigenes to wealthy non-natives, but this has come at the back of the natives' desire for a modern lifestyle via the sale of landholdings. The growing prices of land mean that some poor natives who sold their lands earlier can no longer purchase them; thus, putting landownership in the hands of the wealthy and bourgeois. The commercialisation of land and these expansions have led to a change in how exclusion is viewed from something wrong to a necessary condition. The commercialisation of land limits the accessibility of land to both peasant farmers and nomadic pastoralists. However, because the peasant farmers are primarily natives, they have better security to land compared with the Fulani pastoralists, which may be evicted at any moment.

3.4 Everyday Disputes

While grazing fields herders use reduces, this has not significantly impacted the pastoralists in Awgu and Nimbo. Thus, resources scarcity is not the cause of the everyday disputes between

the farming community and the herders. The disagreements have not been violent and brutal but only once in 2016. The non-violent dispute results from crop damage by herders' cattle, the pollution of the water sources such as rivers and streams or springs when the herds are drinking water. In Awgu, the disciplinary committee is composed of married women carefully selected by the traditional council. The head of the committee noted that "Fulani pastoralists are now everywhere in the farms, they allow their cattle to feed on crops and because they destroy farms. The herders can graze along the banks of the river and streams (which serve as drinking water sources to the villagers), especially in the dry season. As the traditional leader of Adani noted:

We did not have a violent conflict with the Fulani herders except that of 2016, when many people were killed. Since the 1970s, after the war, the herders have been coming around our community and neighbouring villages. Since the early 1980s, the herders started to make campsites in the forest near farming areas in Ugbo Akutara, Ugbo Uweluakpa, Ugbo Ezema, Ugbo Otuguzo and around an area called farm settlement or also known as Ada Rice. No person permitted them to settle in these places. They used these areas as camps by force. We did not evict the herders, we welcome them, but we started having problems from the late 1980s when the herders started damaging farms. We have been having verbal confrontations on issues of crop damage and water resources pollution. They harvest our yams, cassava and feed them to the cattle, including maize cobs and the plant itself.

The herders often graze in the forest at the periphery of villages where fresh and quality pasture can be sourced. In the dry season, the herders rely on the leaves, fruits and stems of some economic trees (e.g., cashew trees, oil palm trees, oil bean trees) in the forests to feed the cattle. The forests also serve some purposes to villages such as hunting wildlife, fetching fuel wood, collecting spring water and fruits from the economic tree and contain their larger farms where cassava, yam is grown. The villagers depend on these economic trees as an alternative source of livelihood. Villagers, especially women, collect the fruits of these trees for sale in the market. The markets are periodically running every four days. This has often put the herders in conflict with local women, which the later accused of using rape as a threat to prevent them from harvesting their fruits. A woman argued that the herders killed women who resisted. The herders denied having raped any woman but ad-

mitted using trees to support and diversify the feeding source for cattle in the dry season.

Nonetheless, these disagreements have not led to the refusal of the nomadic pastoralists to continue to stay in their camps. A village chief noted that the *Fulani pastoralists are not prevented from grazing their herds so long as they do not attempt to occupy the lands they graze on permanently* (Interview at Awgu). In Awgu, the herders hinted that they graze freely in the peripheral bushes so long as they have paid specific fees to the traditional rulers. When the price paid lapses, they may be forced to move out of the community. Most of the traditional leaders we spoke to denied this. However, the locals we interacted with in Awgu, except in the Adani-Nimbo area, noted that their leaders might collect fees from pastoralists. Still, because of fear of retribution, they refuse to disclose such acts. Many participants, including the traditional rulers, shared that increasing development and the expansion of agriculture have reduced spaces herder previously used without confrontation. A traditional ruler noted that:

Previously, when you come to this community, and you demand land, we will just ask you to use as much as you can because we have them in abundance, and nobody was using them. However, now, the land is getting more expensive, and our children are growing, so we cannot give out land anyhow.



Fig. 2 A Fulani pastoralist's herds grazing in a peripheral bush near Adani

What we observed is that the rapid expansion of the use of land for non-agricultural purposes plus the growth of commercial farming reducing the available spaces for grazing. Thus, the herders are forced automatically to graze at the periphery bushes far away from villagers' dwelling spaces (Fig. 2).

The herders indicated that they do not find staying in those thick forests pleasing because they are exposed to dangerous wild animals and cattle rustlers who may attack them. The Fulani herders we interviewed in Isochi and Lokpanta communities near Okigwe indicated that places where they used to graze have now been taken over, *grazing fields are reducing*. A herder noted that:

Previously we had significant access to many grazing spaces without any troubles, but today we are being chased everywhere we go. Also, land for grazing is reducing because many people are selling to people building houses, factories, poultry, and schools. We can graze on some lands that have been sold, but once those agents begin to develop the land, we are forced to move out automatically.

3.5 The moral dimension - the enactment of violence and heightened indigeneity

Despite the everyday disputes, usually verbal confrontations between herders and farmers in the study area, there was no large-scale violent conflicts until 2016. The circumstances in which this violent episode erupted beckons us to look beyond access and exclusion in land tenure or other resources. What we found (as shown in Table 3) is akin to Turner's (2004) idea of the role of moral transgression in triggering violent FHCs. The belief of specific actions as morally wrong leads to the heightened construction of identity of indigeneity and belonging but not necessarily that of ethnicity or religion. Three vital moral issues are identified in our study, namely, the allegations of kidnapping and raping of women by herders and the use of a herder for a sacrifice by the villages in Ukpabi, Nimbo. While the issue of rape and kidnapping was common in the two study areas, the allegation of human sacrifice was not identified in Awgu. The practice of rape is the significant gender dimension of the conflict.

In Awgu, violent clashes between the Fulani herders and the villagers occurred from the allegation that some people have been kidnapped and raped by herders. And the general destruction of crops by herds, especially young herders. Villagers complain of kidnapping and raping of girls and women by pastoralists who camp in the forests. In an in-

Table 3 Profile of causes of the conflicts, actors' identities and sources of power

Action	Perception of action	Accused Agent	Form of conflict	Accused agent source of power	Agent's identities
Crop damage	Criminal action	Herders/herds	Verbal altercation	Possession of sophisticated weapons	Fulani herders/ Non-indigene/ Claims Nigerian citizenship
Water pollution	Criminal action	Herders/herds	Verbal altercation	Possession of sophisticated weapons	Fulani herders/ Non-indigene/ Claims Nigerian citizenship
Cattle rustling	Criminal action	Villagers	Verbal altercation	Possession of sophisticated weapons	Natives/ indigenes/ herders
Rape	Moral wrong	Herders	Violent confrontation	Possession of sophisticated weapons	Fulani herders/ Non-indigene/ Claims Nigerian citizenship
Kidnapping	Moral wrong	Herders	Violent confrontation	Possession of sophisticated weapons/ Nigerian citizenship	Fulani herders/ Non-indigene/ Claims Nigerian citizenship
Use of herder for sacrifice	Moral wrong	Villagers	Violent confrontation	Customary land tenure/ Indigenous belonging/ Nigerian citizenship	Natives/ indigenes

interview with some groups of women, they agreed with the opinion of one woman that *If a woman goes to the farm close to the herders' grazing areas or goes to harvest fruits from economic trees alone, she risks being raped by herders* (Interview at Awgu). This claim also mirrors our interviews in the Nimbo area. This allegation can be seen in the assertion by an ex-headmaster who is now a farmer: *For the pastoralists, we do not ask them not to graze their cattle, but they have become too aggressive, preventing our women and children from going to farms and from collecting fruits in the forest because of fear of rape and kidnapping. Some women and girls have been raped across the years, and many others kidnapped with ransom paid for their release, and others got killed if no ransom was paid. Some other victims of rape and kidnapping were never seen again till today. This is wrong and unacceptable in our land.*

The leader of the Hausa-Fulani community in Adani, Seriki, noted that many actors could disguise as Fulani herders to perpetrate crimes including raping and kidnapping arguing that the herders, he knows to graze in the area do not engage in such activities. He admitted that *"some foreign herders may visit the area seasonally, and he cannot account for their activities. In April 2016, the local villagers in the Ukpabi-Nimbo area were attacked by armed pastoralists killing dozens and many other displaced on the ground that they used a herder for sacrifice. Seriki noted that [t]he fighting that led to killings was because a young herder was killed and used as a sacrifice by the villagers. So,*

the herders fought back in revenge for their lost son because they see that are away be addressed this wrongdoing (Interview with Seriki at Adani near Nimbo). Thus, very pertinent to the eruption of the tension since 2016 are issues that are considered morally wrong by both actors: farmer, herders, villagers and their leaders. The allegations of rapes and killing of women, kidnappings and use of a herder as sacrifice are vital moral wrongs that angered the actors. Besides, crop destruction by herds and cattle rustling gets enrolled in these issues but only when these moral wrongs occurred, prompting herders' exclusion and discrimination as a form of resistance by villagers.

Thus, while the FHCs occurred as verbal confrontation, what triggered the use of force and violence is not primarily exclusion in access to land and resources, but issues considered to be morally unjustifiable, which makes other issues of crop damage and cattle rustling to be remembered and factored in the violent confrontations. The confrontations and counter-resistance engender heightened construction of identity of indigenous belonging on the ground that non-indigenes cannot commit atrocities and still expect to be treated warmly. Also, the confrontations and resistance led to herders' assertion of their citizenship right by saying as in one herder's word, *Na one Nigeria* –implying as a citizen of Nigeria; they have the right to stay in any part of the country as enshrined in the Nigerian constitution. Thus, while the villagers emphasise their customary identity as the indigenes, the herders emphasise legal identity as citi-

zens of Nigeria. These identity and belonging dilemmas have engendered confrontation and conflict, as discussed in the next section.

3.6 Pastoralists land tenure insecurity and the use of force

Despite the general freedom to graze, herders do not control lands, lacking land tenure security. In many places, they have been denied access, and in others, they use force to gain access. In the study area, there are communities where open grazing is prohibited, such as those in Awgu and in others, open grazing is not much of a problem. These varying regulation regimes dictate nomadic Fulani pastoralists operations. In Awgu, it is uncommon to see a Fulani herder around village spaces because open grazing is prohibited. Still, in Nimbo-Ukpabi-Adani areas, you can easily see Fulani herders around (see Fig. 3). This form of regulation thus defines the grazing spaces herders can operate within. The Fulani herders generally operate at the frontiers between villages without being disturbed. However, following allegations of moral wrongdoing, the villagers have been hostile to Fulani pastoralists. The hostility emanated from the idea that *doers* (pastoralists) of moral wrongs cannot be accommodated in the face of diminishing common lands.

Force has been the critical avenue through which nomadic pastoralists have been able to gain secure access to land and control over land in the study area. The pastoralists use force to occupy some lands where they camp and are readily available for brutal fights with the natives who chose to retreat. In such places as in the sites just at the foot of the hills in the Ukpabi-Nimbo-Adani area and the interior of the forests at the frontier of Enugu-Ebonyi, Abia and Imo States along the Awgu-Okigwe axis, the herders prevent non-pastoralists from gaining access. Attempts to regain control by the natives are met by powerful resistance. In such lands, tensions often boil over, and there is constant raiding of Fulani pastoralists to remove them from those lands. The herders have been resistive by arming themselves and fighting back on many occasions. Without such resistance, as the locals noted, they would have chased the herders away from their lands. A farmer in Awgu stated, *we have been trying to pursue the herders because they will use their cattle to destroy our interior Ezie farms, but they can be dangerous because they have arms. So, we no longer farm those areas of the village farmland.* The locals in the Ukpabi-Nimbo areas also share this view.

In the Ezie area of Umuhu, Awgu, most of such lands are in the interior bushes far away from community living spaces. Primarily the grounds are used for growing crops, mainly cassava, yam, cocoyam, and maize.



Fig. 3 A young Fulani herder grazing his herds in Adani

The herders themselves know that to continue to enjoy grazing in some fields without risking paying for any crop damage, they must prevent crop growers from cultivating lands. In many places in the study area especially sites about 2–5 km from the communities' dwelling places, the herders feed their cattle on the farms and resist further cultivation. Thus, what we observed confirms Hall et al. (2011) argument that all land use and access require exclusion of some kind. Although the villagers resolved to exclude Fulani pastoralists, the pastoralists themselves were more determined to gain access. To do that requires fending off attacks by villagers and resisting them from gaining further access. Thus, exclusion is structured by power relations– it does not occur on a level playing field; it is inevitable and not a random process. For these reasons, peasants, including nomadic pastoralists individually or as a group, cannot use land without some guarantee that other people will not grab their farms or steal their crops or rustle their herds.

4 Discussion and Conclusion

This article has discussed the FHCs in SEN. It has shown how indigenous identity gets articulated by perceptions of moral wrongdoing and heightens exclusion and counter exclusion in the FHR. The study finds that contrary to the previous understanding that land tenure in Africa is dictated by ethnic entitlement, land tenure in local communities in SEN is pivoted on indigeneity and gender—being a male member of a local community, not necessarily that ethnicity confers land entitlement. However, this customary land regime is being eroded by power relations, particularly economic power. Economic power is playing a critical role in access to land in the study area. This directs our attention to focus more on the political economy of land conflicts and, indeed, the FHR and conflicts.

Despite the gradual shifting configuration of land tenure and the reduction of lands used by peasants because of growing capitalist land accumulation and commercialisation, it has not been the trigger of the FHCs in the study area. The main trigger of the violence is the allegations of moral transgressions by both host communities and the Fulani pastoralists. Accusations of moral wrongdoing such as rape, kidnapping by herders and claims that a herder was used as a sacrifice by villagers triggered the violent episode and the enactment of pastoralists exclusion based on indigenous non-belonging. Also, in response, the herders emphasise their citizenship rights and deploy overt resistance by arming themselves with weapons to fend off attacks by villagers. These findings confirm [Turner \(2004\)](#) observation that while resource use competition and crop damage are everyday causes of verbal dispute, such disagreements do not lead to violence or brutal conflicts but rather moral transgressions that are considered significant and material.

Our findings show that the FHCs is not caused by the ethnic differences between the herders and natives but that of indigeneity, which only got enacted because of allegations of moral wrongs by herders. Hence, we find support for political ecology studies arguing that resources scarcity or ethnicity is not the main driver of the FHCs ([Benjaminsen & Ba 2009](#); [Benjaminsen et al. 2009](#); [Benjaminsen & Ba 2019, 2021](#)). From the Nigerian perspective, our study supports [Okoli and Nnabuihe \(2019\)](#) argument that the antagonistic ethnic, religious, sectional, or clannish relations are not the root causes of communal conflicts in Nigeria. It partially supports [Vanger \(2015\)](#)

that herders' insurgency on farmers is produced by encroaching on farms, resource competition, climate change, and farmers' resistance to farm encroachment and crop damage. We show that these issues only get mobilised as reasons for hostilities with herders after the herders have been alleged to have committed moral wrongs.

We agree with [Maiangwa's \(2017\)](#) contention that the FHCs in Nigeria and several parts of West Africa epitomise an exciting case study exploring how identity-related concerns instigate conflicts in post-colonial Africa. Also, we share in the contention that the FHCs in Nigeria ([Olaniyi 2015](#); [Akov 2017](#); [Ogundairo & Ijimakinwa 2021](#); [Nwankwo 2020](#); [Madu & Nwankwo 2020](#)) and Ghana ([Bukari & Schareika 2015](#); [Alhassan 2017](#); [Bukari & Kusaana 2018](#)) are associated with multiple elements but manifested within the purview of power disparity in the context of indigenes and settlers/migrants' dichotomy. We add to this argument the moral dimension that [Turner \(2004\)](#) pointed out, which scholars have not recognised, is salient to how indigenous identity gets mobilised to shape the FHCs. In conclusion, thus, our paper contributes to the political ecology of the FHCs in Africa via the novel argument that while what triggers FHCs may be moral wrongs, as [Turner \(2004\)](#) indicated, moral transgressions can heighten identity constructions and get imbued in practices of exclusion.

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