

The National Question and Transformation of Farmers – Herders Conflict: Evidence from Selected States in Nigeria

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Abstract

Nigeria remains a mosaic made up of various ethnic, religious and socio-economic groups. Thus, from the colonial era, the question of how to protect the interests of the various groups which make up the British patchwork called Nigeria has remained unresolved. This study intervenes by analyzing how the unresolved national question has transformed the complex social relations among various groups into violent conflict, one of which is the recurring armed conflict between crop farmers – herders in Nigeria. Specifically, the study interrogates the following research questions: has the inability to address the indigene-settler dichotomy engendered violent conflict between crop farmers and herders in Nigeria? Does the alienation of the federating units in national security management weaken capacity of the Nigerian state to contain the violent armed conflict between crop farmers – herders? The study adopted the conflict transformation theory, while content analysis was employed to analyze secondary data obtained via documentary approach. Based on evidence from three states purposively selected three different geo-political zones in Nigeria, the study argued that the transformation of farmers – herders conflict into violent armed conflict is linked to the indigene-settler dichotomy and the concomitant struggle over scarce resources by both groups. Again, the alienation of the federating units from national security management arising from the centralization of security apparatus creates interstices exploited by criminal elements to perpetuate violent armed conflict between farmers – herders in Nigeria. The study recommends that national security apparatus be decentralized to enable federating units respond quickly to imminent armed violence.

Keywords: National Question; Farmers; Herdsmen; Security; Conflict

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Introduction

Conflict is an endemic feature of human society and can escalate to armed violence if not productively managed. The violent conflict between crop farmers and pastoralists in West Africa is not new but remains an example of poorly managed conflict which has degenerated to armed violence. Farmers – herders conflict in West Africa is quite complex due to the integration of farming and herding systems at household, community and regional levels (Moritz, 2010). Although crop farmers and pastoralists in Nigeria have long standing relationship which oscillates from a symbiotic relationship to an adversarial one (Blench, 2003), contemporary relationship between the crop farmers and pastoralists is characterized by episodic but recurring and coordinated armed violence with adverse consequences for both crop and livestock production.

While structural analyses of the conflict between crop farmers and herders have revealed important insights into the structural factors responsible for the conflict (Adisa & Adekunle, 2010; Ajaero, Mozie, Okeke, Okpanachi, & Onyishi 2015), it is important to note that contemporary violent conflict between crop farmers and herders is complex with multi-faceted causes and consequences which cannot be taken *sui generis* in order to fully grasp the causes, dimensions, transformation and outcome of the conflict.

Evidently, Nigeria has gained notoriety as one of the theatres of violent conflict between crop farmers and pastoralists. Nigeria is a multi-ethnic (over three hundred ethnic groups) and multi-religious (Christianity, Islam & African Traditional Religion) state in which pastoralism is undertaken mainly by the Hausa-Fulanis of Northern Nigeria, this has implications for the nature of farmers – herders conflict in various parts the country. Most studies tend to focus on analyzing causes and consequences of the conflict between the two groups within the country without accounting for the nuances in the dimension and intensity of such conflict in different parts of the country (Adisa, 2012; Odo & Chilaka, 2012). For instance, the causes and intensity of farmers – herders conflict in the Northern part of Nigeria may differ from what is experienced in Western and Eastern parts of the country. For instance, with the exception of the Northern part of the country where some Hausa-Fulanis also engage in crop farming, in other parts of the country, ethnic/religious affiliation is coterminous with occupation (i.e. being a farmer or a pastoralist) in such a way that deepens the cleavages between the farmers and pastoralists, and complicates the

clash between the two groups. Hence, in the Eastern part of Nigeria, every pastoralist is considered a Hausa-Fulani and a Muslim while every crop farmer is considered Igbo and Christian. Therefore with regards to farmers- herders divide in the Eastern part of Nigeria, the substructure is also the superstructure (Fanon, 1963). This implies that one is crop farmer or a pastoralist because he is a Hausa-Fulani Muslim or Igbo Christian respectively and vice versa.

Government response to the conflict has not only remained episodic but inadequate. Nigeria practices a three tier federal system. The states and local governments lack the capacity to intervene whenever the violent clash between the farmers and herders crystallize. This is mainly because these two tiers of government do not have control over the police which is the security agency that has the capacity to intervene in such violent conflict. In most cases, the state governors lament that despite early warning signals received by the state on imminent violent attack, nothing was done to repel such attacks because the state had no powers to mobilize the police force or even the military which is a federal government agency controlled from their respective federal headquarters. In the light of the above, this intervenes by examining the link between national question and transformation of crop farmers – herdsman conflict in Nigeria. Specifically, the study interrogates the following research questions: has the inability to address the indigene-settler dichotomy engendered violent conflict between crop farmers and herdsman in Nigeria? Does the alienation of the federating units in national security management weaken capacity of the Nigerian state to contain the violent armed conflict between crop farmers – herdsman?

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the conflict transformation theory. Conflict transformation theory is traced to the seminal works of scholars like Galtung (1996); Lederach (1997); Miall (2004) and others. The theory contends that once formed, conflicts undergo a variety of transformational processes: articulation or disarticulation, conscientisation or de-conscientisation, complexification or simplification, polarization or depolarisation, escalation or de-escalation (Galtung, cited in Miall, 2004). The theory recognizes that the meaning of a conflict depends largely on factors like: the context out of which it arises; the relationship of parties towards one another as shaped by previous relationships; their memory of what has

happened in the past, and expectations of what may happen in the future. The context of the conflict within the society include: crucial background aspects are culture, governance arrangements, institutions, social roles, norms, the rules and codes in place in a society, and its path of development.

As noted by Lederach (1997) the relationship among parties is also crucial because poor relationships between groups are all too often a trigger for conflict, and remain a critical hindrance to peace building efforts after the violence is over. Further, Memories are part of each party's socially constructed understanding of the situation, shaped by culture and learning, and discourse and belief. The way groups remember and construct their past is often central to the mobilization for conflict, and thus a crucial matter to address in reconciliation and cultural traditions work (Miall, 2004).

Pruitt and Kim cited in Moritz (2010, p. 141) identified five general transformations that occur during conflict escalation:

- (1) shift from small to large (i.e., increasing investment in the conflict);
- (2) shift from light to heavy tactics (e.g., from persuasion to violence);
- (3) shift from specific to general (e.g., from crop damage to ethnic conflict);
- (4) shift from few to many (i.e., increase in the number of people involved in the conflict); and
- (5) shifts in goals from doing well to winning to hurting the other party (e.g., from solving the problem to killing all opponents)

As noted by Varyrynen:

The bulk of conflict theory regards the issues, actors and interests as given and on that basis makes efforts to find a solution to mitigate or eliminate contradictions between them. Yet the issues, actors and interests change over time as a consequence of the social, economic and political dynamics of societies (Vayrynen 1991, 4).

Azar (1990) also contributed to the conflict transformation theory by explicating how very structure of parties and relationships may be embedded in a pattern of conflictual relationships that extend beyond the particular site of conflict. He recognized that conflicts are transformed gradually, through a series of smaller or larger changes as well as specific steps by

means of which a variety of actors may play important roles. Azar demonstrated that conflict arises from the historical context, and from the denial of basic human needs of access, identity and security, as well as through the roles played by the state, international political and economic linkages and the military in politics. If the state and communal groups choose suppression and violent rebellion as their strategies, a conflict may then become destructive. Destructive conflict then results in a more dependent and exploitative pattern of development, a distorted pattern of governance and a militarised form of politics. This leads to the further denial of basic needs. The result is a protracted cycle of institutional deformation and destructive conflict (Miall, 2004).

Based on the foregoing, conflict transformation theory therefore suggests that peacebuilders should consider the following line of action in peacebuilding:

- actor transformations – internal changes in parties, or the appearance of new parties;
- issue transformations – altering the agenda of conflict issues;
- rule transformations – changes in the norms or rules governing a conflict;
- structural transformations – the entire structure of relationships and power distribution in the conflict is transformed (Miall, 2004).

In applying the theory to farmers-herders conflict, Moritz (2010) defined escalation as the transformation of a disagreement, argument, or dispute between a single herder and a single farmer, for example over crop damage, into widespread violence between communities that results in multiple fatalities. These patterns of transformation can be found in who or what groups of people are involved, in the actions they take, and in the stakes they hold or the goals they pursue during the conflict. Accordingly, in Nigeria, the escalation of widespread and recurring violent conflict between farmers and herdsmen can be linked to the indigene-settler dichotomy which feeds into the ‘natural’ conflict between sedentary agriculturalists and pastoralists. The failure of the state to properly manage the sensitive issue of indigene-settler dichotomy increases the disagreement over land between herdsmen and farmers such that in places like Benue, even when traditional rulers collect money from herdsmen to allow them graze, conflict still arise because the herdsmen as perceived as settlers without rights to land. Similarly, in Kaduna, the claim over who is a native of the land intensifies also the misunderstanding between the two groups. Based on the foregoing, this study examines the

conflict between crop farmers and herdsmen within the basic assumptions of the conflict transformation theory.

The Recurring National Question in Nigeria

The national question in Nigeria has undergone transformation in content and orientation from the colonial era to the post-independence era. During the colonial era, with the emergence of the nationalist struggle, the nationalists and leaders of various ethnic tinkered with the question bordering mainly on whether the various ethnic groups in Nigeria should be granted self-rule at the same time and what form of government would best protect the interests of these ethnic group should independence be granted to them as an indivisible entity. For instance, during the pre-independence constitutional conferences, leaders of the three major ethnic groups shared varying views on the best form of government that would guarantee peaceful coexistence of the various ethnic group in Nigeria. While Nnamdi Azikiwe preferred a federal system with small states and strong federal government that does not emphasize ethnic diversity, Obafemi Awolowo proposed a near-confederal system that recognizes the diversity of the ethnic communities and their different levels of economic achievement. Similarly, Sir Ahmadu Bello and other Northern elites advocated for a loose confederal system that preserved the large regional system in Nigeria (Kendhammer, 2014).

Furthermore, the suspicion arising from the unresolved national question led to the conflict that ensued following the motion for self-rule in 1956 moved by Anthony Enahoro on 31 March 1953 on the floor of the Federal House of Representatives. The motion by Enahoro triggered the May 1953 Kano riot in which the Northerners demonstrated their suspicion of the Southerners who were seeking for independence of Nigeria when the North was not yet ready for independence. The rejection of the motion for self-government and the consequent conflict demonstrated that questions of whether Nigeria should be granted independence as one united entity and the form of political structure to be operated after independence were thorny issues prior to independence.

Following Nigeria's independence in 1960, the unresolved national question manifested itself following the military coups of January 1966 and led to the proclamation of the unification

Decree by Aguiyi Ironsi, the counter coup of July 1966, the call for secession and the eventual civil war of that lasted between 1967 and 1970. Unfortunately, the civil war did not resolve the national question. The long years of military rule that continued after the civil war further complicated the national question. Essentially, the military centralized the federal system and created states in such a manner that favoured the Northern part of the country such that by the time the country returned to civil rule in 1999, the North alone had 19 states against the 17 states in the South.

The inability to resolve the successive military regimes to resolve the national question or mitigate conditions that creates dissatisfaction among the various ethnic nationalities in the country since independence led to intensified call for sovereign national conference in some quarters especially during the military rule. The most recent attempt to address the national question is the 2014 national confab convened by the President Goodluck Jonathan led administration. The inability to implement most of the recommendations of the confab has led to the call for restructuring of the federal system in various quarters and more recently, separatist agitation by the Independent People of Biafra (IPOB) in Eastern part of the country. Hence, at the heart of the national question today are issues of how to restructure the Nigerian state to address the relationship between the states and federal government, indigenes-settler phenomena including the relationship between crop farmers and herdsmen in various parts of the country.

Indigene-Settler dichotomy and crop farmers-herdsmen conflict in Nigeria

The prevailing dichotomy between indigenes and settlers contributes to the violent conflict between crop farmers and herdsmen in various parts of Nigeria. The origin of indigene-settler dichotomy could be traced to the native authority system introduced by the British colonial administration in Nigeria. Essentially, under the native authority system, the British decided who was the native (i.e. indigene) of a particular area, empowered the native elites of such area to have control over the political and economic resources especially land and taxation. It also led to the classification of residents who were non-members of the local tribe in an area as 'settlers'. By classifying some individuals as 'indigenes' and some as 'settlers', the Native Authority system served as a barrier for 'settlers' to access economic and political opportunities

in the areas of their residents irrespective of their length of stay in such areas (Kendhammer, 2014).

This dichotomy between ‘indigenes’ and ‘settlers’ in Nigeria has been exacerbated and remained source of violent conflicts in Nigeria since independence. Some of the widely reported indigene-settler violent conflicts in Nigeria include the the Zangon-Kataf conflict in Kaduna State, Aguleri-Umuleri conflict in Anambra State, the Mango-Bokkos conflict in Plateau State, the Ife-Modakeke conflict in Oyo State, the Tiv – Jukun conflict in Taraba to mention a few. In the Tiv-Jukun conflict for example, the Jukuns believe that the Tiv are settlers in the present day Taraba State and therefore not entitled to the land they occupy. The Tiv on the other hand, argue that they have been living here for long and therefore claim both land ownership and political rights in the State, particularly in the Wukari Local Government Area.

This indigene-settler dichotomy has worsened the conflict between the crop farmers and herdsmen in Nigeria. Even though issues of trespass and cattle rustling have been reported as the major source of their conflict, the claim of ‘indigenship’ by one group (usually the crop farmers) and the perception of another group as ‘settlers’ (usually the herdsmen) has contributed to the escalation of the conflict between crop farmers and herdsmen in the country. Why is it that the conflict between crop farmers and herdsmen is not as violent in Northern states like Borno, Sokoto, Adamawa as it is in states like Benue, Enugu, Ekiti? The answer lies in the fact that when indigene settler phenomenon coalesce with occupation, it tend to complicate the relationship between the different groups as in the case of crop farmers and herdsmen in North Central and Southern parts of the country. To illustrate further, with the exception of the Northern part of the country where some Hausa-Fulanis also engage in crop farming, in other parts of the country, ethnic/religious affiliation is coterminous with occupation (i.e. being a farmer or a pastoralist) in such a way that deepens the cleavages between the farmers and pastoralists, and complicates the clash between the two groups. Hence, in the Eastern part of Nigeria, every pastoralist is considered a Hausa-Fulani and a Muslim while every crop farmer is considered Igbo and Christian. Therefore with regards to farmers- herders divide in the Eastern part of Nigeria, the substructure is also the superstructure (Fanon, 1963). This implies that one is crop farmer or a pastoralist because he is a Hausa-Fulani Muslim or Igbo Christian respectively and vice versa.

Historically, Through the series of events called the Fulani jihads, the Fulani conquered a greater part of the area that later became Northern Nigeria between 1804 and 1810. Among the places they did not conquer were many places in central Nigeria, in present-day Plateau, Benue, Taraba, Nasarawa and Kogi states (Okeke, 2014).

For a long period, the Fulani were confined to the edge of the desert. During the twentieth century, Fulani herders began to migrate through and settle in whole zones that were previously inaccessible to pastoralists, bringing them into contact with previously unknown peoples, cultures and production systems. Thus, Prior to the twentieth century, the Fulani were constrained to the semi-arid land in northern Nigeria, mostly due to the presence of trypanosomoses and other diseases that made cattle-rearing in more humid environments in the south impossible without significantly losses to the herds (Conroy, 2014).

As reported by Blench (1994), accounts of Fulani pastoralists moving southwards into Nigeria's sub-humid Middle Belt zone appear as early as the 1820s, however, tsetse flies and the associated trypanosomiasis disease necessitated return northwards into the semi-arid zone during the rainy season. This gradual southern movement has been attributed to the creation of dairy markets by Hausa traders and the relative security of the British colonial period, when violence related to the trans-Saharan slave trade was curtailed (Migration was also seen as a way to avoid the hated *jangali* (cattle tax) imposed by the British with the introduction of trypanocidal drugs further enabling pastoralist cattle herds to access the high-quality grazing land in the southern sub-humid zone. There has also been movement in the opposite direction: northwards expansion of agricultural cultivation into the semi-arid zone occurred from the 1960s, alongside a general increase in the amount of land under cultivation in the region. The resulting gradual disintegration of the *burtali* (official stock migration routes) allowed indigenous farmers to claim ownership rights to fertile land and waterways which Fulani cattle had been grazing for over two centuries (Blench ,1994).

National security architecture and management of crop farmers-herdsmen conflict in Nigeria

The national security architecture is arranged in such a manner that alienates the federating units from making any meaningful contribution especially in terms of control over the

security agencies. This is despite the fact that the major threats to Nigeria's national security are essentially internal, self-induced threats manifesting as violent eruptions among various groups (Jega, 2007). This also includes the crop farmers and herdsmen currently taking place in most states of the country.

Unfortunately, the states in which these conflicts take place do not have control over the security apparatus such as police. Thus, in accordance with section 215(2) of the 1999 Constitution, section 6 of the Police Act, 1990 laws provide that "the Force shall be commanded by the Inspector-General of Police". This simply means that orders, directives and instructions to perform or carry out the duties with which the Police is carried, flows from the Inspector-General of Police, through the chain of Command, to any Officer positioned to implement such order. Disobedience or failure to carry out such instruction, directive or order, attract punitive sanctions.

Accordingly, the 37 State Police Commands are further organised into 12 Zonal Commands. Table 4.2 presents the structure of the Nigeria Police Force.

Table 4.2 Command Structure of Nigeria Police Force

| S/N | Command Levels | Commanders |
|------------|---|---|
| 1 | Force Headquarters (National) | Inspector-General |
| 2 | Zonal Commands (Groups of State Commands) | Assistant Inspectors-General |
| 3 | State Commands | Commissioners of Police |
| 4 | Area Commands (Groups of Divisional Commands) | Assistant Commissioners of Police |
| 5 | Divisional Commands | Assistant Superintendent of Police (or higher rank) |
| 6 | District Commands | Inspectors (or higher rank) |
| 7 | Police Stations | Sub-Inspectors (or higher rank) |

| | | |
|---|---------------|---|
| 8 | Police Posts | Corporal (or higher rank) |
| 9 | Village Posts | Police Constable (with a minimum experience or higher rank) |

Source: Alemika and Chukwuma (2000).

Crop farmers – herdsmen conflict in Nigeria: Evidence from three case studies

Based on the analysis above, we present three case studies from three states in different geopolitical zones in Nigeria to illustrate how indigene-settler dichotomy and alienation of states in management of national security impact on crop farmers – herdsmen conflict across these states.

Case Study One: Benue State

There is a historic relationship between the Tiv man and the Fulanis. The Fulanis call the Tiv-man ‘Munchi’. This is a Hausa word meaning ‘we have eaten’. Historically the Tiv man is believed to have killed and eaten a Fulani cow when the Tivs and Fulanis were moving together in the migrational train as was revealed through Ethnographic Studies. The Fulani’s have the believe that as long as they are in the mist of the Tiv people, some of their cows must be lost, this makes a Fulani man to ever live suspecting a Tiv, man over the loss of their cattle. The criminal elements in the host communities exploit this mutual suspicion and indulge in cattle rustling thereby creating opportunity for the suspicion and hatred to transform to episodic and recurring violent clash between the crop farmers and herdsmen. Thus, within the last few years, Fulani herdsmen have carried out over 50 major attacks on Benue communities, the most prominent of them taking place in 15 of the 23 local government areas of the state namely, Agatu, Gwer East, Gwer West, Makurdi, Guma, Tarka, Buruku, Katsina Ala, Logo, Ukum, Kwande, Oju, Obi and Konshisha.

The Agatu Incidence

A village in Agatu was attacked by Fulani herdsmen on February 24, 2016, killing between 300 and 500 persons, 9 other people were killed on February 28, in the same Agatu village in another attack by herdsmen. The Agatu attack has been labelled one of the worst ever seen in the series of attacks by Fulani herdsmen. A Fulani leader, Mr. Bayeri said the attacks

were forms of retaliations orchestrated by Fulani herdsmen in revenge of the killing of one of their leaders by Agatu people three years ago. The Fulani leader said about 20 Agatu and Tiv militia, on April 20, 2013, invaded the compound of one Shehu Abdullahi, killing him and carting away over 200 cows. Mr. Bayeri narrated the Fulani have records of how the Agatu killed over 300 of their people. Thus, between 2013 and 2014, the theatre of conflict between Fulani herdsmen and agricultural farming communities in Benue State widened to such an extent that Tiv and Agatu farmers in the state were locked in internecine battle with the Fulbe herdsmen, which resulted in wanton killings, destruction, and a large number of IDPs. Between May and September 2014, for instance, a spate of attacks on Agatu communities in Agatu Local Government Area of Benue State, reportedly carried out by Fulani herdsmen, resulted in the displacement of an estimated 10,000 people. The IDPs were forced to seek refuge in neighbouring communities and local governments (Daily Independent, in Egwu, 2015).

In Benue, there are allegations that traditional rulers collect money from herdsmen to allocate land to them, but because they are seen as settlers without right to land ownership, the community members still claim ownership of such lands thereby leading to struggle over the land for farming (by the communities) and for grazing (by the fulanis). Thus, at the root of the conflict between crop farmers and herdsmen is the dichotomy between indigenes and settlers over land ownership.

Case Study Two: Enugu State

Enugu state shares borders with Benue and Kogi state which makes it easy for the herdsmen to infiltrate the communities in the state. besides, Fulani herdsmen have various settlements in Enugu state. However, since 2013, Enugu state has been one of the theaters of violent conflict between crop farmers and herdsmen. Virtually all the 482 communities are under siege (Olaniyan, 2016). One of the most widely reported incidents in recent times is the Ukpabi Nimbo attack of 2016.

The Ukpabi Nimbo Attack

On April 25, 2016, unquantifiable number of people suspected to be Fulani herdsmen invaded Ukpabi Nimbo, an agrarian community in Uzo-Uwani Local Government Area of Enugu state. The residents of the community (mostly farmers) were attacked with

various ammunitions including AK47 rifles, machetes etc., houses were torched and destroyed, tens of people were killed and properties worth millions of naira destroyed (This Day Newspaper, 26 April 2016). The purpose of this invasion and attack of the agrarian community by suspected Fulani herdsmen from the North was essentially struggle over land in which the herdsmen attempted to intimidate and forcefully evict the crop farmers from the community so that the herdsmen can continue to graze on the cultivated farm lands in the community uninterrupted.

It was alleged that intelligence report on the Ukpabi Nimbo attack was received by the Governor Ugwuanyi, but he could not mobilize the security agencies because he lacked control over the agencies. The Ukpabi Nimbo incident demonstrated that the weak capacity of the federating units to mobilize security agencies in the management of internal security hinders efficiency of the security agencies and undermines internal security.

Case Study Three: Kaduna

Since the return to civil rule in 1999, there has been increase in the intergroup violence experienced in Kaduna. This has no doubt resulted in death and displacement of thousands of people. Although much of the conflicts rooted the sensitive issue of indigene – settler dichotomy and the related claims over landed resources, farmers and herdsmen have been the major actors and victims of such violence.

Violence has variously erupted between farmers and herdsmen in various communities where sedentary agricultural and pastoral communities engaged in violent attacks on each other over the struggle over farm lands for grazing and for farming. The common belief is that the crop farmers are the main indigenes of the land while the pastoral communities are ‘settlers’ who have no right over lands. Therefore, attempts to establish grazing reserves has been contentious especially Southern Kaduna, as it is perceived as injustice to the indigenes, who are mainly farmers. In fact, many in Southern Kaduna saw the grazing reserves as a plot to dispossess them of their land and give it to ‘settlers’.

In October, 2016, About 40 people were killed in Godogodo town, in Jema’ah Local Government Area, and its environs in Southern Kaduna following days of attacks by suspected

Fulani herdsmen. In fact, since 2010, suspected Fulani herdsmen are alleged to have burnt down over 500 houses and killed more than 4,000 people in Southern Kaduna (Thisday, 2016).

Conclusion

The relationship between crop farmers and herdsmen in Nigeria is long standing. However, the relationship between crop farmers and herdsmen in various communities in Nigeria has been characterized by violent conflict in recent times. This study examined how the complexity of the national question in Nigeria has contributed to the transformation of the conflict between crop farmers and herdsmen. It argued that the indigene-settler phenomenon in the country and the associated struggle over land has contributed to the fierce conflict between the two groups. Again, the alienation of the federating units in national security management impacts negatively on the capacity of the Nigerian state to contain the violent conflict between crop farmers – herdsmen.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, we put forward the following recommendations:

- The indigene – settler dichotomy should be addressed in Nigeria by ensuring that Nigerians are treated equally and given equal opportunity anywhere they find themselves in Nigeria irrespective of tribe and religion.
- The Nigerian police should be restructured to allow for state police with powers of both the state and federal police should be specified in the constitution

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