



Impacts of Herdsmen Attacks on the Religious Worship and Activities of Apa Local Government Area, Benue State

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Abstract. This paper examined the impacts of herdsmen attacks on religious worship and activities of Apa Local Government Area of Benue State. The research aimed at considering the attacks of herdsmen on religious worship and the disruption of other activities in Apa. Historically, herdsmen have been very friendly with farmers and host communities in Apa, but today, the reverse is the case, as they have become a source of misery and worries. Communities and religious worship places are usually their targets and these have left much to be desired in the local communities. Over two decades now, records of herdsmen attacking people in churches, wounding, maiming, and killing in Benue State, have formed headlines of the major national dailies and other news outlets in Nigeria. The work adopted descriptive and analytical methods, while data were elicited from both primary and secondary sources, to address the issues raised. The findings revealed that herdsmen attacks were caused as result of struggle for meager resources such as water and farmland, the Islamization agenda and conspiracies. These have led to the destruction of farm crops, raping, kidnapping, land trespass, lack of respect for host communities, loss of lives, destruction of religious worship places, displacement of people, and homelessness. The work recommended that the Church should encourage dialogue, peace mediation and reconciliation, and intensify prayers to end the menace. On the other hand, security agents should work with the community leaders in securing the local communities. They should step up actions in disarming herdsmen with firearm and be bold to prosecute culprits and discourage violence. This research will be of immense relevance to religious institutions, farmers, herdsmen, Benue State, Nigeria, and Africa as a whole.

Keywords: Herdsmen, attack, religion, worship, Apa.

1. Introduction

The prevalence of Fulani herdsmen attacks poses serious threats to religious institutions and places of worship in Apa Local Government Area of Benue State. The worship life and activities of many religious groups, which used to be accompanied with joy, fellowship, and a feeling of divine presence, is no longer a thing to reckon with today. Christian Churches are mostly affected here. Activities such as Bible study, vigil, prayer meetings, and Sunday services have been disrupted and paralyzed. The coming together of people in church, mosque, and other social assembly do not thrive anymore. Worse of it, many villages and churches have been destroyed, and many people deserting the affected villages. Fulani herdsmen attacks have resulted in the death of many people, loss of lives, destruction of farmlands and crops, disruption of economic and social activities, severe relationships between farmers and herdsmen, and many persons abandoning their villages and becoming refugees in strange environments.

J. Omaji (personal communication, 11th September, 2024), observed that the causes of herdsmen attacks on places of worship, especially churches, could be traced to “the herdsmen Jihadist agenda, an attempt to Islamize and takeover Benue State, mostly populated by Christians, struggle to displace farmers and farming on cattle routes.” The impacts of this have always been in the negative, resulting to constant destruction of farm crops, confrontation from herdsmen, pollution of water, kidnapping, raping of women on the farm by herders, and among other things. Today Apa communities have been practically dislocated in all facets. People today live in fear and cannot congregate in places of worship to have fellowship, while others have been displaced and live like strangers in their homeland.

This work, through qualitative approach, examined the nexus of herdsmen attacks on religious worship in Apa. It took into consideration factors that led to

this menace, the impacts, the position of the church and a way to resolving the challenge. Finally, the work recommended that herdsmen and religious institutions should embrace dialogue, understand each other and return to those good old days when they have lived together in peace and harmony.

Explicating the Key Concepts

Nwankwo, (2017, p.11) defined religion as, “that ideological but irresistibly endearing force of Reality which encompasses and overwhelms the whole essence of man; an overt recognition of the covert experience of the divine, which explains the deep fundamental questions of existence and teaches men how to live, and how to die and for what to die. The understanding which manifests in emotions, attitudes, beliefs, rituals, duties, honour and reverence to that which is understood as Supreme Reality.”

Religion is a strong ideology and conviction which may seem difficult to resist once conceived. It encompasses the totality of human person and explains the deep fundamental questions bordering on reality, essence and existence. Man in religion tries to reach out beyond self to God or whatever is considered supreme, the wholly other. It is equally a social phenomenon. No definition of religion will be adequate if it fails to consider its God-ward and man-ward relationship. Man has a duty or role towards God and towards his fellow man.

Tylor (1963), explained religion as belief in the soul and spiritual beings. That means belief in religion is more than one being; it is belief in more spiritual beings. That is, anything one chooses to revere that has a spiritual end is called a spiritual being. Religion is referred to as a system of symbols that relate to the world, human relations, and ourselves. It is the way humans revere and relate to supernatural beings through symbols or objects. Religion is absolute dependence on supernatural beings.

On herdsmen, Alexander, and Ugwu (2024), referred to them as the nomadic people or pastoral farmers. It commonly refers to cattle raisers, who move their animals from place to place in search of pasture or green grass for their livestock to feed on. In other words, herdsmen are referred to as pastoral; Fulani are nomadic or semi-nomadic, whose primary duty is raising livestock. Herdsmen are known as Fulani herders, who usually move their livestock around for open grazing in many parts of Nigeria. Those whose primary assignment is to care for livestock.

2. Theoretical Framework

The theories that framed this research are that of frustration-aggression theory of Dollard, Doob, Miler, Mowrer, and Sears, propounded in 1939 and conflict theory of Karl Marx in 1841.

The frustration-aggression theory best describes the menace of Fulani herdsmen in Nigeria. This theory which was also known as frustration-aggression-displacement theory was developed by John Dollard and his associates in 1939. Elson (2018), described the theory as frustration-aggression hypothesis. The theory was expanded and modified by Yate in 1962 and Berkowitz in 1963, which draws mainly from psychological basis of motivation and behaviour (Ogege, 2015).

The theoretical framework explains the violent behavioural pertain which is caused by the inability of individuals to fulfill human needs. According to the theorists, the main cause of human capacity for violence is frustration aggression mechanism. This means unfulfilled expectations create relative deprivation gap between expectation and capabilities and can lead to violence or conflict. In other words, when someone or group of people have the perception of their ability or right to something (goal), if prevented from attaining such goals the result is frustration which will in turn generate aggressive behaviour that will snowball to violence (Ojo, 2014). Citing Dollard et al. (1939), Arie (2023, p. 446) noted that, “frustration produces instigation to aggression.”

The theory ranks among the most seminal and prominent theories in research on aggression. It is relevant for this research because, the herdsmen and host communities, when frustrated, will eventually lead to aggression, and aggression will result in herders attacking the host communities due to the destruction of lives and properties, including places of worship by herders. Their major targets in this case is usually, the religious centers and the worshippers. Frustration from the villagers will lead to aggression and these will result in attacks and killings, destruction of lives and property, places of worship and displacement of people. The Fulani herders usually feel frustrated when encroachment of grazing fields or tracks by the people occurs, in other words, by banning them from having access to water for their cattle, stealing their cattle or sheep, or poisoning the grass for cattle, leading to the loss of livestock, lead to frustration. The above-mentioned issues often cause frustration and aggression, which nurture violence either by Fulani herdsmen or the communities in retaliation or attacks. This is usually the case in Apa Local Government Area of Benue State.

3. Herdsmen in Biblical Perspectives

The history of herdsmen has been around for a long time; even in the Bible days, both in the Old and New Testaments, herders and farmers' conflicts existed. Ugwu and Eze (2024), observed that Abraham was a nomadic herder, who majored in livestock farming, and his children after him. In addition, Matthews (1956), said that, "originally, the Hebrew people were known as nomads in the Old Testament, the first occupation of the Israelites, before gradually embracing "agriculture, a commercial economy, and a national political system."

Joseph brothers in Egypt were known as shepherds by tradition; wandering Aramean was my father. The deliverance of the Israelites portrays them as nomads as they left with all their flocks and their families towards the Promised Land of Canaan. They camped in Sinai, and their flocks move around the surrounding environment. Genesis 13:2, 26:13, noted that, Esau and his brother Jacob were herders. Jacob selected from his flocks 550 as a gift to appease his brother Esau (Ugwu and Eze, 2024).

Herdsmen played a significant role in the Old Testament, representing a common occupation in ancient Israel and the wider Near Eastern region. Shepherding is one of the earliest professions mentioned in the Bible, and many key figures were depicted as herdsmen.

In the New Testament, herdsmen activities were equally spelt out beginning from the time of Jesus. The shepherds at the time of Jesus' birth were watching their flocks at night when the angel of God appeared and brought the good news of the Messiah's birth to them (Luke 2:8-16). The shepherd delivered the message of the angels regarding Jesus to people, and everybody was amazed.

The shepherds in the New Testament did not pose threats or challenges; rather, they were very peaceful and conveyed an angelic message about the Messiah to men. Furthermore, in 1 Peter 5:2-4, the Apostle exhorts the leaders of the church to be like shepherds caring for God's flock: "Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them-not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be" (Matthew 9:36). Jesus is moved with compassion for the crowds because they are "harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." This reflects the need for godly leadership and guidance.

Hebrews 13:20, Jesus is described as "the great shepherd of the sheep," underscoring His role in leading and protecting His followers. In New

Testament teaching, the figure of a shepherd (or herdsman) is a rich metaphor for spiritual care, guidance, and sacrifice, often used to describe Christ's relationship with believers and the responsibilities of a Christian leader.

4. History of Farmer/Herdsmen Conflicts in the Bible

It is clear in the Bible that farming is a business that is opened to natural and human attacks. Natural attacks include the growing of thorns, draught, flood, flood and earthquakes. It should be noted that fanning conflict is one of the first conflicts recorded in the Bible. It was the conflict between Cain and Abel (Mbachirin, 2005). God asked the two first brothers to present the products of their farming. The products of Abel met the requirements for the offering and were accepted. Cain's presentation did not meet the requirements and was rejected. Abel, the innocent fanner and probably the weaker one suffered more. This was conflict between a herder and crop farmer. It can also be seen that in most of the farming conflicts in the Bible it was the innocent party that suffered or was disadvantaged. Some of the other conflicts include the problem between Abraham and Lot, a dependent on Abraham chose the best land and the conflict with Isaac and the Canaanites. Anytime Isaac dug water wells to feed his cattle they covered them. Jacob experienced farm conflict with his father-in-law, Laban. In the book of Judges Israel experienced farming conflict as God sent other nations either to destroy or confiscate their crops, take over their farmlands and thresholds. There were conflicts between herdsmen and herdsmen struggling for water. Another major conflict was the one between Ahab and Nabot. Farming conflicts in the Bible are endless (Mbachirin, 2005).

5. Factors enabling Herdsmen Attacks in Apa

The concept of herdsmen attacks generally revolves around confrontation and violent conflicts between herders and farmers, typically in rural areas where competition over land and resources has intensified. These conflicts often arise when pastoralists, typically in search of grazing land for their cattle, encroach upon farming lands, leading to disputes over land rights, resource control, and economic survival. In recent years, these attacks have evolved in frequency and intensity, affecting not only local communities but also the broader social, economic, and security landscapes, especially in Nigeria and parts of Sub-Saharan Africa. Some of the reasons for herdsmen attacks are described below.

One of the major reasons for conflict between herdsmen and communities, is the issue of resource competition. Herdsmen attacks are often linked to

competition over land and water resources. With increasing population growth and desertification, there is a scarcity of these resources, leading to tension and conflict between herders and settled agricultural communities (Azeez, 2022).

O. Anya (personal communication, 11th September, 2024), observed that herdsmen often seek out an area with good grass, streams, and rivers for their animals, and Apa Local Government, has those resources at her disposal. The competition over fertile lands covered with grass and rivers, farmer fertile and water environment for agriculture to produce crops, and herdsmen need it to feed their livestock. This desperate desire to take control generates conflict between host communities and herdsmen.

Another challenge centers on ethnic religious dimension. Many Fulani herdsmen attacks are also rooted in ethno-religious differences, where herdsmen and the host communities often belong to different ethnic and religious groups, exacerbating conflicts and leading to broader regional instability (Bello & Musa, 2023). Most herdsmen are Muslims. The Fulani herdsmen often embark on a mission to Islamize Benue Valley in the guise of pastoralists. They usually, unleash killing, and maiming of their victims with the intention of wiping out Christian communities in the Plateau and Benue environments. This is the case in Apa today as villagers are attacked on a daily basis.

6. Herdsmen Attacks and its Impacts on Religious activities in Apa

According to Aliyu (2023), “the impacts of herdsmen attacks on religious activities have become a worrisome concern in Nigeria, where violence always causes disruptions not only to physical safety but also to the spiritual and communal life of the affected populations.” Religious leaders and members are the ones majorly at risk of fear, attacks, injury, loss of property, and displacement, which, in turn, weakens their capacity to engage in regular worship, outreach, and pastoral care, visitation, community development, and free medical care among others. The effects of herdsmen attacks on religious worship as they affect members and religious leaders are numerous.

Among the major impacts of herdsmen attack is the psychological and emotional trauma it brings about on the religious communities. Facing herdsmen attacks frequently have resulted in the experience of trauma, affecting mental health and morale of the people of Apa. Religious members and leaders who survive such incidents most often develop anxiety and depression, impacting their ability to lead and

participate in faith-based activities (A. Edo, personal communication, 16th September, 2024).

Displacement and closure of worship centers occur due to the repeated threats and attacks. Many congregations have been forced to flee or abandon their churches. The interruption of religious activities is a major consequence of herdsmen attacks. Regular services, ceremonies, and gatherings are often suspended or canceled due to fears of violence. This disrupts the communal and spiritual life that is central to many religious communities (Ojo, A. K., & Bamidele, F. A., 2021). J. Oloche (personal communication, 11th September, 2024), agreed that, in the affected areas, all religious activities are always paralyzed, and churches and other worship places destroyed or totally abandoned.

This displacement weakens community ties and disrupts continuity in worship and church functions. The loss of church buildings due to herdsmen attacks has led to a decrease in active membership and service attendance in certain regions of Nigeria (Ogundele & Adamu, 2022). As it is to today, E. Glory & E. Amodu (personal communication, 16th September, 2024) said, “many villages in Apa Local Government, such as Ugbobi, Ochemukwu, Ijaha, and among others, have been deserted due to herdsmen attacks in the affected areas.”

Fulani herdsmen attacks have economic impacts on the religious groups in Apa Local Government. Economic hardships on religious institutions caused by herdsmen attacks, also impose financial strains on religious communities, as properties, equipment, and resources are often destroyed or stolen. When this happens the religious groups are often tasked with fund raising activities to rebuild and support displaced members. Churches in the affected areas always struggle to meet financial obligations, which impacts their ability to assist vulnerable members and engage in community outreach (Kalu, 2022). The impacts of herdsmen attacks have been grievous on the people of Benue and Apa in particular, as means of livelihood destroyed, farmlands and crops abandoned, houses and economic trees and livestock destroyed, and human beings displaced and exposed to hunger (G. Simon, personal communication, 13th September, 2024).

Another challenge is seen in the area of restricting outreaches and evangelism. Fear generated by Fulani herdsmen attacks has a chilling effect on religious outreach. Many church leaders now hesitate to conduct outdoor evangelism or visit remote congregations, as these regions are considered high-risk. Okeke & Musa (2023), noted that “this restriction has diminished the effectiveness of evangelical missions and community services. I. Agada & O. Ben (personal communication, 13th

September, 2024), expressed their dissatisfactions, “that almost every Christian activity was brought to a hot, prayer meeting, vigil, Bible study, and even Sunday service could no longer hold as people vacate their villages and run for their lives.”

These frequent attacks have continued to weaken the religious intuitions’ social influence. Okafor, & Ekwe, (2022), opined that the reduction in regular attendance and participation can weaken the influence of religious institutions, impacting their ability to promote social cohesion, provide community support, and participate in charitable activities.

7. The Position of the Church towards Resolving Herdsmen/Farmers Clashes

Okeke (2023), addressing the church’s position on resolving herdsmen attacks, noted that, “it is very essential to analyze the roles religious institutions play in conflict resolution, peace building, and fostering dialogue in affected communities. Recent literature offer insights on how churches, through both spiritual and practical approaches, can encourage peace and reconciliation. Here are some roles the church should play towards resolving herdsmen and host communities’ clashes:

The Church as a mediator in conflict resolution, should often act as neutral party in conflicts. Thus, bringing together communities through organized peace meetings and fostering dialogue. Churches can help mediate by providing a space where different groups can share grievances and work towards compromise. Okeke & Musa (2023), discussed the Catholic Church’s role in organizing interfaith dialogues between Christians and Muslims in conflict zones, which has helped reduce tensions.

The promotion of nonviolence and peace education advocacy is very key in the discussion under consideration. The church’s moral authority and commitment to peace encourage communities to reject violence as a solution. Many churches engage in peace education, particularly targeting young people, to foster a culture of nonviolence. Adamu & Nwosu (2022), examined how Methodist churches in Nigeria provided peace education programs that discouraged violence, thereby reducing retaliatory attacks in Apa.

Advocacy for Government and policy interventions is very important in resolving this menace of attacks on religious communities. On this, Musa & Oladele (2021), highlighted how the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) advocated for better security policies to protect affected communities. Churches also use their influence to advocate for policy changes that address the root causes of herdsmen conflicts, such

as resource allocation, land rights, and security. Religious leaders often pressure the government to enhance security and implement fair resource-sharing practices.

Encouraging support for displaced and affected persons will foster an end to the incessant attacks. In this regard, Eze (2023), discussed how the Anglican Church in Benue State provided ongoing support to families displaced by herdsmen attacks. Churches play significant role in offering relief services and supporting displaced individuals and families impacted by herdsmen attacks, often providing shelter, food, and spiritual support. Also in 2017, R. Ogwola (personal communication, 15th September, 2024), said the Methodist Church Nigeria, under the leadership of Chukwuemeka Kanu and Oliver Ali Aba, provided food and relief material to victims of herdsmen attacks at government house Makurdi. Even recently, the Methodist Archdiocese of Benue donated relief materials to support Apa and Agatu over herdsmen attacks.

Reconciliation and forgiveness are key catalysts towards ameliorating the challenges of herdsmen attacks in Apa. Johnson & Adekunle (2022), evaluated the importance of reconciliation programs by the Presbyterian Church in northern Nigeria, emphasizing forgiveness and reconciliation. Churches promote reconciliation through teaching forgiveness and supporting initiatives that allow conflicting parties to rebuild relationships. This spiritual encouragement can help communities heal from the trauma of violence.

In addition to the aforementioned, prayer is key to ending the recurrent herdsmen attacks because with God all things are possible. The book of 2 Chronicles 7:14. “If my people who are called by name humble and seek my face, repent, and turn away from their evil ways, I will hear and forgive and heal their land.” The church should embark on prayer and seek God’s intervention in the face of herdsmen attacks.

Information gathering and security alert will go a long way in nipping this menace in the bud. Leaders and members of the church should take information gathering seriously. Be attentive, vigilant, and watchful, and report strange movements or information to security personnel. Christian youths should be advised not to confront herdsmen without government security forces; due process should be followed to maintain law and order in the society. Herdsmen also should avoid the use of dangerous weapons and aggressive confrontation against host communities.

8. Conclusions

The activities of herdsmen attacks on religious institutions and places of worship in Apa Local

Government Area have become issues of great concern and worry. They occur on a daily basis, leading to wanton destruction of farm crops, pollution of stream waters, killing, maiming, destruction of properties, church buildings, raping, robbery, kidnapping, and displacement of villagers. The struggle over land and water and the attempt to Islamize Benue State, mostly populated by Christians, form the brain behind the Fulani herdsmen attacks. The impact of these attacks has led to the burning and closure of many churches, in Apa, Benue State, and many parts of Nigeria, leading to paralyzing religious activities. The Church should continue to mediate and preach tolerance among herdsmen, communities, and adherents of different religions. The culture of peace, love, and tolerance for peaceful coexistence in our society should be appropriated by all. And those herdsmen who carry dangerous weapons should be arrested to face the wrath of law of the land.

9. Recommendations

That security measures from within the state, and local communities be put in place in order to checkmate the activities of Fulani herdsmen attacks on places of worship such as churches and mosques. Police and soldiers should always guard religious institutions.

Fulani herdsmen carrying firearms and dangerous weapons should be arrested and prosecuted by the law enforcement agents. The religious institutions should continue to preach peace, tolerance, and love to herdsmen, farmers, hosting communities, and youths to show violence. Finally, the Church should always take part in the mediation processes and progress to strive in the society like Apa, Benue, and Nigeria at large.

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