

CONTESTING HISTORICAL NARRATIVES: THE LEGACY OF HERDERS–FARMERS CONFLICTS IN SELECTED COMMUNITIES OF ADAMAWA STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

Few conflicts in Nigeria have proved as resistant to resolution as the recurring clashes between Herders and farmers. Commentary on the crisis usually settles on land scarcity, climate stress, and the collapse of traditional grazing corridors, and these pressures are real. But something less visible sits underneath them, and arguably does more damage: the slow distortion of historical memory within and between the two communities. That distortion is what this study set out to examine - its shape, its causes, and what it costs the people living with it - in a set of conflict-affected localities across Adamawa State. The research was qualitative, built around a phenomenological design that put participants' own remembered experience of the conflict at the centre of the inquiry. Data came from in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with 240 men and women drawn from herders and farming communities in four local government areas, along with traditional rulers, religious leaders, teachers, civil society workers, and local historians. Documentary sources gave a further layer of evidence against which the oral material could be checked. What came out of the analysis was a picture of two historical narratives that no longer fit together. Each community remembers itself as the wronged party, and each has let the more cooperative parts of the shared history fade from view. This is not simply what trauma does to memory on its own; politicians, preachers, journalists, and teachers all have a hand in keeping the adversarial version of events alive, because it serves them to do so. The study argues that rebuilding some shared historical ground is not an optional extra but something closer to a precondition for any peace that actually holds, and it ends with a set of specific proposals for how that work could start.

Keywords: herders, farmers, historical distortion, collective memory, intergroup conflict, oral tradition.

1. Introduction

There is something particularly hard to fix about a conflict that outlives the generation that started it. After two or three cycles of retaliatory violence, the original dispute is often no longer recoverable in any clean sense - what is left behind is a set of community memories, shaped consciously and unconsciously by people and institutions, into stories that justify carrying the hostility forward. That, broadly, is what has happened between Herders and crop-farming communities across northern Nigeria, and it is happening with particular intensity in Adamawa State.

The relationship between the two communities goes back a long way and is more tangled than either side's current account tends to admit. For much of the pre-colonial and early colonial period, herders and farming communities across the West African savannah worked out an arrangement that served both sides, unevenly but genuinely: herders moved their animals

through farmland along known seasonal routes, farmers let their fields be grazed after harvest and got manure for their trouble, and local chiefs and councils of elders had the authority to step in when animals strayed into standing crops or herders blocked access to water (Blench, 2003; Shetima & Usman, 2008). It was never friction-free, but it had built-in ways of repairing itself when things went wrong.

From around the mid-twentieth century onward, those repair mechanisms started to break down. Population growth put new pressure on available land. Colonial and post-colonial governments formalised land ownership in ways that worked against mobile herders and disrupted grazing corridors that had operated for generations. Desertification in the Sahel pushed Fulbe communities further south, into areas where they had no existing relationships with local farmers to fall back on. And the spread of firearms turned disputes that might once have stayed manageable into confrontations that left dozens dead on both sides. By the time Adamawa State became a regular feature in national conflict reporting through the 1990s and 2000s, the structural groundwork for sustained violence was already in place (Benjaminsen & Ba, 2009).

What concerns this study, though, is a side of the crisis that gets much less attention: what the conflict has done to history itself. In communities that have lived through repeated violence, the oral traditions that once carried a fuller, more nuanced account of intergroup relations have been disrupted or lost outright. Other kinds of stories have moved into that gap - stories shaped more by grief, fear, and political calculation than by any accurate memory of what actually happened. These are now the main way young people in affected communities learn who the other side is and what they are supposed to have done. The stories get preached in mosques and churches, folded quietly into school textbooks, aired on local radio, and forwarded through WhatsApp faster than anyone could reasonably fact-check them.

This study asks how historical narratives about herder-farmer relations are built and contested in Adamawa State, what is driving their distortion, which institutions carry and amplify that distortion, and what it has cost the communities involved. It also asks, on a more hopeful note, whether there is anything left to work with in trying to recover some common historical ground. What follows lays out the theoretical and methodological choices behind the study, presents what the fieldwork found, and closes with proposals the authors think deserve serious attention from anyone in a position to act on them.

2. Statement of the Problem

Faced with the scale of violence attached to the Herders-farmer conflict in northern Nigeria, it is tempting to focus entirely on the most visible drivers — shrinking grazing land, weak government mediation, easy access to weapons, courts that do not deliver. These are real problems and addressing them matters. But none of them, on their own, explains why peace agreements in affected communities tend to fall apart so quickly, or why young men with no direct memory of the original grievances are still willing to kill and die over them.

Communities in Adamawa State no longer share an understanding of how they came to occupy the same land, or on what terms they once got along. What they hold instead are rival versions of the past in which each side casts itself mainly as victim and the other mainly as aggressor - and in which the messier, truer picture of mutual dependence and occasional

cooperation has mostly dropped out. These are not fixed stories; they get refreshed constantly by new incidents read through old assumptions, by politicians who find historical grievance useful for mobilising support, and by religious leaders who frame what might otherwise be a resource dispute in the language of existential threat (Okoli & Atelhe, 2014; Tonah, 2006).

Schools have done little to push back against this. History and social studies curricula in the affected states were not built with the complexity of pastoralist-farmer relations in mind, and a lot of the textbooks still in circulation reproduce the same broad ethnic categories that do not hold up well against a careful reading of regional history. Teachers, many of whom grew up in the communities they now teach in, often bring their own version of the conflict narrative into the classroom without quite realising it. Religious institutions, for their part, have too often amplified historical grievance rather than moderated it, framing the conflict in terms that make any compromise feel like a betrayal of faith.

What is missing from most of the existing analysis is a systematic account of how all this actually works - how historical narratives in these communities get built and distorted, by whom, through which channels, and with what consequences for the chances of lasting peace. This study tries to provide that account for Adamawa State. It is not trying to adjudicate between competing historical claims. The concern is with the social life of those claims and with finding the points where a more accurate and reconciliatory historical understanding might have a chance to take root.

3. Research Questions

The study was built around three questions:

1. What are the dominant historical narratives held by Herders and farmer communities in conflict-affected localities of Adamawa State?
2. Which factors bear most responsibility for the distortion of historical memory in these communities?
3. What kinds of intervention offer the most realistic prospect of genuine reconciliation?

4. Research Objectives

The main objective of this study was to examine how contesting historical narratives have fed and prolonged the herder - farmer conflict in Adamawa State. Three specific objectives guided the work:

1. To explore the content and character of the historical narratives that Herders and farmers in Adamawa State hold about their shared past and their relations with one another.
2. To identify the principal factors responsible for the distortion of those historical narratives in the context of ongoing conflict.
3. To propose practical strategies for fostering historically grounded narratives capable of supporting social cohesion and lasting peace.

5. Theoretical Framework

This study draws on Tajfel and Turner's (1979) social identity theory. Their starting observation is almost too familiar to notice: people define themselves partly through the groups they belong to, and they have a real psychological stake in seeing those groups in a good light. In peaceful, secure conditions, that tendency is easy enough to manage. In conflict, it turns dangerous. Group identities harden, stories about the other side grow harsher,

ambiguous events get read in the worst possible light, and historical memory gradually reshapes itself to confirm what the group already believes about itself and its adversaries (Turner et al., 1987).

You can see this dynamic clearly in how both communities in Adamawa State talk about their history. Herders describe themselves as people whose ancestral right to seasonal migration has been steadily taken away - first by the colonial administration and more recently by farming communities encroaching on routes that had been recognised for generations. Farming communities describe themselves as tolerant hosts to transient herders who have been repaid with violence and land seizure. Both accounts contain real elements of truth. Both also leave out or reframe, whatever would complicate the picture. That is not necessarily conscious dishonesty - it is simply what social identity dynamics tend to produce once a group is under pressure.

6. Research Design

The inquiry was qualitative in design. The design drew on documentary analysis and, where community access allowed, observation of public events and community meetings. These were not add-ons. Oral accounts of history take much of their meaning from the settings in which they get told and retold, and documentary sources are part of the same institutional ecology that produces and reproduces those accounts. Reading oral testimony against documentary evidence, and both against what could be observed directly in the field, was a deliberate way of building a fuller and more reliable picture than any one source could offer on its own.

7. Population and Sample

7.1 Target Population

The population was defined fairly broadly: anyone in a conflict-affected community in Adamawa State who held meaningful knowledge of, or had been significantly shaped by, the historical narratives around Herders-farmer relations. They included; herder community members across different generations; members of the major farming communities in the four study localities; traditional rulers and district heads who hold local historical knowledge in trust; village and clan elders; local historians and griots; religious leaders from both Muslim and Christian traditions; schoolteachers and curriculum officers from primary and secondary schools; civil society workers involved in peace building; and representatives of local media.

7.2 Sampling and Sample Size

Purposive sampling, supplemented by stratification across ethnic identity, gender, age cohort, institutional affiliation, and locality, was used to build a sample that was both knowledgeable and internally varied. A total of 240 participants took part across four local government areas - Mubi North, Song, Numan, and Toundou - with roughly 60 participants in each. Within every LGA, 20 people took part in individual in-depth interviews and 40 more took part across four focus group discussions of ten people each, giving 80 interview participants and 160 focus group participants overall, across 16 focus groups in total.

8. Data Collection

Eighty semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants across the four localities, using an interview guide developed iteratively as the fieldwork progressed.

The sixteen focus groups served a different purpose from the individual interviews. They were designed to draw out the collective side of historical memory. To keep discussion frank, groups were composed along community lines, with herder participants meeting separately from farming community participants.

The documentary review complemented the oral data and offered an independent line of evidence on how institutions represent the history of herders-farmer relations. History and civic education textbooks used in primary and secondary schools across the four localities were examined, along with curriculum frameworks issued by the Adamawa State Ministry of Education and other available related documents.

9. Data Analysis

Thematic content analysis was the main analytical approach. Interview and focus group transcripts, field notes, and documentary sources were managed in NVivo, which made it possible to organise and retrieve a large body of text systematically. The analysis itself was not a mechanical run through fixed steps but a back-and-forth movement between the data and the interpretation taking shape, with the research team returning repeatedly to the full body of material as themes were identified, tested, and revised.

10. Thematic Literature Review

The section explores the intersection around the three objectives of the study. The aim is not to cover everything that has been written on the subject, but to engage critically with the scholarship most directly relevant to each question the study set out to answer.

10.1 The Historical Narratives Surrounding Herder–Farmer Relations

Any serious account of Herders-farmer relations in Nigeria has to start with the pre-colonial period, however imperfectly that period can now be reconstructed. Blench (2003) offers one of the more careful reconstructions available of pastoralist-farmer dynamics across the West African savannah, tracing the shift from a broadly complementary arrangement toward a more competitive and contested pattern of land use that picked up speed under colonial land tenure regimes. Formalising land as a fixed, registerable asset, as Blench argues, hit pastoral interests especially hard: herders needed access to large territories and could not show the kind of continuous occupation that colonial law recognised, so their customary rights eroded steadily with nothing put in their place.

Shetima and Usman (2008) trace a similar deterioration specifically within northern Nigeria, documenting the shift from seasonal cooperation to recurring conflict over the second half of the twentieth century. Their work draws attention to something that more recent, crisis-focused scholarship tends to overlook — how central memory and oral tradition were to keeping cooperative norms alive during periods of relative stability.

The pre-colonial history of Adamawa State adds another layer. The eastward expansion of the Sokoto Caliphate under Modibbo Adama in the early nineteenth century set up a Fulbe-led emirate system across what is now Adamawa State, putting Fulbe ruling classes in political

authority over diverse, and sometimes resentful, farming peoples. These old power imbalances have not simply dissolved with time; they continue to shape present-day identity claims and grievances in ways that rarely make it into official or popular accounts of the conflict. Adamu and Ben (2019) are among the few scholars who have looked closely at this dimension of Adamawa's history, and their work is a useful corrective to accounts that treat the conflict as a purely modern, environmentally driven problem.

Adebayo's (2021) comparative study of pastoralism and conflict across Nigeria, Mali, and Burkina Faso documents a pattern that bears directly on Adamawa: the way sustained conflict and marginalisation reshape how communities tell their own history. Fulbe communities in all three countries, Adebayo finds, have increasingly come to frame their history through a lens of dispossession and existential threat — a framing rooted in real and serious present-day experience, but one that also colours how earlier, more ambiguous relations get interpreted. This retrospective darkening of the historical record is one of the key mechanisms of distortion this study traces at community level in Adamawa State.

10.2 The Causes of Historical Distortion

Assmann (1995) laid the theoretical groundwork for understanding why and how historical memory distorts under conflict conditions, distinguishing between the communicative memory carried directly by living people and the more formalised cultural memory that takes over once that living transmission breaks down. The practical implication is that when violence and displacement destroy the social conditions that sustain communicative memory, communities end up depending more on cultural memory - and cultural memory is far more open to manipulation by institutional actors. Assmann's framework points, in other words, to the institutional side of distortion: it is not just that people forget, but that what gets remembered is shaped by whoever controls the mechanisms of cultural reproduction.

Ibrahim (2015) develops this idea in the Nigerian context, documenting how political elites across the north have made systematic use of the vacuum left behind as traditional historical custodianship collapsed. The deaths of knowledgeable elders in the conflict, the out-migration of educated community members, and the weakening of traditional authority structures have all opened space for politically convenient narratives to push out more accurate ones — particularly around election cycles, when ethnic mobilisation pays off most.

Benjaminsen and Ba (2009) add the material dimension to this picture. Their fieldwork in the inner Niger delta of Mali shows plainly that communities competing over resources have strong reasons to build historical narratives that back up their territorial claims. The ancestral use rights that both herders and farmers invoke in these disputes tend to be partial, selectively remembered, and in some cases invented after the fact. That does not make them simply dishonest, but it does mean material interest and narrative construction reinforce each other in ways that make a plain appeal to historical accuracy politically and psychologically costly for whoever makes it.

10.3 Strategies for Recovering Historically Grounded Narratives

The scholarship on narrative transformation in post-conflict societies gives some cautious grounds for hope. Gibson's (2004) analysis of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission finds that public acknowledgement of historical wrongs — made by the groups

responsible, in front of an audience that includes victims — measurably improves intergroup trust and reduces the chances of conflict recurring. The mechanism, Gibson is careful to note, is not resolving every factual dispute about the past; it is creating institutional space where multiple accounts can be heard, compared, and partly integrated. Communities do not need to agree on every detail of what happened. They need some recognised process through which they know they have actually been heard.

Pingel's (2008) UNESCO review of history textbook reform in post-conflict societies identifies a set of principles that has worked across quite different national contexts: including multiple community perspectives on contested events, being explicit about the partial and constructed nature of historical narrative, weaving local and oral history in alongside the national account, and training teachers in critical history pedagogy. These principles have been applied in post-genocide Rwanda, post-war Bosnia, and post-Troubles Northern Ireland, and the evidence from those settings suggests they help reduce narrative polarisation among students over time.

Community-based dialogue processes have also produced encouraging results in West African settings. Tonah (2006) documents facilitated inter-community historical dialogues in Ghana's Volta basin that measurably softened adversarial narrative positions and opened up space for negotiated resource-sharing. Adamu and Ben (2019) report similar findings elsewhere in Nigeria. Digital and media-based interventions remain comparatively under-researched, though community radio fact-checking and digital literacy programmes are increasingly discussed as a plausible complement to these approaches, particularly in communities where social media has become the main channel through which historical narratives now spread.

11. Summary of key Findings from the thematic literature review

This section provides a critical discussion of the themes and empirical evidence drawn from the literature review. The purpose of this discussion is to interpret what the existing research reveals about the daily realities of herder-farmer conflict. This is not meant as a complete account of everything the study found, but a fair representation of the patterns that showed up most consistently across the four localities.

11.1 Communities Tell Incompatible Histories

The most basic finding of the study is also the most dispiriting one: herders and crop farming communities in the study localities hold accounts of their shared history that are not just different but structurally incompatible. Each account casts its own community as the original, legitimate occupant of the contested land and the other as the intruder. Each puts responsibility for violence almost entirely on the other side. Each plays down or leaves out the historical evidence of mutual dependence and cooperation that both communities can, under the right conditions, still recall.

What stood out in particular was how far these accounts had already drifted apart within living memory, and in which direction. Elder respondents from both communities gave noticeably more complicated accounts of the past than younger respondents did, acknowledging historical interdependence, reciprocal obligation, and real periods of cooperation alongside the grievances. Among younger respondents, that nuance had mostly

disappeared — in their telling, the past had simply always been adversarial. This is the Assmannian dynamic playing out in real time: communicative memory, carried by elders, giving way to a more schematic and adversarial cultural memory that institutions now reproduce on their own.

11.2 The Forces Behind the Distortion

Several factors came up across the data as contributors to the distortion of historical memory, and none of them operate in isolation. The physical disruption caused by conflict has done the most immediate damage: elders who were killed or permanently displaced cannot pass on what they knew, and community records and local archives have been destroyed in the violence or simply abandoned. This is not manipulation. It is loss, and it leaves a knowledge vacuum that other forces then move to fill.

Political manipulation was the factor respondents themselves raised most consistently, across both communities and all four localities. Local and regional political figures were named repeatedly as key actors in commissioning, amplifying, and spreading historical accounts that serve electoral and paramilitary ends. Several respondents described specific incidents where they had personally witnessed a political figure misrepresent historical events, and the intensity with which this came up across interviews gave it particular weight as a finding.

Economic competition supplied the structural backdrop that made distortion rational in the first place. Where a community's material interests are seen to depend on establishing historical priority over land, the incentive to build and hold onto a favourable historical account is obvious. Accurate history, which would mean acknowledging some legitimacy in the other side's claims, becomes materially threatening in that context.

The failures of the formal education system have done their damage more slowly, over a longer stretch of time, leaving generations of young people without the critical historical literacy to weigh competing accounts of the conflict or recognise the political interests bound up in the stories they have been told.

11.3 What People Actually Want

The study did not find communities that were simply locked into adversarialism. Alongside the distorted and polarised accounts, there was a real and fairly widespread appetite for something different. Elders in both communities expressed frustration that their more nuanced historical knowledge was not being sought out or recorded by anyone, and several described wanting some kind of institutional protection for that knowledge before it disappears. Younger respondents, while more likely to hold a simplified view of the history, were not uniformly against the idea of inter-community historical dialogue — their resistance tended to be about what they imagined such dialogue would look like in practice, not about the idea itself.

Teachers were clear that they wanted curriculum materials that would let them address local conflict history honestly and constructively. Their hesitation was practical rather than principled: they lacked the materials, the training, and the administrative backing to do that work under current conditions. The appetite was there. What was missing was institutional support.

13. Recommendations

The following recommendations are put forward:

Government and policymakers should establish a state-level Historical Memory and Reconciliation Commission in Adamawa State, with a specific mandate to document, preserve, and disseminate accurate historical accounts of Herders-farmer relations.

Educational institutions should design a supplementary local history curriculum for primary and secondary schools in Adamawa State, drawing explicitly on locally gathered oral history alongside current scholarship on Herders-farmer relations.

Religious institutions should develop and offer structured inter-faith historical dialogue programmes to religious leaders from both Muslim and Christian communities in conflict-affected localities. The aim is not to produce agreement on contested historical claims but to build relationships across the religious divide.

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