

Role of Mass Media towards Ending Fulani Herdsmen and Farmers Conflicts in Benue State

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Abstract. Fulani herdsmen and farmers in Benue State have recently been at each other's neck. This ugly situation has led to the destruction of many lives and property worth millions of naira. Consequently, the nomadic Fulanis who mainly rear cattle and Benue indigenes living in rural areas with farming as their main preoccupation now live in suspicion for the fear of the unknown. Though several efforts have been made to curb the menace but less success has been recorded. The mass media have through their information, education, surveillance, agenda setting and other functions proved to be powerful means of entrenching peace and mitigating conflicts. It is against this backdrop that this paper x-rays how the mass media could be utilized to salvage this ugly situation. Agenda setting Theory is used as theoretical slant for this study. The study concludes that, mass media have a significant role on preventing and resolving conflict effectively by assuming conflict preventing functions

Keywords: Fulani Herdsmen, Farmers, Conflict, Mass Media, Benue

1. Introduction

Nigeria and her component units referred to as states have been riddled with one form of

conflict and security challenges or the other. This is evident in ethnic, political and religious conflicts and/or crises. The attendant consequences of these anomalies range over wanton destruction of lives and property, assault, kidnapping/abduction, assassination, and general state of insecurity as well as social disorder. As Dodo (2008) asserts:

Just like most African nations, Nigeria has been witnessing various social ills since the attainment of political independence. These social problems include: religious intolerance, ethnicity, sectionalism, apathy and indifference in matters of national interest. So far, successive governments since independence have made efforts to minimize these evils but these have yielded little or no positive result (p. 2).

These precarious and unfortunate situations described above have permeated all strata of the Nigerian society thereby plunging ethnicities which were known to be mutual friends into a state of 'cat and dog' relationship. Oral accounts indicated that the Fulanis of North Western and Eastern Nigerian and Tiv people of North central Nigeria have common ancestry and occupation, cattle rearing. However, the Tiv people been lovers of meat, had eaten all their cattle, a situation which made Fulanis referred to Tiv people as "munchi". Instead, the Tiv people take farming as their major occupation while

their Fulani brothers stick to cattle rearing. They have lived peacefully together for decades even as herdsmen and farmers.

Regrettably, and recently too, these friendly cohabitants have been thrown into occupational war which escalated between 2013 and 2014 with some vestiges in 2015. No doubt, several and concerted efforts have been made by government at all levels, community and faith based organizations to end the feud as evident in the deployment of military and other security operatives to quell the crises as well as convocation of peace summits. However, these efforts have almost been less effective. Thus, this paper explores the possibility of using the mass media as a answer to correct this anomaly, hence Nwosu (2004) says, in times of conflict or even war, adequate or inadequate management of information is considered to be a critical factor in the emergence, escalation or reduction of tension at various levels.

2. Brief Overview of Fulani Herdsmen and Benue Farmers Conflict

Though, there are little historical accounts on the causes of Fulani-Tiv conflicts, with hindsight one could say the trouble starts when nomadic Fulanis allow their cattle to graze on crops planted by Tiv farmers. The farmers in attempt to protect their crops or farms usually chase the herdsmen and their cattle thereby leading to violent retaliations. Hagher (2013), notes that, the foundation to the current crises was laid first in 1988 when the then District Head of Nzorov District of Guma local government area, Chief Iordye Akaahena was assassinated by gunmen suspected to be Fulani herdsmen. This incidence sparked anger and derision among Tiv indigenes at home and in Diaspora, as it portrayed the Tiv nation as weaklings before most ethnic groups in Nigeria. Akor (2015) recounts that:

The recent wave of Fulani-Tiv crises re-echoed on February 8, 2011 when armed Fulani herdsmen numbering between 200 and 500 attacked and sacked three districts in Gwer-west local government area with scores left dead and over 20,000 people rendered homeless. The sedentary Tiv farmers at the Benue Riverside areas of Gwer-west were the frites to be attacked.

This situation lasted from February 8th – 10th, 2011 when the horde of Fulani herdsmen who after an altercation with the sedentary farmers over grazing and farmlands years back, returned to the area armed with sophisticated amoury including chemical grenades. The same scenario played itself later on March 4th, 2011 which coincided with the official visit of former president Goodluck Ebele Jonathan to Benue State (p.44).

The second deadly attack was on March 5, 2012 when scores of Fulani invaders crossed River Benue by boats into the state. Armed with AK47, Mark 4, and other weapons, they sacked the Tiv farming community, marching through a distance of 30 kilometers from Tse-Abomste Mbamegh to Tse-Joo, all in the Gwer west local government area. They allegedly killed all men including women and children they met on their way and spared no farmlands, economic trees, houses, food barns and domestic animals. These communities had reportedly had no previous conflict with the Fulanis (Akor, 2015). Akor (2015) posits that:

Another deadly attack was launched in Agatu in which 37 persons, including seven soldiers made up of a Lieutenant, two Sergeants, one Corporal and Lance Corporal as well as two Privates serving with Nigerian School of Military Engineering (NASME), Makurdi lost their lives. After the prolonged killing of sedentary Tiv farmers in Guma LGA, and surprisingly enough, the ancestral home of the then Tor-Tive Orchivirigh Dr. Alfred Akawe Torkula was razed down by suspected Fulani militia with sophisticated weapons, killing an unspecified number of people. (p.46)

These crises later spread to Logo, Ukum, Katsina-Ala and Kwande local government areas of the state particularly along the Taraba and Cameroun borders. In fact, between November and December, 2015, the conflict has taken over parts of Oju and Ado Local Government Areas of the State leading to several killings, kidnapping with many cows missing.

3. Mass Media

The mass media are defined by Eyutachae (2002) as the communication systems or devices

used in delivering information, thoughts, knowledge, ideas and attitudes to a sizeable and diversified audience. The systems or devices according to this author refer to television, radio, newspapers and magazines. Abagen (2009) says, the mass media are by definition, the whole range of information dissemination institutions and agencies.

Furthermore, Iwokwagh (2009) defines the mass media operationally from a dual perspective. First, as technological artifacts, and second, as social institutions. At the first level of conception, the mass media refer to the various systems of modern communication that make information consumption possible. These include newspapers, magazines, books (print media) and television, radio, film or cinema (electronic media).

At the second level of conception, the mass media refer to those highly structured or organized social systems with well-defined authority relationships and are responsible for the gathering, processing, packaging and dissemination of information or message for public consumption. He explains that, the advantage of such dual conception of the mass media is that, it presents a near total picture of what the mass media are. Thus, the mass media are both the technological means and social systems that facilitate the dissemination of information to a large, scattered and anonymous audience.

4. Conflict

Conflict is inevitable among humans. When two or more social entities (i.e., individuals, groups, organizations, and nations) come in contact with one another in attaining their objectives, their relationships may become incompatible or inconsistent. Relationships among such entities may become inconsistent when two or more of them desire a similar resource that is in short supply; when they have partially exclusive behavioral preferences regarding their joint action; or when they have different attitudes, values, beliefs, and skills. There are divergent connotations about what constitutes conflict. Pate (2002), argues that, conflict is part of life. It characterizes the dynamics of human interaction.

Owens-Ibie (2002), concurs that, conflict is a product of life and living. As long as there are people who interact, there is bound to be conflict.

A conflict is more than a mere disagreement, it is a situation in which people perceive a threat (physical, emotional, power, status, etc.) to their well-being. Participants in conflicts tend to respond on the basis of their perceptions of the situation, rather than an objective review of it. As such, people filter their perceptions (and reactions) through their values, culture, beliefs, information, experience, gender, and other variables. Conflict responses are both filled with ideas and feelings that can be very strong and powerful guides to our sense of possible solutions. Conflict connotes disagreement, dispute, or controversy in ideas or viewpoints held by two or more individuals or groups (Oyeshola, 2006). Imobighe (2003) in Adeogun (2006), asserts that conflict represents a condition of disharmony within an interaction process usually as a result of clash of interest between parties involved in some form of relationship. Week (1992) submits that, conflict is a phenomenon that is an important part of human existence and a natural part of our daily lives.

The forgone views demonstrate that conflict occurs in all human societies and it varies in degree and form of expression. In some societies, verbal rather than physical aggression is more frequent, while in other societies, more passive forms of expression may predominate. Some people inhibit aggression within the local community, to wage war against their neighbouring groups as in the case of herdsmen and farmers in Benue State.

5. Theoretical Slant

In keeping with academic tradition globally, scholars often use models and theories in an attempt to explain social phenomenon, at least under ideal circumstances (Keghku, 2011,). This work is not an exception. Therefore, it is anchored on agenda-setting theory.

Agenda-setting theory is credited to two researchers, Donald Shaw and Maxwell

McCombs in the 1970s who studied people's reactions to election campaigns through the media. The theory basically assumes that, "the more attention the media give to a topic, the greater is the importance attributed to it by the news audience" (McQuail, 2010, p.548). According to McCombs (2004, p1) the theory's main postulation is salience transfer which is the ability of the news media to transfer issues of importance from their "news media agendas to public "agendas". The mass media through their day-by-day selection and display of news focus our attention and influence our perceptions of what are the most important issues of the day. Moreso, the proponents of agenda-setting, McCombs and Shaw (1972, p.179) identified its two basic assumptions. These are, "the mass media do not reflect reality, they filter and shape it, and the mass media concentration on a few issues and subjects leads the public to perceive those issues as more important than others. Folarin (1998, p.8) submits that, agenda-setting theory does not ascribed to the media the power to determine what we actually think, but it do ascribed to them the power to determine what we are thinking about.

Agenda-setting theory is relevant to this discourse in view of the fact that, through constant reporting of the Fulani herders-Benue farmers conflict the mass media can attract attention to it, thereby eliciting the desired action towards curbing the ugly trend. The mass media based on this theory can present the conflict as the most important issue that demands urgent government or public attention.

6. The Role of the Mass Media in Ending Fulani Herdsmen and Benue Farmers Conflict

There is a general consensus by communication scholars that the media lay a vital role in conflict resolution and peace building, locally, nationally and globally. Nwosu (2004) observes that: The mass media are considered to be very important in conflict management because they are information merchants, conduits or carriers of various shades and colours of information. And in times of conflict or even wars, adequate information is considered to be a critical factor

in the emergence, escalation or reduction of tension at various levels. Tensions depending on how they are managed can determine the end or continuation of the conflict (p.15).

The above scholarly disposition suggests that the mass media have a significant impact on preventing and resolving conflict effectively by assuming conflict preventing functions. In recent times, the media have emerged as an essential tool in combating conflicts, crises and acts of terrorism through the mechanism of information dissemination. Pate (2002), maintains that: *In times of conflict, information is regarded as a critical factor in escalating or reducing tension. In conflict it is often argued that abuse by the instrument of mass communication in time of crises, especially in complex and fragile societies like Nigeria, could have serious consequences* (p.5)

Though, the media are cardinal to the maintenance and sustenance of peace in the society, they can also serve as destructive agents in the peace process. They can choose to negatively report on the risks and dangers associated with a compromise, raise the legitimacy of those opposed to concessions and reinforce negative stereotype of the enemy. To this end, Jan (2011) asserts that:

Media can foster human security and it is evident that media can reinforce motives for fuelling wars. Media, traditional/non-conventional, can both prevent and resolve conflict through the autocratic functions of responsibly disseminating information, furthering awareness and knowledge, promoting participatory and transparent governance and addressing perceived grievances (p. 190).

Tahir (2009) argues that, it is important for the media to understand what conscious and unconscious role they play in their routine work of reducing or a times aggravating conflicts. Tahir further, identifies the role of the mass media in the process which include:

- Bridging communication gap
- Educating the audience
- Confidence building
- Correcting misrepresentations
- Identifying interests

- Emotional outlet
- Face-saving and consensus building
- Solution building
- Encouraging a balance of power

Furthermore, Bajraktan and Parajon (2007) notes that, the mass can contribute to peace merely by restoring level of trust and self-worthy in a population on the brink of or emerging from war. Where the mass media can occupy a space in the grassroots of civil society, it has the potential of healing and community building and prevention of future resurgence of violence.

Precisely, the mass media based on its numerous functions in the society have a major role to play in conflict resolution. Ekharefor and Olley (2011) highlights the media functions that are expedient in resolving conflict and combating acts of terrorism as follows:

Information: This is the first and major function of the media in the society. Providing the public with information on conflict situations such as the skirmishes between Fulani herdsmen and Benue farmers will make the society-those concerned to brace up to the challenges of the violent conflicts the two factions face. For the media to effectively assist in the resolution of this conflict, accurate and objective information, devoid of sensationalism, sectionalism or religious undertone must be passed to the people.

Surveillance: No doubt, the media assist in watching over the society. In the times of conflict such as the one being discussed, the issue of gathering intelligence about gunmen and their operations must not be left to the security agents alone. The media must ensure that they play their surveillance functions well with a view to complementing the efforts of security agents. The media can send undercover investigative reporters to get information on the activities of those perpetrating violence. By so doing, the media will be able to position themselves and inform the public before violence breaks.

Transmission of Cultural Heritage: This is a critical function of the mass media which focuses on the transmission of knowledge,

values and social norms from one generation to another. The mass media can extend this critical role to conflict resolution by helping to preserve those cultural heritages that make us whom we are. For instance, the Fulanis, Tiv and entire Benue people have for a long time live peacefully together until recent developments which created a warring situation amongst the erstwhile friends, now foes. Through transmission of cultural heritage the media can help in sustaining the relationship and ensuring peace among these people. The media should therefore present to the public more of our heritage and play down imported foreign contents which are often laced with violence.

Act as Community Forum: The mass media can create a community forum for the discussion of issues and for solutions without violence to be sought. Thus, a forum could be created by the mass media to brainstorm and proffer solutions to causative factors that have thrown Fulani herdsmen and Benue farmers into conflict.

Apart from the above, the media could be the best option of settling ethno-religious clashes as obtainable in the Fulani herders-Benue farmer's situation due to their enormous importance to the society. McQuail (1994) in De wet (2004) provides some assumptions about the media and their importance which made them indispensable to conflict resolution. These are:

- The media are able to influence matters and control innovations because they remain the most potent way of informing and influencing society.
- The media remain the sphere where issues nationally and internationally are played out. They have the potential either to place issues at the centre of debates or to ignore issues that could control or steer debates in particular directions.
- The media provide definitions of identities and social realities.
- The media are platforms to fame and disgrace where instant heroes and villains are made.
- The media are the source of an ordered and public meaning system that provides a benchmark for what is normal.

- The media are the largest focus of leisure time activities and means of entertainment.
- The conduct of both democratic and undemocratic politics, nationally and internationally depends, increasingly on mass media being a part of the social system.

Beyond that, the media's role in the development of national security proposed by Umeri and Galadima (2011) is veritable for ending conflict situations as in the case of Fulani herdsmen and Benue farmers.

Motivation Role

Motivation factor is one responsibility of the mass media in any society. The promotion of the immediate and ultimate aims of each society, and the stimulation of personal choices and aspirations, the fostering of individual or community activities, geared to the pursuit or agreed aims. From this position, the media have the responsibility to pep up support for the police and other security agencies in area of equipment provided by government in the discharge of their duties, particularly in handling conflicts. Other issues of welfare and working conditions of the police should form key issues of reportage in media as ways of encouraging or motivating the police to professionally quell crises.

Public Entertainment

The mass media are socializing organs that service the needs of society through gathering, writing and distributing the news of the day. The media are thus in a position to bring to the attention of all, issues of the day. Consequently as a socializing force, the media should be in the fore-front of enlightening Nigerians on issues relating to development of National security through provision of sufficient information and to encourage government to introduce programmes that would be based on attitudinal change and behaviour of the people.

Social Responsibility

The social responsibility of the mass media is based on the fact that the mass media are the 'watch dog' of society. To perform this role creditably, the media must be objective in their reports. The goals and priorities of the media

ideally should be to portray the realities of the society they serve. A key impetus for development of national security is objectivity on the part of journalist on some of the shortcomings of the police and other security operatives, for instance, reportage of inadequate communication facilities and vehicles for police and their conduct should be presented to illicit immediate solution so as to effectively and efficiently handle conflicts.

7. Conclusion

Based on the aforementioned, it is evident that the mass media are veritable tools of tackling or resolving ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria, particularly the one of herders and farmers in Benue State. This laudable objective could be achieved through the information, education, agenda-setting, advocacy, mobilization and sensitization functions of the mass media. Prevention and/or resolution of conflict, is everyone's responsibility including the mass media. Mass media can be used to and set-agenda for the government to prioritize security of lives and property of the citizenry. In a particular, the mass media could through advocacy champion the establishment of ranches to avert cattle grazing on farmlands and crops which is the remote cause of herders and farmers conflicts in Benue State and the entire country. They can sensitize the people to be security conscious and alert security agencies as soon as there is security threat. The mass media could also mobilize peaceful action against conflicts in order to forestall or eliminate violence. However, in carrying this enormous task, the mass media must remain objective, fair, balanced and avoid sensationalism in order to reduce and not aggravate the conflict situations. Media practitioners should consider public interest by being truthful and factual as well as avoid provocative or malicious language. This is because citizens in conflict situations need to know both sides of the story in order to make the right decisions or take appropriate actions to safeguard their lives and property.

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