

THE ORIGIN, EFFECTS AND RESPONSE OF THE CHRISTIAN ASSOCIATION OF NIGERIA TO THE MENACE OF THE HERDSMEN PHENOMENON

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ABSTRACT

The activities of herdsmen have turned into serious challenges in Nigeria, particularly in the North Central part of the country. This has created an atmosphere of worry as hardly a day would end without reports of brutal attacks on people and communities. At the outset, it was thought to be a misunderstanding between farmers and herdsmen, but recent studies point to another dimension, with attacks being carried out against communities and churches. These attacks, without doubt, are having adverse effects on security networks and on the religious activities of people, including hindrance of national development. This study aims at examining the origin, impacts of Fulani herdsmen and the response of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) to the menace of herdsmen activities. The objectives of the study are to highlight the activities of the herdsmen and suggest ways through which the menace could be resolved to enhance national development and human wellbeing. The methods adopted in this study include survey, historical and empirical analyses. The findings of the study show that some of the activities of the herdsmen are dangerous, leading to loss of lives and properties. Riding on these dangerous activities, farmlands and places of worship have been affected. In the face of this, CAN leadership has not been able to speak collectively. Only few voices have been heard both at national and international levels. The study concludes that herdsmen battle with the issue of identity and misplaced human values. Ways through which the challenges could be resolved are suggested for national peace and development.

KEY WORDS:

Christian Association of Nigeria, Herdsmen, Menace, Response

INTRODUCTION

The present study explores the response of Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) leadership to the challenges of herdsmen in North Central Nigeria. The North Central states in Nigeria comprise of Kwara, Niger, Kogi, Nasarawa, Benue and Plateau.

Nigeria, within the last three decades, has been facing various challenges ranging from religious, economic and security issues. These challenges impact on the socio-economic growth of Nigeria. In the last fifteen years, another dimension of these challenges emerged. It was rooted in insecurity and was commonly known as “Boko Haram” (Olorunnimbe and Nwosu 2020: 124). The group perpetrated various atrocities such as killing, kidnapping, and abduction of school children.

The insecurity took another angle as herdsmen started attacking indigenes of certain parts of Nigeria, namely Benue, Plateau, Taraba and other parts of North Central Nigeria. On January 1st, 2018, over seventy people were killed in Benue by these herdsmen. Thereafter, some clergy were killed while going for morning worship and various villages were sacked in Benue, Plateau, Taraba and Kogi.

A few months down, the herdsmen insecurity spread to Kaduna and some states in the Southern parts of Nigeria like Delta, Ogun, Ekiti and Oyo State. It became worrisome as people could not go to the farm or travel from one area to another freely. It was reported that the herdsmen intend to forcefully deprive the natives of their legitimate lands. The menace of the herdsmen has continued without the government combating or arresting the situation.

The negative impacts of these killer herdsmen have received media attention. Utterances and responses of the political groups escalated the crisis. The *Myetti Allah* Cattle Breeders Association of Nigeria (MACBAN) claims to be the voice of these herdsmen and their utterances at times, show that they have links at the corridors of power (Edieya 2019: 74).

As the case maybe in Benue and Jos, the church was worst hit by the activities of the killer herdsmen in the sense that all people killed on January 1st, 2018, were Christians celebrating Christmas and New Year (Olorunnimbe and Nwosu 2020: 124).

Various bodies came out to condemn the incessant killings and the inactions of the governments to bring the culprits to book. Christians Association of Nigeria (CAN) was among the bodies that condemned the dastard acts. But the issue remains on how CAN responded to the phenomenon beyond mere condemnation. Was the response of CAN effective? Why has the response not been taken seriously by the government and the killers?

To this end, this study, sponsored through the 2024 senate research grant, university of Ilorin, Nigeria, examines the response of CAN to the menace of herdsmen including the inability of the body to speak with a collective voice against the wicked acts and the government. The study proceeds in the following subheadings: theoretical framework, survey methodology, findings and discussions and then, conclusion.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The ultimate intention of God for the entire humanity is wellbeing. This is expressed in practical goals like a relationship with God so that God could teach humans how to live fully human lives with Him, with each other regardless of tribe or religious affiliation and live in community. (MacCammon, 2008: 23). Yet, the sacred book of some religion introduces questions

about conflict, punishment and mercy in the divine-human relationship and relationship among people. In the light of the above, the mythical story of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4:1-16 accounts for the ancient and ongoing tension between farmers and herdsman particularly in Nigeria. It points to rivalry and how it spreads and intensifies over time (MacCammon, 2008: 42). It also marks a significant shift in the understanding of evil, conflict and human relations and how to keep them in check, especially through proper understanding and dialogue. The mythical narrative of Cain and Abel begins on a bright note thus, “now the man knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, “I have produced a man with the help of the Lord.” Next she bore the brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep and Cain a tiller of the ground. In the course of time, Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruits of the ground, and Abel for his part brought of the firstlings of his flock, their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So, Cain was very angry and his countenance fell” (Genesis 4:1-5).

Taking God’s command to “be fruitful and multiply” to heart, Adam and Eve moved on in life. In giving birth to Cain, Eve willingly acknowledged her dependence on God for fertility. This shows a sign of humility which was soon rewarded with the second child, Abel. The central and archetypal human conflict began when God reacted negatively to Cain and his offering. But why is God displeased? Could it be that Cain was tired of sibling rivalry, which is common in sacred narrative? Perhaps he simply did what was necessary to gain favour with God. Whatever the case, this became the beginning of the conflict in human relations and motive of choices.

God reassured Cain that if he does well and works out of pure motives as Abel apparently did, then his offering will be accepted. But if he works only for self-serving ends and does not get what he feels he deserves, then jealousy and anger will tempt him to take matters into his own

hands. From the foregoing, it becomes clear that the challenges of human relations will always be. Humans can master it if they seek dialogue and understanding of what God commands. The acceptance of human offerings and cordial relations are determined now by the quality of their motives.

While sociologists of religion have been interested in religious identity and in the case of Nigeria, tribal and religious identity, there has been less attention and focus on religious and tribal identities among those who cross religious borders as in the case of herdsmen. Much of the literatures available suggest that individuals abandon former religious identities including ethno-religious ones when they join or come to a new community or are in a new environment (Shekat and Wilson, 1995: 993 – 1026). According to Ammerman (2003), religious identities centers on and relate to “religious” actors, ideas, institutions, and experiences that play a role in the story of who we are and who I am (p. 216). It arises from the interplay of structures and frameworks. Ammerman (2003) focuses on the influence of religious identities in interaction and narrative as well as the ways in which they are embodied. Cadge and Davidman (2006), on their own part, opined that religious identities are multilayered. In their study of Buddhist religious identities, they demonstrate how some religious identities are seamlessly achieved and chosen. While research on the Jewish case challenges this assumption, the issue of herdsmen in Nigeria throws up further insights. Ethnographic literature and cross-cultural studies seem generally ignored. Thus, this study rides on mythical narrative of Cain and Abel, and on ethno-religious identity illuminating with religious mobility.. It extends insights from the context of CAN leadership by examining its various responses to the menace in North central states of Nigeria.

SURVEY METHODOLOGY (FIELDWORK SUMMARY)

The fieldwork for this study was based on survey method. The method was used to collect data from the respondents in the field. This happened in two periods, between July to September, 2024 and November, 2024 to February, 2025. The methods used to collect primary data were mainly group focused interviews and participatory observation.

A total of fifty five informants were interviewed. The respondents were mostly religious specialists. They were chosen because the focus of the study is to get the response of CAN leadership, to the challenges of herdsmen. They were conversant with the menace of herdsmen in their various localities. The information provided by some CAN leaders was used to ascertain and confirm whether the North Central states possess common experiences and challenges of the menace.

The instrument used to collect primary data was oral interviews and on sight visits. The majority of respondents were interviewed singly but whenever possible, focused group discussion was used. There were nine such groups of two to six people making a total of twenty six CAN leaders in selected areas. The approach was appropriate because it enabled the researchers to probe where respondents' answers were not clear.

To minimize problems in the field, several precautions were taken. Which included the use of research assistants. Twenty research assistants were engaged from the areas of study where they are well known to the respondents. Visits in advance to the key CAN leaders in selected areas were made. We also attended local meetings organized by CAN such meetings were described as CAN neighbourhood committee. There we took chance to explain to the leaders the research mission.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

By definition, CAN is an association of Christian churches in Nigeria with distinct identities, belief in the Trinity, and recognizable church structures. The association resulted from

the meeting of a group of church leaders of many denominations. The meeting was held at the National Catholic Secretariat, Lagos on the twenty seventh, August, 1976. Events and situations in Nigeria between 1975 and 1976 caused much worries for Christians. This made them push efforts by holding various meetings. It was during such meetings that the name to be given to the gathering was suggested. Jatau, in his interview with Enwerem (1978) explained.

Those who went from the north to represent the Northern states had an association which was formerly named the Christian Association of the North. The Northern delegates said if it is going to embrace the whole country, why not make it “Nigeria”. So we all agreed. It was accepted and that gave birth to the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN).

Present at the meeting were thirty-three church leaders from thirteen denominations. These include Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Baptists, Methodists, The African Church, Presbyterians, The Salvation Army, The Lutheran Church of Christ in Nigeria (LCCN), The Apostolic Church, United African Methodist (UAMC), The Evangelical Church of West Africa (ECWA), The Church of Christ in Nigeria (LCIN) and the TEKAN Churches (Olorunnimbe and Nwosu, 2020: 126). At these meetings, the church leaders thought it wise to be calling one another together. They decided to retire to the convenient sport at the Catholic Secretariat, Lagos and there they formed CAN.

There was a challenge of Church unity in Nigeria then and up till now. The challenge spurred the church leaders to action and thus broke the walls of pride and self-centeredness. The Holy Spirit used this to stir the zeal of oneness and unity in the heart (Olorunnimbe and Nwosu, 2020: 126). Williams puts it thus:

The Holy Spirit had another plan.... The Church leaders were destined to be founders of a very important Association which by the grace of god will ultimately bring together into one fold all those who claim the fatherhood of God through Jesus Christ... And so, what many years appeared – the coming together of the Roman Catholics and impossibility, different shades of Protestants –

became under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, a simple, spontaneous and effortless achievement (Enwerem 1978: 9).

The church leaders accepted the formation of CAN as the work of the Holy Spirit. The birth of CAN was simple, spontaneous and effortless achievement. According to Enwerem (1979), by the end of 1978 branches of CAN had spread in ten of the then nineteen states of the Federation. And since then, it has been spreading across the country with Zonal, local government and individual churches.

The central aim and objective of CAN is to promote understanding, peace and unity among the various people and strata of the society in Nigeria through the propagation of the gospel (Olorunnimbe and Nwosu, 2020: 128). To what extent is this objective reflected in the herdsmen phenomenon in the North Central parts of Nigeria? This is the focus of the next discussion.

The history of herdsmen in Nigeria dates back to the 13th and 14th Centuries. That was the period Fulanis started migrating into the northern parts of Nigeria known as Hausa Empire. The migration was from Senegal-Gambia region. Now they are spreading into about 20 states which cut across the West Africa and the Sahel as well as Western Sudan and Central African Republic (Tanko, 1991:105). After the Uthman Dan Fodio jihad, the Fulani integrated within the Hausa population or Ethnic group of Northern Nigeria. During the dry season when tsetse fly population had reduced, Fulani herdsmen would move their cattle to the middle belt zone and they would return to the north at the outset of the rainy season. This confirms Faulkner (2017) assertion that members of such groups (as Fulani herdsmen) are linked not just by shared religious beliefs, practices and affiliation but also by shared family ties, neighborhood, language, history tradition, and culture. (p. 449). These enhanced social ties are seen to strengthen group members' commitment to one another and affect group members' religious mobility, especially for Fulanis whom ethnicity and religion are rightly linked.

Basically, the Fulanis can be found in Mali, the Gambia, Sierra Leone, Central African Republic (CAR), Togo, Nigeria, Ghana and beyond (Olorunnimber and Nwosu, 2020: 128). In an interview with a prominent CAN Leader, Ajewole notes;

The Fulani herdsmen mostly move with their cattle from one place to another in search of grazing land especially in the dry season. When the Fulani light-skin herders are migrating, they are often accompanied by their dark-skinned sedentary kinsmen who are better educated and more dynamic in politics and finances, versed as Muslim than the farmer.

The Fulanis are the major providers of milk and beef in Nigeria. Their contribution to the dairy industry in Nigeria is impressive. About 90% of the cattle in Nigeria are owned by the Fulani (Anichie, 2020: 128). They are also responsible for the production of Hides and skin in Nigeria – with the fall of Sokoto caliphate, Colonization and the introduction of cattle taxes in Nigeria, the Fulani herdsmen dispersed into the southern part of the country and have since then become itinerant herders, settling anywhere but mostly in the forest places (Olorunnimber and Nwosu, 2020: 128-129).

In light of the above, there has been constant conflicts between herdsmen and farmers especially in the North Central Nigeria. The farmers accuse the herdsmen of destroying their farm lands. At the initial stages, the clashes were resolved peacefully as herdsmen at times, were asked to pay restitution for damages, over time, as reported by an eye-witness, “the Fulanis justified their destructive actions by claiming that the farmers were denying them grazing land when there was no other option. This led to the killing of 63 people in 2013 which later increased to 1,229 people in 2014” (Ajibefun, 2018: 133-139).

Benue State in North Central Nigeria was the most affected by the menace of herdsmen phenomenon. In 2018 while celebrating the New Year festival, about 73 people were killed by

herdsmen in Guman and Logo Local Government Areas, of Benue. On this wicked act, Avwomakpa notes that,

you have to see the corpses of these people to understand the pain and agonies that families of the dead are going through. The corpses consisted of men, women and children. The people were massacred in their homes by heartless people and their properties set ablaze on the first day of the New Year. Imagine those lifeless bodies who entered into the New Year with hope and aspirations being killed mercilessly like that.

The eye-witness further narrated his experience at the burial ceremony organized by Benue

State government for the victims of the massacre. It made one to wonder how harmless herdsmen living among people suddenly became ruthless and harmful. In this regard, Modupe recalled the Fulani herdsmen known in their childhood,

The Fulanis that we grew up to know, were the cattle-rearers who went about with sickles and rods, leading their cattle even selling cheese and milk. In villages, one wonders who are these ones going about with sophisticated weapons.

This was the mutual concern of the majority while considering the gravity of destruction done by the herdsmen to their host community. All of the respondents discuss and note that herdsmen portray identity attachment that are largely ingrained and habitual, persisting despite religious and geographical exit or relocation. Despite the herdsmen's movements they remain attached to their identities. According to Faulkner (2017), 'despite their exits, these individuals (herdsmen) remain attached to their identities primarily because they are so deeply ingrained but also because they remake them in their new secular contexts' (p. 450-451).

The opinion of Faulkner (2017) is made concrete in the posture of the spokes group of herdsmen, the *Miyetti Allah* Cattle Breeders' Association of Nigeria (MACBAN). They demonstrate actions believed to be callous and often do not show empathy to the victims of Fulani herdsmen attack.

The attacks by the herdsmen were not limited to the farmers. It extended to religious communities and churches for instance, two priests and dozens of parishioners were killed in April,

2018 in Benue State. Other states witnessed attacks aswell. This included Kaduna, Plateau, Taraba and Kogi.

Comparison of Patterns of attack and CAN responses illuminates contextual factors. Altogether, findings suggest that ethno-religious identities are not mutually exclusive of other identities. This points to the complex nature of human identity. It is multilayered and constructed in particular contexts in interaction with existing notions about religious groups. The challenge is to achieve harmonious coexistence in North Central States and Nigeria generally. Hence, the discussion turns to the response of CAN to the menace of herdsmen phenomenon.

In the Punch Newspaper of June 8, 2020 was a headline: “Northern CAN Knocks Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders...” in the news report Christian Association of Nigeria in the 19 northern states and Abuja called on department of State Services (DSS) and the police to caution Miyetti Allah Association against its statement capable of causing crisis in the country. The call by CAN leadership in the Northern Nigeria was not taken seriously by the DSS. In this regard, Christian Leaders were warned to desist from making speculative statements capable of heating the polity. On another development, CAN President, Ayokunle came out to condemn the continuous killings of people, especially Christians by the herdsmen. In a workshop organized by CAN leadership in Kwara State on July 6, 2018, Ayokunle lamented that:

It seems as if the government of the day has decided to kill us for herdsmen. Last week, many of our people were killed by Fulani herdsmen, who wanted to lay claim to our land. The level of killings by these herdsmen has taken an alarming state. Most of our roads are no longer safe. We went to the president to complain about these killings, he seemed not to regard our calls. Most of our service chiefs failed to listen to us. Even when any arrest is made, they were immediately released, and the complainant became the accused. This can lead to anarchy.

At the end of the workshop, members of CAN expressed their dissatisfaction on the state of the nation under the then Buhari presidency. It was “a situation in which human life had no value but a cow has value than human beings” (Olorunnimbe and Nwosu, 2020:131).

Ayokunle also added that herdsmen under the name of Miyetti Allah have contributed to the killings of Christians in some northern communities. He, as a Leader in CAN called on the Federal Government to declare Miyetti Allah a terrorist group and order the arrest of its leaders for prosecution. In another development, Adewole, a former secretary of Ilorin City CAN, lamented the level of wickedness exhibited by herdsmen against Christians. He opines:

It seems Nigeria has been divided into two. Namely, Fulani herdsmen and other sections. One seems not to understand why their lawless acts are treated with kids' glove. If Christians should rise up to counter these people now, they will try to give it another colouration. What a nation? No equity and justice.

The foregoing highlights the CAN leadership stance of condemnation of the atrocities of the herdsmen. In North Central Nigeria, Echioda also criticized the continuous silence of the government over the activities of Myetti Allah which has been shielding the killer herdsmen. Opoola, on his own parts, challenged the reaction of most Christian leaders, noting that most of them cannot speak against the menace of herdsmen with a single voice.

In light of the above, it was made salient that Christians and their leaders do not have collective voice against the menace. Christian leaders spoke at various fora but there seemed not to be proper coordination for their voices and actions. It seems only few voices spoke against the activities of the herdsmen simply because there is disunity among the rank and files of Christian leadership in Nigeria (Olorunnimber and Nwosu, 2020: 132).

An instance was at a point when the Northern Christian Elders' Forum (NCEF) wanted a combat response to the activities of the herdsmen, but CAN National Leaders thought that dialogue could solve the problem. “Onaiyekan at an interreligious conference at the University of Ilorin,

raised a concern on the response of NCEF, which he cautioned could heat the already boiling nation the more” (Olorunnimber and Nwosu, 2020: 132). Put differently, CAN leadership approached the menace of herdsmen in Nigeria from opposite directions and different lanes. This approach was heightened by a divisive block which made up CAN national leadership. Added to this, is the fact that past leaders of CAN seem to have gone underground in the face of the excessive attacks of herdsmen on farmers, communities and religious houses.

The Catholic Block of CAN leadership in Nigeria and at the regional levels has been very clear, outright and blunt in condemning the violence and killings carried out by the herdsmen. In a Press Statement by the Catholic Diocesan Priests Association (NCDPA), Makurdi Diocese, the body made courageous statements on the persistence of killings, violence and displacements of innocent citizens in Benue State. The firm stance focused on justice and peace thus: “our people are being killed and driven from their ancestral homes on a daily basis, with their livelihood destroyed and eaten by cows. Homes and churches are burned down...since 2001.” This stance was taken in advocacy for justice and in defense of the suffering people of middle belt region of the North Central States as submitted by Terfa Beba, chairman, NCDPA, Makurdi Diocese, Nigeria.

CONCLUSION

Going by the logic of the discovery of this study, the menace of herdsmen is still on in Nigeria. Herdsmen and farmers are not supposed to be suspicious of each other. CAN Leadership faces the challenges of building bridges and covering gaps in the various blocks that form CAN. Again, the clear understanding of shared religious beliefs and ethno-religious groups in Nigeria and beyond is relevant for peace and integral development. Scholars contend that ethno-religious groups like herdsmen hold social and cultural ties which help them sustain connections to their

ethno-religious groups even when they do not hold the group's beliefs or engage in its practices. Identity attachments of herdsmen need continuous study since they are largely engrained and habitual. They are persistent despite religious exodus and migration. They are remade often in their new secular contexts. Indeed, the herdsmen menace blurs the boundaries between religion and ethnicity. But where cordial relations and areas of specialization are recognized, there may be mutual respect including undue or avoidable conflict such as being witnessed, almost everywhere in Nigeria between herdsmen, farmers and the host communities. Religion and ethnicity appear to be indispensable in human existence. It would seem that they have been coexisting, and they will continue to coexist. As human beings, we learn a lot from each other if there is humility and openness of mind, including making one's ethnicity and religion to have respect for other people's ways.

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